KINDERGARTEN AT
LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

Portal to Lifelong Happiness & Success

By Helen Purcell
Director, Living Wisdom School of Palo Alto
and George Beinhorn
Living Wisdom School Web Manager
Why Kindergarten Counts

Can kindergarten influence your child’s chances of success and happiness in later life? Most definitely! – but perhaps not in the ways you may have imagined.

What Kind Of Education Do You Want For Your Child?

I would like to make a case for a complete, well-rounded approach that takes into account not only the child’s physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, but their individuality as well.

Education Through The Ages – A Legacy Of Common Sense

For many centuries, educators understood that children’s development occurs in natural stages of about six years. From birth to age 6, for example, the child’s primary developmental task is to become comfortable with its body. From 6 to 12, feelings come to the fore – this is a time when children can be taught most effectively through the “tools of imagination” – in particular, the arts. It’s a time that many of us look back upon fondly as the years that most truly defined our childhood.

From 12 to 18, will power becomes the primary focus, as young people prepare for independent adult life. And finally, from 18 to 24, the life of the mind takes center stage – think of college students talking late into the night about philosophy, politics, history, science, and the arts.

As I’ve hinted, schools in centuries past took account of these natural stages in the life of a child and adjusted their methods accordingly. In ancient Greece and Rome, in
India and China, and in Europe throughout the Dark Ages, Renaissance, and Enlightenment, teachers adapted their approach to the student’s age and natural tendencies.

I believe that in our attempts to improve schools today, we shouldn’t overlook the reasons this system was so widely and successfully adopted. Wise educators have always recognized that it’s much more efficient to align their teaching methods with the child’s nature, and not try to impose adult theories that might have little correspondence with the reality of the student’s needs.

They knew that to ignore the child’s developmental stage would be disastrous, and that forcing a child of 6 or 8 into an overwhelmingly academics-oriented curriculum would do far more harm than good. It would risk stunting the children’s emotional growth, killing their enthusiasm, stifling their curiosity, and greatly reducing their eagerness to learn.

Equally unfortunate, it would do a very inferior job of giving the children invaluable skills that would help them succeed in high school, college and beyond – for example, the ability to cooperate happily with others, to consider others’ needs, to communicate well, and to grasp with a sure inner certainty the need for personal self-discipline, kindness, compassion, values, morality, courage, and honor.

How Our Thinking About Education Changed

It was only in the 19th century that educators, encouraged by the federal government, began to consider that this system, which had worked so well for so long, was in need of change.

They decided that schools should prepare students to be employable in the factories of the burgeoning industrial age. To that end, they stripped the curriculum of almost everything except the “Three R’s” – reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic.

This is why, for the last two centuries, our students have been almost completely deprived of an education that addresses important aspects of their being: their feelings and will power, and the proper training of their minds.
What results has this stripped-down educational system achieved? I believe it’s fair to say that they have not been attractive:

- Widespread cynicism and rebellion against a system that fails to acknowledge the child’s inner realities

- A poisonous belief that life has no purpose, and an accompanying loss of motivation

- A lack of moral education, which can make susceptible children feel free to commit selfish acts without pangs of conscience, including crime and violence

- Addiction to drugs and alcohol, in an attempt to dull the sense of meaninglessness and the lack of awareness of life’s exciting possibilities

- Over-competitiveness, status-seeking, cliquishness, and bullying as an affirmation of the ego against other egos, due to a lack of proper training during the “Feeling Years” from 6 to 12, and encouraged by school environments where unbridled social and academic competitiveness is the rule

- Illiteracy and underachievement – a sense that what’s being taught has little relevance, and that it holds no promise of satisfying the individual’s longing for increasing happiness

- Depression, suicide, boredom, and aimlessness

- Failure-consciousness among those less academically gifted

- Tremendous, oppressive pressure on every child to excel academically – a pressure that can reach completely unrealistic, unsustainable levels for the gifted and the less gifted alike, and that can lead to serious, health-destroying stress and chronic depression

- A thoroughly unrealistic, terribly misguided, and profoundly damaging belief that every child, regardless of their natural talents and inclinations, should be encouraged to compete for acceptance at an elite university
Many parents today have begun to awaken to the need to fix our educational system. Organizations have sprung up to help them in this endeavor. Yet everywhere, well-meaning parents, educators, and reformers are still groping for answers.

