

DR. TIM ELMORE

# Three Huge Mistakes We Make Leading Kids ...and How to Correct Them

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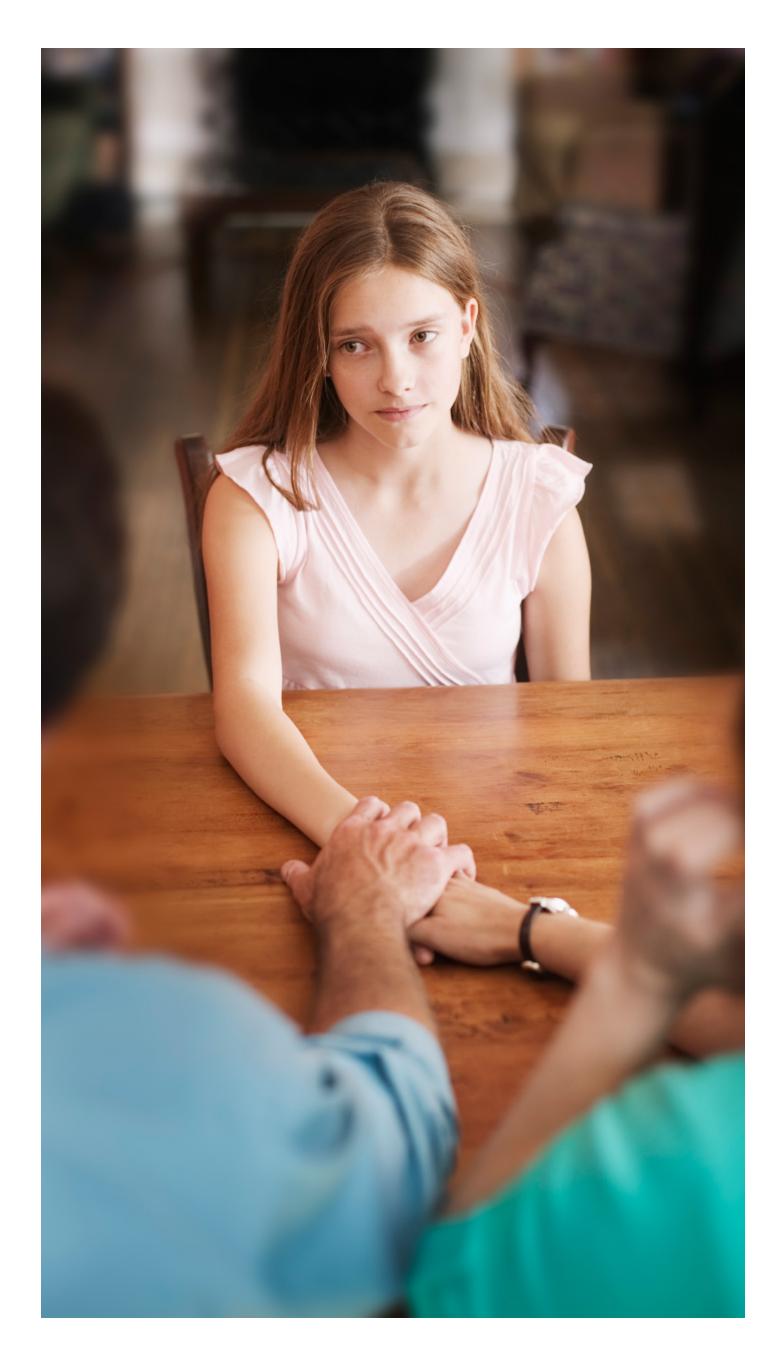
Changing Our Minds About Kids

# 1 What's the Problem?

Recently, I read about a father, Paul Wallich, who built a camera-mounted drone helicopter to follow his grade-school-aged son to the bus stop. He wants to make sure his son arrives at the bus stop safe and sound. There's no doubt the gizmo provides an awesome show-and-tell contribution. In my mind, Paul Wallich gives new meaning to "helicopter parent."



While I applaud the engagement of this generation of parents and teachers, it's important to recognize the unintended consequences of our engagement. We want the best for our students, but research now shows that our "over-protection, over-connection" style has damaged them. Let me suggest three huge mistakes we've made leading this generation of kids and how we must correct them.



#### Mistake One: We Risk Too Little

We live in a world that warns us of danger at every turn. Toxic. High voltage. Flammable. Slippery when wet. Steep curve ahead. Don't walk. Hazard. This "safety first" preoccupation emerged over thirty years ago with the Tylenol scare and with children's faces appearing on milk cartons. We became fearful of losing our kids. So we put knee-pads, safety belts and helmets on them...at the dinner table. (Actually I'm just kidding on that one). But, it's true. We've insulated our kids from risk.

