

Middle School Success

Many years of my colleagues and I offered a class that we titled Middle School Success, and as we began offering that class, we began to wonder what exactly parents and students are thinking about when they think about the idea of being successful. And it turns out that often the definition is way too narrow, that parents are talking primarily about academic success, and primarily in terms of grade achievement. What happens then is we focus on the grade outcomes instead of the process and many, many other factors that are, I believe, more important in becoming a successful person. So, I want to talk today about some of the ingredients of success that you can think about when you are raising and teaching your children.

One of them I think we'd all agree that happiness is part of being a successful person. But what exactly do we mean by happiness? And I'm just going to suggest what we suggest to the children or the students in our middle school class. One notion of happiness is if you have passionate pursuits, if you have things that you really enjoy and care about and pursue avidly. We're talking about the golfers, the readers, the chess players, the people who like to get involved in the environment, swimmers, artists. It doesn't have to be an academic pursuit, but, people, as they live their lives, look back and go did I have fun, did I have joy in my life? And one of the ways they accomplished that is by building passionate pursuits. When children are very young, it's very hard to establish what that pursuit is going to be. But as they get older, as they enter middle school and beyond, that's when we want to contemplate what is your potential path going to be in terms of your passion pursuits? Editorially, I'm going to say video games is not, I'm not good on that being the passionate pursuit, I think video games and balance as part of our broader life experiences. OK? But when I see kids that their primary, almost exclusive passion are video games, I have many concerns. The other part of being happy, I believe, is appreciating things. Learning to appreciate the food that you eat, the walks that you take, the time you spend with others, a good film often people are not mindful enough of their life experiences, so they're not extracting or experiencing enough joy or satisfaction from what they do. This brings back our notions of building mindfulness skills in our children. So, I think we can all agree that passionate pursuits and being more appreciative of life experiences is part of being happy, is part of being a successful person. There's more to it than that.

Another part of being a successful person, I believe, is developing some sense of competence. Something that you feel that you are good at. Now, it doesn't have to be necessarily academic competence, although of course that's valued. But you could be a good magician, you could be great at making things out of clay, you could be a master fisherman. It's really important to develop in our children areas of competence where they really feel that they are good at something, they'll work at something, they'll share what they know with other people. I really think that one of the goals of middle school is to find those areas of competence, even academic competence. Maybe you're someone in middle school that is interested in the presidency of the United States that make you learn a lot about presidential history. Maybe that becomes one of your paths. Maybe that's something you're knowledgeable about. Or it might be the environment, or it might be some aspects of math. Or frankly, I know a boy, his

sense of competence was his knowledge of cars. And as we talked about in previous modules, if you have a sense of competence and passion, you can connect that to academic experiences, that it's easier to pay attention, it's easier to complete your work. You just have a better feeling about what you're learning in school when what you're learning has, as we've talked before, relevance.

A third area of building success in middle school is independence. What happens when children are young is parents are reminding and prompting and facilitating a lot of success. So, were you minding your children to do their homework? We're helping them with their hygiene habits. We're very involved in how they behave and how they work. As you go through middle school, it's important that you take a step back, and that we orchestrate ways for the children, the students, to be more independent. So, we have to move from telling your son or daughter to do their homework, or to study for a test or to bring their backpack to school, to building those habits and attitudes where the students are doing it independently and we are not as much part of the process. So, we go from being the reminders and prompters and orchestrators. Orchestrators, that's a word, I hope, of the experience to where the children are the ones who engineer those responsibilities and then they are reporting to us. I'm not suggesting that we abandoned our role in their academics or in their health or in their athletics. I'm just saying that we want to shift from being the directors of the success and have the students try to share their experiences with you and they're accountable to you, but they're more independent. I saw a boy the other day whose parents felt that it was a fairly successful school year, and I went how so? They said he got A's and B's. I go, OK, so why are you meeting? Well, he spent three or four hours a night achieving those grades and we had to sit with him much of the time. Obviously, you know my reaction, was that's not a successful process and it's not a successful outcome and we are going to change things to build more independence. Another part of helping children be successful is the idea that you want to build positive work ethic and work habits. We really want to emphasize that having to work at something is not a negative, it is a positive. That getting things accomplished involves setting up good work habits and work attitudes. So, the days of your child resisting work and you finding the right lever or button, so they'll do the work have to change. We must have different life experiences and as we talked about in other modules, different types of learning opportunities and consequences so that students go from having to do the work to wanting to do it. That doesn't mean that everything is harder. And by the way, if hard becomes a four letter word, then it's going to undermine their attitudes and work ethic. There's nothing wrong really with something being harder. That's how we grow. That's how we improve. So, we have passions. We have a sense of competence, we have building a positive work ethic and work habits, and we have building independence.