The reformers too often overlook what has worked in the past. Nor do they give due attention to the handful of exceptional schools that have found real, working answers to educating all aspects of the child, by implementing an educational philosophy that, far from lowering the child’s chances of being accepted at a good college and landing a good job, leads to the highest personal achievement and happiness in high school, college, and beyond.

Instead, the reformers have, in large part, tried to re-invent the wheel. They’ve spun fine-sounding theories that haven’t actually been tested. Some schools simply “fake it.” Hoping to ride the bandwagon of school reform, they spout nice-sounding phrases like “joyful education,” “well-rounded curriculum,” and “educating the whole child.” But when we look at their actual classroom practices we find that they are delivering the same old pressure-cooker education that yields one-sided results at the expense of the child’s well-being and overall development, not to mention the health- and happiness-destroying effects of years of unrelenting stress on their bodies, hearts, minds, and souls.

The Answer Is in the Outcome

What is the answer? I think we can gain a glimpse by considering the qualities that enable adults to be highly successful in today’s world. As our first example, I propose that we look at the world’s most prominent high-tech company. (The following account is adapted from our book, Happiness & Success at School.)

When Sergey Brin and Larry Page founded Google in 1998, they established a policy of hiring only the most brilliant applicants in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math).

Fifteen years later, Google decided that it might be a good idea to evaluate the results of this policy.
A *Washington Post* article, “The surprising thing Google learned about its employees – and what it means for today’s students” (December 27, 2017), summarized the insights Google gleaned from Project Oxygen, the detailed examination of its hiring practices.

Project Oxygen completely overturned the company’s assumptions about the qualities that best predict success in a high-tech business environment. Most notably, among the eight standout qualities of Google’s top employees, STEM expertise was *dead last.*

The top qualities that augured success at Google were all “soft” skills. The researchers found that the most successful Google employees:

1. Are good coaches
2. Empower the team and do not micromanage
3. Express interest in and concern for the other team members’ success and personal well-being
4. Are productive and results-oriented
5. Are good communicators – they listen and share information
6. Help others with their career development
7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team
8. Have key technical skills that help them advise the team

A follow-up study by Google of the qualities of its most productive research teams (Project Aristotle, 2016), confirmed these results.

In the *Post* article, Cathy N. Davidson, a professor in the graduate school at CUNY, described the findings:

“Project Aristotle shows that the best teams at Google exhibit a range of soft skills: equality, generosity, curiosity toward the ideas of your teammates, empathy, and emotional intelligence. And topping the list: emotional safety. No
bullying. To succeed, each and every team member must feel confident speaking up and making mistakes. They must know they are being heard.”

Davidson cited a survey of 260 companies conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. The study, which included industry giants Chevron and IBM, found that recruiters ranked communication skills among the top three qualities companies look for in job applicants. “They prize both an ability to communicate with one’s workers and an aptitude for conveying the company’s product and mission outside the organization.”

What conclusions can we draw from these studies, about the best ways to prepare our children to succeed and be happy in school and beyond?

A common feature of the qualities that set the top Google employees apart is that they are “expansive.” That is, they foster a safe work environment where the employees can feel free to work cooperatively, ask questions, make mistakes, and help each other.

The personal traits that the researchers identified as furthering success at Google and at other top companies are precisely the same qualities that the teachers at Living Wisdom School devote tremendous energy to fostering in the classroom every day,
considering them essential for creating a safe, nurturing, joyful learning environment for the children.

In *Happiness & Success at School*, we present overwhelming evidence that individualized instruction, combined with appropriate attention to emotional needs, consistently produces the greatest success not only in high-tech companies but at Harvard, Stanford, and MIT, and in business, sports, and the military.

The qualities that contribute to success at Google, Harvard, and Stanford are the *same* qualities that we cultivate, starting with each four- or five-year-old child’s first day at school.

Let me hasten to dispel any fears parents may have that our school *overly* emphasizes these “soft” abilities. Quite the opposite is true. In the 45 years of our schools’ existence, we have found that learning becomes *far more efficient* when soft skills are given due attention.

Discipline problems are greatly reduced and motivation soars when each child is guided to learn at the upper edge of his or her own, individual capacity. It has been our experience that proper attention to the soft skills powerfully *amplifies* the amount of learning that can take place in the classroom. Because we are able to motivate and engage each child at his or her own, individual level, the gifted students are never bored, and the less-gifted are never frustrated or infected with a sense of failure, and of being left hopelessly behind.