Author Gever Tulley suggests, "If you're over 30, you probably walked to school, played on the monkey bars, and learned to high-dive at the public pool. If you're younger, it's unlikely you did any of these things. Yet, has the world become that much more dangerous? Statistically, no. But our society has created pervasive fears about letting kids be independent—and the consequences for our kids are serious."

Unfortunately, over-protecting our young people has had an adverse effect on them.

"Children of risk-averse parents have lower test scores and are slightly less likely to attend college than offspring of parents with more tolerant attitudes toward risk, says a team led by Sarah Brown of the University of Sheffield in the UK. Aversion to risk may prevent parents from making inherently uncertain investments in their children's human capital; it's also possible that risk attitudes reflect cognitive ability, researchers say." Sadly, this *Harvard Business Review* report won't help us unless we do something about it. Adults continue to vote to remove playground equipment from parks so kids won't have accidents; to request teachers stop using red ink as they grade papers and even cease from using the word "no" in class. It's all too negative. I'm sorry—but while I understand the intent to protect students, we are failing miserably at preparing them for a world that will not be risk-free.

# Unfortunately, over-protecting our young people has had an adverse effect on them.



Psychologists in Europe have discovered that if a child doesn't play outside and is never allowed to experience a skinned knee or a broken bone, they frequently have phobias as adults. Interviews with young adults who never played on jungle gyms reveal they're fearful of normal risks and commitment. The truth is, kids need to fall a few times to learn it is normal; teens likely need to break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend to appreciate the emotional maturity that lasting relationships require. Pain is actually a necessary teacher. Consider your body for a moment. If you didn't feel pain, you could burn yourself or step on a nail and never do something about the damage and infection until it was too late. Pain is a part of health and maturity.

#### Psychologists are discovering a syndrome as they counsel teens: High Arrogance, Low Self-Esteem

Similarly, taking calculated risks is all a part of growing up. In fact, it plays a huge role. Childhood may be about safety and self-esteem, but as a student matures, risk and achievement are necessities in forming their identity and confidence. Because parents have removed "risk" from children's lives, psychologists are discovering a syndrome as they counsel teens: High Arrogance, Low Self-Esteem. They're cocky, but deep down their confidence is hollow, because it's built off of watching YouTube videos, and perhaps not achieving something meaningful.

By the time students reach their teenage years, they naturally want to take risks. There is an inborn tendency to spread their wings and test their newfound independent spirit. When adults hover over them, or insist they remain "safe" or "close by" it can dampen their ambition. During adolescence, students have a heightened sense of adventure and a lowered sense of consequences, which leads "smart kids" to do "dumb things." We've all seen it. But even worse is when adults harness a teen's desire to expand and risk in the name of being safe and secure. We must distribute autonomy (freedom) and accountability evenly. Whenever we give them autonomy, there must be an equal amount of responsibility.

We must encourage risk-taking, yet at the same time, help them process those risks.



According to a study by University College London, risk-taking behavior peaks during adolescence. Teens are apt to take more risks than any other age group. Their brain programs them to do so. It's part of growing up. They test boundaries, values and find their identity during these years. This is when they must learn, via experience, the consequences of certain behaviors. Our failure to let them risk may explain why so many young adults between the ages of 22 and 35 still live at home or haven't started their careers, or had a serious relationship. Normal risk taking at fourteen or fifteen would have prepared them for such decisions and the risks of moving away from home, launching a career or getting married. Bottom line: we must encourage risk-taking, yet at the same time, help them process those risks.

#### PRESCRIPTION:

If your student wants to attempt something risky, pause before you speak. Ask them why they want to do it; ask them if they've considered all the angles of this decision and finally, inquire if they've talked to an older "experienced" person who's done it. For instance, one mother told me her 15 year-old daughter informed her that she wanted to become "sexually active." Instead of rebuking her, she gently followed the advice above. She spoke calmly as if she were talking to another adult. When she got into the "angles" she let her daughter know they'd need to visit a doctor for birth control pills and for information on sexually transmitted diseases. On that visit, the doctor wisely warned her of all the ramifications of this how this decision often plays out. Upon exiting the doctor's office, the daughter told her mom she's decided she would wait on that "sex thing."

