



# WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS MOST WANT YOU TO BE?

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A lot of the things that are wrong with the world we can't fix by ourselves. As much as we'd like to see peace brought to troubled areas, corrupt governments reformed, cancers cured, there's a limited amount that any of us as individuals can do about such things.

However, there is one thing that nearly all of us can do that will immediately and exponentially increase goodness and happiness on earth.

Parents – and all other adults – should reserve their highest praise of children for when their children do kind acts. This is not the case at present. As a rule, children receive their highest compliments for one of four things:

- their intellectual and academic achievements “my son, Sean is brilliant! His teacher says he is the best student she has had in years.”
- their athletic abilities,
- their artistic attainments,
- and, in the case of girls, their looks.

Children who receive their parents' and other adults' compliments in these areas are delighted; everyone loves compliments. But what about the child who doesn't excel at academics, who isn't a gifted athlete or dancer? Or the girl who is not particularly pretty?

About what will their parents praise them? The most flattering remark such a child is likely to hear their parents tell others will be something like, “But he or she is a really good kid.” From which it can generally be inferred that being a good kid is not a big deal – that, from the parent's perspective, the child is probably not very good at anything worth talking about.

Some parents to whom I've made this proposal have told me it's unnecessary; they're certain that they've successfully communicated to their children that being a good person is what really matters most to them.

By in large, these parents are deluding themselves and there is a way for parents to find out if this is so.

For many years, Dennis Prager has suggested that parents ask their children: What do you think that I, your mother, or I, your father, want you to be: Successful, smart, good, or happy?

Many parents who have conducted this experiment have been quite surprised to learn that their children did not think that being good was what mattered most to their parents. Try it

yourself. Ask your child of any age that question: What do you think I most want you to be?

I want to make clear that I am not suggesting that parents stop complimenting their children for their accomplishments in other areas. All children want to know that their parents have respect for their accomplishments. And girls, even more than boys, also need to feel that they're physically attractive.

But -- and this is an important but -- what I am suggesting is this: the traits that we most often emphasize and praise are all important only if being a good person is placed at the top of the list.

But then you might say, "don't these traits have a value in and of themselves independent of goodness?" The answer is no. They don't. Germany did not start World War II and carry out the Holocaust because it lacked intelligence or cultured people, but because it lacked enough good people.

Now, what do I mean when I speak about young people being good? Let me cite a few examples:

- speaking out against and confronting a school bully;
- Befriending a new kid at school who isn't popular;
- Finding a wallet or cell phone and making every effort to locate the owner, instead of keeping it;
- Offering one's seat on a bus to an older person;
- Treating one's siblings decently;
- Not cheating on tests;

And much more.

Note, however, that I didn't list among my examples going on a 10K walk for a good cause like cancer research. That is, of course, a very worthwhile thing for a young person to do, but it's not really what I'm talking about. I'm talking about individual one-to-one acts of goodness and integrity.

Why will parents' reserving their highest praise for their child's goodness and integrity have so powerful an impact?

Because children will then ultimately identify feeling good about themselves with being a good person, and they will most like themselves when they act nobly. Or to put in another way, their self-esteem will come more from their goodness than from anything else.

What a world that would be! And the best news about this proposal is that you can start doing it immediately. And I don't mean tomorrow. I mean now.

I'm Joseph Telushkin, for Prager University.