Because we’ve had 45 years to observe how these qualities help children succeed throughout their lives, we take great care to cultivate them, starting in the earliest years.

We’ve shown that they create the best possible foundation for success in the K-8 grades, in high school, college, and after. It’s why we are tremendously focused on kindergarten as a critically important gateway to give the children the vital skills they will need to be successful throughout their lives.
Kindergarten Is a Portal to Future Success & Happiness

We’ve seen that if you can start developing these expansive “soft” qualities in the children at age 4 to 6, and if you can continue to build upon those qualities throughout their elementary years, it’s a gift that will bear powerful rewards in high school and college.

I’m thinking of one of our students, Hazemach Munro. Hazie entered LWS in preschool and recently earned his master’s degree in astrophysics from the University of Bremen in Germany. Hazie now teaches math in our Palo Alto Living Wisdom High School.

I think also of Bryan McSweeney who spent nine years with us, from kindergarten through 8th grade. Bryan is a talented professional filmmaker who taught at Living Wisdom School High in Nevada City and now serves as ambassador for Education for Life in India, as that country begins to develop its own Living Wisdom Schools.

Kshama Kellogg spent most of her elementary years at the Living Wisdom School in Nevada City, aside from two years when she attended public school in Italy. A brilliant, inspired teacher, loved by her students, Kshama taught second grade in our Palo Alto Living Wisdom School for many years and is now the School Director at our Living Wisdom High School.

In 45 years we’ve gathered a growing reservoir of knowledge and experience for translating our Education for Life philosophy into practice. Our philosophy is based, first and foremost, on creating a learning environment where the children can feel safe, happy, and free to interact confidently with the teachers and with each other. We feel it’s only
within such a safe and happy environment that the children can experience the undistracted joy of mastering challenges every day.

When learning happens with joy, we find, with tremendous consistency, that every child quickly begins to love learning. This is why our students, who represent a wide spectrum of native abilities and backgrounds, have achieved a median high school GPA over the years of 3.85.

Play and Learning – Essential Partners

When we’re talking about a four- or five-year-old, the first thing we need to take into account is that they absolutely need a playful, loving approach to learning. It’s the single most important key to preparing these little children for success now and in the years ahead.

Once we have that playful, happy foundation, we find that the children feel inwardly free to achieve amazing things. For example, it enables our kindergarteners to happily acquire math concepts two to four years ahead of their grade level.

Many of our parents have come from rigid school cultures where the children were forced to sit at their desks all day and were allowed very limited playtime. Some of the schools in our area that have adopted that system give their kindergartners just 20 minutes away from the classroom at lunchtime. Learning is reduced to something incredibly formulaic and dry, even at the earliest age. And because it isn’t creative, it utterly fails to produce learning in the most efficient and natural way, because it doesn’t make use of the child’s natural enthusiasm. It’s pounding information into their young brains without opening their hearts to receive it.

It harkens to the industrial era when all instruction was directed, even with four- and five-year-olds, to how it would affect their SAT scores in high school. But what unfortunately happens is that it sets up tremendous resistance in the child, because it’s fighting against the way they are made. And it runs completely against the way they can best be drawn into the learning experience, and the way they can absorb learning most naturally and efficiently.
By contrast, when you work with a child’s nature, discipline problems are few, and the children become deeply engaged and focused on learning. They learn at a much faster pace, and they look forward to every day at school.

In his wonderful book *Where You Go, Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*, Frank Bruni, a long-time New York Times columnist and feature writer, laments the tragic failures of the traditional approach of forcing children into a system that ignores the way they are made. He excoriates today’s approach which is oriented toward improving the children’s high school grades and SAT scores and preparing every child to be accepted at Harvard. I think it’s a wonderful sign that St. Francis High School has made Bruni’s book required reading for every parent.

I often talk with parents of kindergarten-age children who are deeply concerned about this very false and misleading kind of rigor, which fails to tune into the child’s actual needs at each developmental stage, and which, in kindergarten, must include play.

In the very early years, they should not be learning, first and foremost, that learning is torture. They should be learning that learning is fun. At that age, they do not
need to understand that learning, in later years, may require hard work to reap the joys of mastering academic challenges.