## Mistake Two: We Rescue Too Quickly

This generation of young people has not developed some of the life skills kids did thirty years ago because adults swoop in and take care of problems for them. We remove the need for them to navigate hardships. May I illustrate?

Staff from four universities recently told me they encountered students who had never filled out a form or an application in their life. Desiring to care for their kids, and not disadvantage them, parents or teachers had always done it for them.

One freshman received a C- on her project and immediately called her mother, right in the middle of her class. After interrupting the class discussion with her complaint about her poor grade, she handed the cell phone to her professor and said, "She wants to talk to you." Evidently, mom wanted to negotiate the grade.

A Harvard Admissions Counselor reported a prospective student looked him in the eye and answered every question he was asked. The counselor felt the boy's mother must have coached him on eye-contact because he tended to look down after each response. Later, the counselor learned the boy's mom was texting him the answers every time a question came in.

A college president said a mother of one of his students called him, saying she'd seen that the weather would be cold that day and wondered if he would make sure her son was wearing his sweater as he went to class. She wasn't joking.

# Rescuing and over-indulging our children is one of the most insidious forms of child abuse.

This may sound harsh, but rescuing and over-indulging our children is one of the most insidious forms of child abuse. It's "parenting for the short-term" and it sorely misses the point of leadership—to equip our young people to do it without help. Just like muscles atrophy inside of a cast due to disuse, their social, emotional, spiritual and intellectual muscles can shrink because they're not exercised. For example, I remember when and where I learned the art of conflict resolution. I was eleven years old, and everyday about fifteen boys would gather after school to play baseball. We would choose sides and umpire our games. Through that consistent exercise, I learned to resolve conflict. I had to. Today, if the kids are outside at all, there are likely four mothers present doing the conflict resolution for them.



The fact is, as students experience adults doing so much for them, they like it at first. Who wouldn't? They learn to play parents against each other, they learn to negotiate with faculty for more time, lenient rules, extra credit and easier grades. This actually confirms that these kids are not stupid. They learn to play the game. Sooner or later, they know "someone will rescue me." If I fail or "act out," an adult will smooth things over and remove any consequences for my misconduct. Once again, this isn't even remotely close to how the world works. It actually disables our kids.

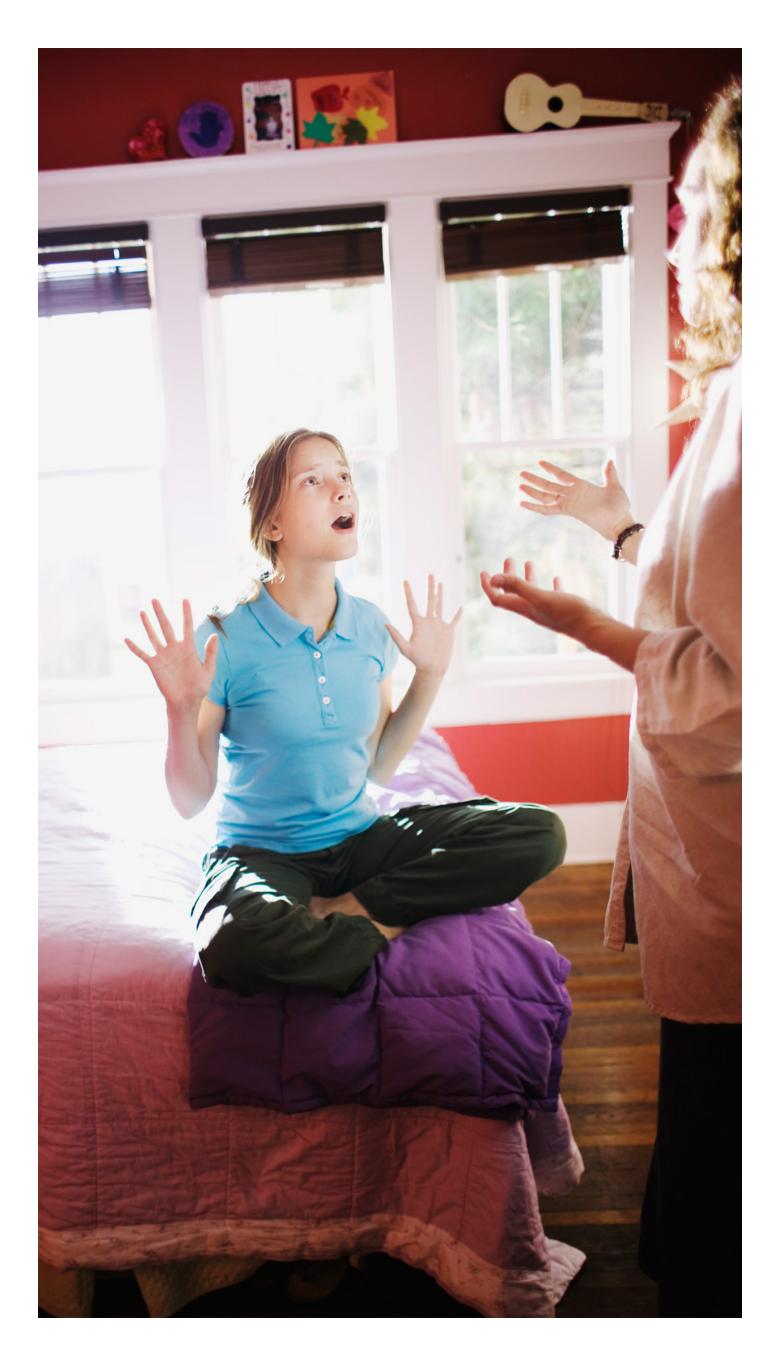
Kids know—if I fail or "act out," an adult will smooth things over and remove any consequences for my misconduct.