Another area that I think is important in raising a successful child is teaching them about their health. I think children who grew up living a healthy lifestyle. Factors that are involved in our health, the importance of getting sleep, exercise, hygiene, they are way better off and frankly when I was young, I won't say how long ago, health was a class that we all looked down upon. It was a class that we had to take that had no value. But I believe that learning about health is more important than learning about math. Health becomes a theme throughout your life. Right. It's going to be important for the next 70 or 80 years. I'm not sure that math is going to

be a central element in everyone's life. I have many of my friends who say I wish I had taken better care of myself; I wish I had not been so hard on my joints that I'd gotten more sleep. So, if you're thinking about middle school, this is the time where we really want to emphasize healthy attitudes and habits.

Another area I think is very important is connectedness. This is the idea that you are involved with other people. Church groups, debate clubs, different organizations. Being involved with other people is an important part of being a successful individual. It also involves looking at things from another person's point of view. As I asked middle students, for example, to suggest a dinner idea or what restaurant they we should go to, or what movie we're going to download. I'm asking middle school students to think about it from other family members point of view. We have to move away from a self-centered point of view, where children are talking about what they want and need, what's most important to them, and begin expecting them to think more broadly about what works not just for them, but their friends, their family, their school community have to think beyond themselves.

I'm going to end with one more area that is important in becoming a successful person, and I believe it's self-awareness. Many of us lack self-awareness. We don't understand, myself included, how we might come across to others, what our strengths and weaknesses are. We're not open to feedback and so middle school is a process of self-evaluation and self-awareness. It becomes very important, and we talked about this in other modules that for middle school students to begin to evaluate their own performance, their own living environment, their activities for the day, their accomplishments, their positive experiences. With many families, I'm suggesting that every night we should have a discussion that involves some level of self-awareness. What did I accomplish today? Where did I struggle today? What am I proud of today? Frankly, this process of self-reflection is not only good for our children, it's good for ourselves.

These are just some of the ingredients involved in success. If your definition of success, I'm going to give you 2 examples of this, is too narrow you're going to keep your child from becoming a successful person. I remember talking with the student who's playing soccer. Very smart boy, but his friend was teasing him for not being very good at soccer. And the boy said to his friend, well, actually I think I'm better at soccer than you are. Of course, the other more achieving boy, who had got more goals than the game, was astonished. How could you be better? I scored four goals, you didn't score any. The more clever boy or at least clever in this regard, responded by saying, aren't we playing this game for fun? The other child had to admit that they were playing it for fun and he said, well, I clearly had more fun at this game than you did. I enjoyed it more. You are under a lot of pressure. Your dad was screaming at you about where you needed to be in the game. You're frustrated when you missed a goal while I was out there, getting better passing to my teammates and really enjoying the afternoon. So, in that sense, I'm better at soccer than you are. The same thing is true for children who accomplish good grades. Did they do it independently? Was it really successful? Do the grades really matter? I think we could have a very deep discussion about whether going to, I'll pick my alma mater, Princeton, is that much more successful than going to Gonzaga? It's not necessarily true,

but your life is more successful because you went to an Ivy League school versus some other school. It's what you've learned to be passionate about, what you connect with, the work that you do, the contributions that you offer. That's my definition of success.