At this age, they are very open to whatever is going on in the classroom and at school. And an instructor who can bring together the twin threads of learning and play, and do it in a happy, loving way will be very successful. As we demonstrate in our book, *Head & Heart: How a Balanced Education Nurtures Happy Children Who Excel in School & Life*, our kindergartners are not falling behind their Harvard-acceptance competitors. Quite the opposite, as a direct result of the playful approach, they are able to absorb concepts at the third and fourth grade curriculum level.

I’m sure that most of us, when we visualize a kindergarten classroom full of four- to six-year olds, imagine a squirming mass of young bodies and a harried, red-faced teacher who’s yelling at them to behave. But parents and educators who visit our kindergarten are confronted with a very different picture.

First of all, when learning is delivered in a format that matches the children’s natural development, they become deeply engaged. Thus – believe it or not! – you will find four or five tiny tots working silently together, heads bowed in deep concentration.

We are intent on helping each child be comfortable and happy within the school environment. With this goal in mind, a practice that helps us greatly is the inclusion of yoga and meditation at the start of the school day. If you can help children discover an enjoyable state of calmness and concentration within themselves – a state of happy, relaxed mental attention – they will be gaining a powerful tool that will help them be successful throughout their school years.

The kids start the day with yoga and meditation, just before math class. When you can set a tone where they are comfortable and at ease in the environment, a great deal becomes possible in math, phonics, writing, art, and science. Anything is possible when the children’s hearts are open and eager to dive into the day’s lessons.
The Benefits of A Stress–Free Learning Environment

When you can give a child an experience every day at school of being comfortable and relaxed in the environment, and with the teacher and the other kids, it means that they will never have to fend off the distractions they would find in schools that are focused entirely on academics, and that spend little time creating an optimal learning environment.

Most schools do little, if anything, to steer the kids away from forming cliques and treating each other badly, with the upshot that each child must deal with these extremely negative and harmful factors that can make school too stressful and tense to give full attention to their studies.

It’s well documented that generalized stress at school interferes with learning. In a *Washington Post* article, “How much does stress affect learning?” (June 10, 2011), education and foreign affairs reporter Valerie Post quotes Catharine H. Warner, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Maryland:

“Our findings indicate that stress in the classroom environment affects children’s likelihood of exhibiting learning problems (difficulties with attentiveness, task persistence, and flexibility), externalizing problems (frequency with which the child argues, fights, disturbs ongoing activities, and acts impulsively), problems interacting with peers (difficulties in forming friendships, dealing with other children, expressing feelings, and showing sensitivity, or internalizing problems (presence of anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness in the child). These findings suggest that stress – in the form of negative classroom conditions – negatively affects the way children pay attention in class, stay on task, and are able to move from one activity to another.”

The tremendous energy that we devote to creating a calm, peaceful, joyful, accepting classroom and school environment frees each child to be exactly who they are. And who they are will be exceedingly individual. When you’re allowed to be who you are, and you’re challenged at exactly that level, the result is that you will have daily successes that will give you a joyful experience of learning. But if you’re just trying to meet somebody else’s rigid demands and requirements all the time, at somebody else’s
level, it creates a tension that prevents learning by shutting down your energy and enthusiasm.

As a teacher for more than fifty years, it has been my experience that tension is never a positive factor when it comes to learning. On the other hand, feeling free to make mistakes, and to have those mistakes accepted as a natural part of the learning process, is an amazing, blissful and extremely helpful experience for the child.

In our school, we achieve that freedom by combining learning with play, and by making sure our kids have exposure to free time. We fight against the misguided compulsion to structure every minute of the child’s day. It can create a very stressful situation for a kindergartner, when their teachers and parents are scheduling their every waking moment. Even during our after-school program, where the kids are mostly working on homework, there’s a relaxed sense of freedom, and the children love being there.

Children CAN Be Happy AND Successful in School

Parents and educators who visit our school invariably remark on how every child is completely him- or herself, and how they show a remarkable level of maturity and confidence. It’s an extremely rare and extraordinary experience in schools today, to see how centered they are in themselves, in a natural and real way.

You can see it in their eyes and in how they carry themselves. A child will walk into the principal’s office, not at all intimidated, and say, “Helen, I need an ice pack.” Somebody was hurt and they are eager to help, and there’s no fear or hesitation. Or they’ll come in and share a birthday donut with me.