#### PRESCRIPTION:

If your teen gets into trouble (with an unfinished project, a bad grade, a failure, relationship conflict or a tough decision), be ready to talk with them, but don't solve the problem for them. Help them process how they got into the situation, and what they've learned. Then, ask

questions to help them think about solutions to the dilemma they face. Give them support, but encourage them to take those steps themselves to solve their problem.



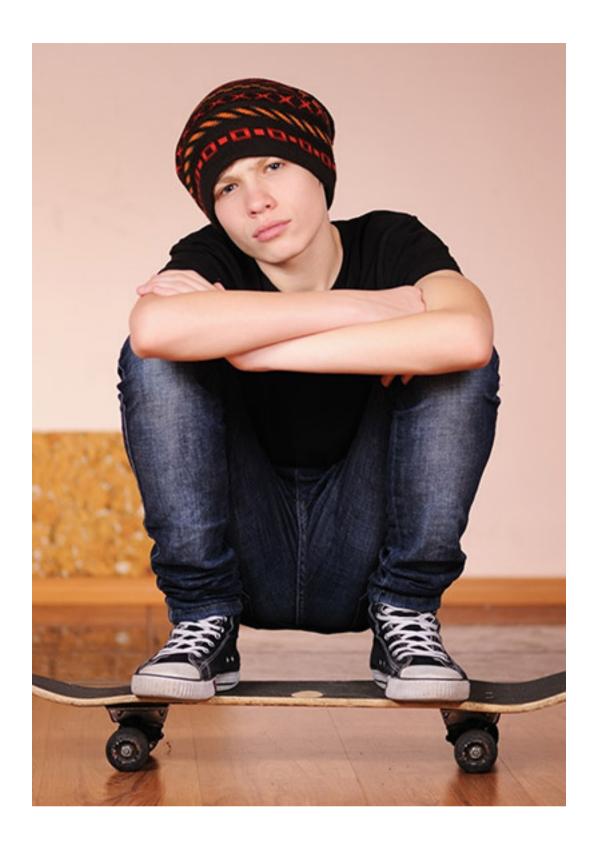
### Mistake Three: We Rave Too Easily

The self-esteem movement has been around since Baby Boomers were kids, but it took root in our school systems in the 1980s. We determined every kid would feel special, regardless of what they did, which meant they began hearing remarks like:

- "You're awesome!"
- "You're smart."
- "You're gifted."
- "You're super!"

Attend a little league awards ceremony and you soon learn: everyone's a winner. Everyone gets a trophy. They all get ribbons. We meant well—but research is now indicating this method has unintended consequences. Dr. Carol Dweck wrote a landmark book called Mindset. In it she reports findings about the adverse affects of praise. She tells of two groups of fifth grade students who took a test. Afterward, one group was told, "You must be smart." The other group was told, "You must have worked hard." When a second test was offered to the students, they were told that it would be harder and that they didn't have to take it. Ninety percent of the kids who heard "you must be smart" opted not to take it. Why? They feared proving that the affirmation may be false. Of the second group, most of the kids chose to take the test, and while they didn't do well, Dweck's researchers heard them whispering under their breath, "This is my favorite test." They loved the challenge. Finally, a third test was given, equally as hard as the first one. The result? The first group of students who were told they were smart, did worse. The second group did 30% better. Dweck concludes that our affirmation of kids must target factors in their control. When we say "you must have worked hard," we are praising effort, which they have full control over. It tends to elicit more effort. When we praise smarts, it may provide a little confidence at first but ultimately causes a child to work less. They say to themselves, "If it doesn't come easy, I don't want to do it."

