

## **Parenting Our Children Through Today's Social Challenges**

How We Are the Solution, Not the Problem In Our Children's Lives

On a frozen Minnesota night in Colonial Church, the PCN audience was treated to an engaging speaker who addressed the gap between good parental intentions and outcomes (aka grown children). Dr Garbarino gave powerful scientific and anecdotal evidence on the problems facing today's families, and how we can support our children, and each other, in the efforts of raising healthy families. He has identified seven obstacles that parents will encounter and through intentional parenting may overcome.

### **Context**

Are you a strict or permissive parent? The answer to this is dependent on your society, neighborhood or decade. A permissive parent in the 1920's, a strict parent in the 1960s, or a single parent in the projects. It is the context that makes the difference in which type of parenting was the most effective. Dr Garbarino acclimated the crowd to think "It depends".

### **Temperament**

The child arrives with a temperament. Some temperaments are easier to parent than others. With some children you look forward to the school conference, while with other children you dread the thought. But whatever the temperament, it is important to build compensatory skills so that they may learn self management. One example he used was to work with the highly competitive child and not just pacify the child by letting them win. It is important to get a clear picture of what you need to get where you want. He also stressed that a child's need for acceptance vs. rejection is critical. It is also important to think about how to deliver criticism? Some researchers liken it to a bank account: you need to bank positive statement so criticisms don't drain account. Other researchers suggest that you need five positive comments to counter each negative comment to confirm acceptance of the child.

### **Kids develop secret lives**

At some point in childhood, every child learns that his or her thoughts are separate from their parent's. This is the "theory of mind." Dr. Garbarino used the example of Jason Klibold, one of the Columbine shooter, who went on a college visit with his parents shortly before he carried out the horrific attack. It is important to teach children to embrace self disclosure as young children and this will carry through to teen years. That you care what they are thinking and feeling. With this he did a study of Cornell College freshmen and that a high percentage of them had fairly significant secrets (depression, suicidal thoughts and their sexual orientation). These "secrets" may have disastrous results. As for sexual orientation, Dr. Garbarino stressed that you need to love your child. If you want your child to be genuine with you than from an early age make sure that you are not shutting doors by telling gay jokes, or making fun of a gay actor, etc.. Children will often "float a balloon" by saying, "my friend.." and see how you react.

### **Parents are people and therefore imperfect**

This came as no surprise to this audience. Dr. Garbarino suggested there is real value in readdressing issues with child when parents have said and done things in error. Asking for forgiveness is a powerful message for your child. Communicate acceptance of the child however you can.

### **Erosion in the structure of benevolent adult authority**

Adults show decreased respect for societal institutions (e.g. government). When adults show lack of respect for governmental leadership and societal institutions, this influences our children who may be less respectful to teachers and other authority figures.

Television shows adults as buffoons/inept vs. "Father Knows Best". Dr. Garbarino used an example of a neighborhood kid that dumped trash in his yard. His father, dressed in a bathrobe, went to the child's house and told him to pick it up and he did. Today kids may not comply, schools and other institutions fear lawsuits, and parents intervene. "Okay syndrome" turns declarative sentence into weak questions e.g. "Get into the car, okay? Wear your seatbelt, okay?"

### **Moralizing is not moral development**

"Circle of caring" is that universe which you care about. It may include your family, friends, and neighborhood and will change and grow with your moral development. An example that he used was "believe killing is wrong, but capital punishment is ok because the murderer outside of circle of caring." Dr. Garbarino suggested that Americans are very good at sentimentality instead of true compassion. Compassion is continuing to care about a person even after they have done something bad (e.g. Gandhi). He proposed that we try not to depersonalize groups of people but try to find true compassion.

### **Socially toxic environments for families**

Studies have proven TV violence increases aggressive behavior. Internet access is validating deviant ideas and depersonalizing relationships. Hypersexualization of teens and tweens, especially girls, is being fed by the media. Violent video games especially those violating human forms are desensitizing people to violence. Be mindful of the media and internet and make decisions for your child that will protect their innocence and childhood.

### **Children are physical, psychological and spiritual beings**

The media will tell your child that they need things NOW. That things and money will make them happy. Studies indicate that children need a spiritual life. A spiritual approach to life may be a religious background, a connection to nature or anything that would give the child a base that there is more to life than things.

Edina PCN is grateful that Dr. Garbarino shared his message that parents are the most important influence on children. We hope that his talk will generate discussion of how to better parent our children that will benefit our entire community. Dr Garbarino can be reached with questions: jgarbar@luc.edu