If it’s a difficult situation, where they aren’t feeling well, or somebody needs to call a parent, they’ll come in and have absolute trust. And this is true of every adult in the school, including all of the classroom teachers and PE teachers and music teachers and math tutors – because there is a family atmosphere that’s very consistent and that we cultivate very consciously every day.
It happens in every situation – in class, on the playground, and in extracurricular activities such as music and the theater program.

**Theater Magic – An Extraordinary Experience of Learning and Personal Growth**

Our theater program includes every child from grades K through eight. It creates an extraordinary atmosphere for learning, and for cultivating personal success qualities. The kindergarten children are on stage, rehearsing and performing with the older children, and they develop a level of comfort and confidence that is far beyond what most kindergartners get to experience at school. It allows them to walk in the world of school in a very different way, when they can engage with an adult or an older child and they can both be very playful. Partner reading and partner walks are an extension of the confidence-building practices the children experience every day.

Our methods come to fruition most clearly for the kindergartners during spring quarter, when you can watch a child get out of the car in the morning, brimming with confidence, and it’s the same child who wouldn’t look at you six or seven months earlier, or who would cringe and hold their mother’s hand tightly and be very shy.

I’m thinking of a child who was extremely fearful at the start of the school year, and now her father will say, “Have a great day!” and she’ll turn and look at me with a big, confident smile and say, “Good morning, Helen!”

It’s a maturation that is possible because there is no exclusion. There’s a definition of self here that allows for the inclusion of everybody, not just their own classmates and teachers, but every single teacher and child.

**Choosing Happiness**

We don’t have an intimidating or fearful culture. This morning, I was explaining to a parent that the fundamental principles on which our school is based are most clearly expressed by two of our School Rules: “Choose Happiness,” and “Practice Kindness.”

**Practice kindness.** Learn to practice kindness with one another and to recognize that in doing so you help create a loving and safe atmosphere.
Choose happiness. Learn that you have the power to choose how you will respond to life’s challenges. Learn to focus on the positive rather than the negative. Learn to control your moods and raise your energy to meet difficulties that arise.

These two rules define the culture of the school. If you choose happiness, it means that you don’t have the right to take out a bad mood on anybody – you have an obligation to use your will power and your understanding to turn the energy around, with the ready and willing help of your teacher and classmates.

It’s amazing to watch the rules in action. A child will come to school, and maybe they aren’t feeling well. Maybe they’re feeling a little moody or snarky, and everybody is sympathetic. The teacher says, “I’m so sorry you’re not feeling well. Go over to the safe spot and take a moment, and take your teddy.” So there’s sympathy, but there’s also an expectation that at some point, and it should be pretty soon, you need to choose to be happy.

And they do, because they’re shown how to do it. They are given the specific steps they can take to be kind and choose happiness. And when you articulate the steps, they learn that they have the power to choose positive feelings and behavior.

It’s an incredibly valuable lesson for now and for the longer term. And the other children have the opportunity to practice kindness, because they aren’t going to be saying, “Oh, stop being such a chump.” The right behavior is constantly modeled for them, and the teachers deliberately take time to give them instructions on how to choose happiness every time the need arises.
Over several months the older children work with the younger children at play rehearsals, and they are very sensitive about their well-being. They want to take care of them, and they’ll help them and guide them. It’s a spirit of friendship that includes a sense of responsibility for the other person, especially the little ones.

It’s so easy for children to be selfish and self-involved. Especially when they’re kindergarten age, it’s all about them. They need to grow into a sense of the other, and to be able to learn how to do it at a young age, and to see it constantly modeled for them by the adults and the other children in the school environment is a priceless gift. It’s an invaluable foundation for acquiring the maturity that we must all achieve to be successful at every level, and it’s an awareness that we’re instilling in them starting on the first day of kindergarten – the awareness of another’s reality.

Does Living Wisdom School Over-Emphasize Soft Skills?

There’s a huge question that parents ask about our school. “You have a wonderful school culture, but how does it translate to grades and test scores?” And, of course, the proof is in our graduates’ high school and college grades, and in their adult successes.

In our book *Happiness & Success at School*, there’s a wonderful account of how, in the military and in sports, individual attention, individual freedom, individual acceptance, and a culture of what’s best for the individual produce the highest success. We were able to show how, at Harvard, Stanford, and Google, happiness and success go together. We are not simply spouting wishy-washy, unrealistic ideas that we haven’t tested and that don’t work in the real world. The interplay of happiness and success is a real-life experience at our country’s elite universities, at major corporations, and in sports and the military.