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What's more, kids eventually observe that "mom" is the only one who thinks they're "awesome." No one else is saying it. They begin to doubt the objectivity of their own mother; it feels good in the moment, but it's not connected to reality.

Further, Dr. Robert Cloninger, at Washington University in St. Louis has done brain research on the prefrontal cortex, which monitors the reward center of the brain. He says the brain has to learn that frustrating spells can be worked through. The reward center of our brains learns to say: Don't give up. Don't stop trying. "A person who grows up getting too frequent rewards," Cloninger says, "will not have persistence, because they'll quit when the rewards disappear."

# A person who grows up getting too frequent rewards will not have persistence because they'll quit when the rewards disappear.

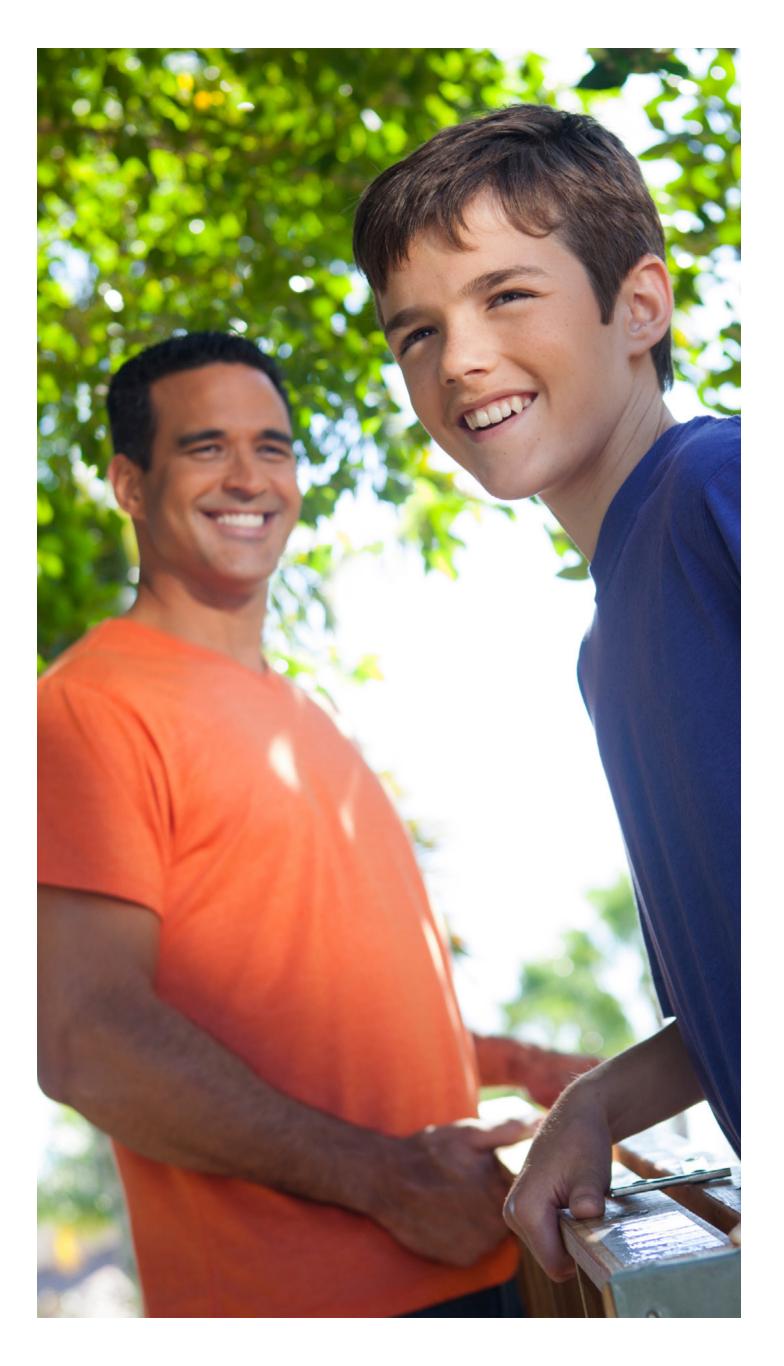
When we rave too easily, kids eventually learn to cheat, to exaggerate and lie and to avoid difficult reality. They have not been conditioned to face it. A helpful metaphor when considering this challenge is: inoculation. When you get inoculated, a nurse injects a vaccine, which actually exposes you to a dose of the very disease your body must learn to overcome.