I received an application recently from a parent of a fifth-grade boy. It was very unfortunate that the class was full and we weren’t able to take him. The parent was sad because the child’s predisposition is to self-judge himself to an extent that he becomes paralyzed – he’s afraid to try anything new because he’s afraid to fail. And to build a culture and an attitude toward learning that includes the ability to “fail happily” is a wonderfully liberating gift.
In the late 1980s, a professor of computer science at MIT, Seymour Papert, published a book called *Mindstorms* in which he pointed out that the most wonderful lesson children can take from learning to program computers is that mistakes are a natural and necessary part of the process. He pointed out that professional programmers make, on average, at least 10 mistakes per hundred lines of their first code drafts.

Papert called it “the debugging approach to life.” Kids today have so much stress around success, and on getting it right the first time. There’s a tremendous competitive and comparative emphasis in the typical approach to learning, where you’re always wondering if I’m as good as somebody else. As opposed to “What am I learning?” And “Was it fun?”

In our school, the kids know who’s good at this or that subject, because we celebrate their successes. But the fact is that we constantly celebrate their small, daily, individual successes as the most important kind of success. We are celebrating their small experiences of mastery as artists, poets, singers, scientists, dancers, and mathematicians.

There isn’t a child in our school who doesn’t have an area of success that we can celebrate. I’m thinking of a boy who had some very significant challenges at school, until he began rehearsing for the all-school play, whereupon he flourished amazingly. The success he enjoyed in the theater program translated to an ability to self-regulate in class, where he now wants to do well because he’s experienced what it feels like.

Each of us has an inborn drive to experience happiness and to be free from suffering. And the universal spiritual law is that whenever we expand our awareness by
learning something new or by overcoming a challenge, we experience a corresponding inflow of joy. And if you’re having happy learning experiences every day, you’re going to want more and more of them.

The Straitjacket of Modern Education

I often wonder how our culture went wrong, when it failed to take account of the link between learning and happiness. Children are so elastic, and so ready to learn, including learning which thoughts and actions will give them joy. And instead, they suddenly find themselves bound in straitjackets of expectations that may or may not be realistic. And it’s tragic.

Learning by rote and learning by drill no longer needs to be the foundation of a child’s school experience. What is necessary is to cultivate imagination, resourcefulness, and creativity, starting at the earliest age, and then remove the limits. We need to support the children who are learning at the bottom end and take the limits off each child’s horizons, so that they can surprise themselves and keep growing every day.

We have a first grader who has artistic ability beyond all imagining. He made several sketches of a ship, beautifully executed with lots of fine detail, and we put them on the cover of our annual literary magazine. We had a choice – we could celebrate excellence, or we could impose some false standard of egalitarianism. But it’s absolutely clear that what that little boy has achieved is not equal, and we feel that it’s a false imposition to pretend that his work isn’t exceptional.

Everybody in the school acknowledged and celebrated the boy’s talent. The older kids were saying, “Whoa, who did that?” But the truth is, we celebrate every child’s successes, and we ensure that there are plenty of successes to celebrate, by having them operate at the tip of their ability, mastering challenges at their level.

A girl who came to us in the fall absolutely flourished in the school play. She took to her role and developed it amazingly. That little girl, who has so much talent, was very unhappy in her former school, until she came here and felt embraced by the energy, and realized that she could let loose and be as creative as her abilities allowed.
This morning I spoke with parents who are brain researchers at Stanford. They chose our school because they have friends whose children go to our school, and they recognized the level of acceptance and individuality that exists here, and the happiness of the children. But, more than anything else, they simply want their children to be happy during their time in school.

The father was educated at a school in Israel that was very progressive, but the mother had a more standard education, and they both just want their children to be happy while they’re learning.

One of the biggest tests for our parents is that when their children reach third or fourth grade, they’re tempted to buy into the culture that is constantly pressuring them to think, “Oh my God, how am I going to get my kid into Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Princeton, or MIT?”

The parents I spoke with this morning understand the theoretical and practical aspects of our system, but they really didn’t want to talk about that side. They wanted to tell me how the families of children in our school had told them that their kids have never been happier, and that a great deal of learning goes hand in hand with a great deal of happiness.

It’s really that simple. And what parents everywhere need to realize, and our government and schools need to realize, is that happiness and school success are not mutually exclusive – that, in fact, the opposite is true: happiness is indispensable for the most efficient learning to take place.

We need to help children leverage their natural gifts. And maybe the process won’t be as linear as our culture would prefer, and maybe we won’t always be able to quantify it with numbers. But our successes have proved our methods year after year, in terms of our graduates’ high school and college grades and their adult successes.
Learning Priceless Personal Success Skills

Another factor that makes our kindergarten so special and powerful is that from the first day we practice leading with the heart. We teach each child what it feels like to appreciate another person’s reality, and how happy it makes them feel.

If a kindergartner gets to someplace first, it’s their nature to let everyone know that it’s their place. They are very territorial, and it’s all about “mine.” My toy, my place, my pencil. Yet they also have very open hearts, if they’re allowed to. And it’s bringing those two together, by showing them that the greatest happiness comes from being unselfish, that creates a wonderful learning environment. It’s a learning that may take people a lifetime to acquire. But whether it’s in the sandbox or on the tricycle, it’s something that they’re learning here every day.

Two kids were arguing over a bike. We did a conflict resolution, and one child said, “Okay, how about five minutes for him and five minutes for me?”

The teacher said, “That seems reasonable.”

The other child thought about it and said, “Well, what if we had it at the same time?”

The teacher said, “I don’t think that’s possible.”

He said, “Oh, yeah, it is, because one of us could drive and the other could stand on the back and then we could switch places.”

It’s a defining story, because it illustrates how, once they understand the principle, they can be creative and take it a lot farther than we might imagine.

We help them have many experiences of happiness, and we teach them how to find it for themselves. And they begin to look for it all the time, and they become very expansive.

I was talking with one of the eighth graders here in my office, when he suddenly said, “Oh, hey, Helen, I gotta go!”

I said, “Well, I’m not quite finished.”
He said, “I know, but the younger kids are about to show up, and they want me to hide the ball for them.”

What’s interesting is that RJ is so connected with the younger children. They are these tiny kindergartners and first graders, and RJ is a big, hulking kid, almost six feet tall, who’s very strong and buff and athletic, and he’s wanting to play this game with the little ones where he’ll hide the ball and they’ll have to find it.

For an older child to hide the ball might be considered hostile, but what’s happening here is very different. And in this environment everyone knows that it’s an expression of friendship. The little tots adore RJ, and he was willing to break off a conversation with me to go help them.

“No Bullying!” – More than Empty Words

I talked yesterday with the principals of two of our local high schools. They were asking me about the culture at our Living Wisdom High School, because I’m on the school board and we’re up for certification.

When the conversation came around to what makes our school different, I very boldly said, “We do not have bullying at our school.” And I noticed a sudden change in the atmosphere. The men sat quietly and had nothing to say, and I knew why – because they couldn’t say the same about their schools.

I said, “It’s not allowed, and it’s not that we have to come down punitively in order to enforce it. It’s that we teach a culture of kindness, and our children understand from the inside that it gives them the highest happiness.”

I would say that 75 percent of the parents who sit in this office who are looking for a suitable school for their children are trying to escape bullying.

And, well, don’t you think that it comes from the extremely one-sided, highly competitive atmosphere in the schools at all levels? I’m not talking about sports, I’m talking about grades and social advancement and test scores, and how there’s a constant, brutal sense of competitiveness that permeates the social culture in schools today. The culture, particularly in high school, can be cruelly competitive and stratified.
Many parents in Silicon Valley have had to struggle to get to where they are, and they naturally value material success. And when you can have an efficient and balanced environment such as we have here, and a culture that brings the whole child into the educational process, and not just their will power and their brain, it can look a little suspicious to them initially, if they’re consumed by anxiety about the child’s chances of getting into Harvard – even though we can hold our heads high when it comes to our graduates’ successes.

Our supportive culture frees a child to do extraordinarily well. I’ve seen kids who were extremely introverted and fearful and were not able to thrive in the highly competitive cultures of other schools, and who come to us and blossom, to a point where they are respected, accepted, and naturally part of the group.

I’m sure that we will reach a tipping point in this country where parents will wake up to the simple truth that we have demonstrated for 45 years – that kids can be highly successful at school and be happy at the same time.