It's a good thing. Only then do we develop an immunity to it. Similarly, our kids must be inoculated with doses of hardship, delay, challenges and inconvenience to build the strength to stand in them.



#### Prescription:

When your student achieves something special, decide what level of affirmation it deserves. The praise should always match the performance. We don't need to rave about showing up at school on time, or doing a chore around the house. Space out your praise, so it doesn't lose its impact. If your young person makes a good grade, instead of saying, "You're smart!" or "You're special!" (even though they may be) wisely respond with: "I love the effort you put into that project!" or "One of the qualities I love most about you is your willingness to sacrifice to reach a goal." Remember—what gets rewarded gets repeated.



## Steps Toward Healthy Leadership

Obviously, negative risk taking should be discouraged, such as smoking, alcohol, illegal drugs, etc. In addition, there will be times our young people do need our help, or affirmation. But—healthy teens are going to want to spread their wings. They'll need to try things on their own. And we, the adults, must let them. Here are some simple ideas you can employ as you navigate these waters:



- 1. Help them take calculated risks. Talk it over with them, but let them do it. Your primary job is to prepare your child for how the world really works.
- 2. Discuss how they must learn to make choices. They must prepare to both win and lose, not get all they want and to face the consequences of their decisions.
- 3. Share your own "risky" experiences from your teen years. Interpret them. Because we're not

the only influence on these kids, we must be the best influence.

- 4. Instead of tangible rewards, how about spending some time together? Be careful you aren't teaching them that emotions can be healed by a trip to the mall.
- 5. Choose a positive risk taking option and launch kids into it (i.e. sports, jobs, etc). It may take a push but get them used to trying out new opportunities.
- 6. Don't let your guilt get in the way of leading well. Your job is not to make yourself feel good by giving kids what makes them or you feel better when you give it.
- 7. Don't reward basics that life requires. If your relationship is based on material rewards, kids will experience neither intrinsic motivation nor unconditional love.
- 8. Affirm smart risk-taking and hard work wisely. Help them see the advantage of both of these, and that stepping out a comfort zone usually pays off.

#### BOTTOM LINE?

Your child does not have to love you every minute. He'll get over the disappointment of failure but he won't get over the effects of being spoiled. So let them fail, let them fall, and let them fight for what they really value. If we treat our kids as fragile, they will surely grow up to be fragile adults. We must prepare them for the world that awaits them. Our world needs resilient adults not fragile ones.

## Changing Our Minds About Kids

Now, let's focus on some leadership solutions we can employ. I believe every challenge we've mentioned is solvable. Those answers lie in our practicing healthy leadership. Perhaps this is a common scenario you've witnessed before.

Parents trying to control their children, filling their schedules with structure, rules and goals to meet. Their hope is—if they just push them hard enough, those children won't embarrass them or be under-achievers.

Teachers trying so hard to be hip and relevant in the classroom, they leave students laughing. While the faculty members may be in mid-life, they are acting as if they are "Forever 21." Everyone sees the incongruency except for them.

Coaches who try to lecture their way into the hearts of their young players. They often become frustrated that the attention spans of their student athletes are about four minutes long. It is the classic "old school" leader with a "new world" team.

These scenarios are far too common for my taste. It seems I find adults everywhere who throw their hands in the air, in surrender. They don't know how to lead, parent, coach, pastor or manage today's "Generation iY" kids, who've grown up with iPods, iPhones, iTunes, iPads and the internet. So adults fail to lead at all. Since our world is so different than the one we grew up in, grown ups frequently don't make the jump to understand and practice good leadership with their young. So, what are we to do? How should we lead these kids?

May I talk straight? We have to change our minds about how to lead them. In fact, let me suggest nine shifts we must make in our perspective to lead them well:



# Ten Strategies to Right-Size our Leadership as Teachers, Coaches and Parents

#### 1. Don't think CONTROL, think CONNECT.

Too often, our ambition as a parent or teacher is to seize control. We want to govern every action and direct each step kids take as they play, work or study. Studies show that parents who over-program their child's schedule often breed kids who rebel as teens. Why? They never got to truly be a child. Let me remind you: control is a myth. None of us are actually "in control." Instead, effective leaders work to connect with students. Why? Because once we connect, we build a bridge of relationship that can bear the weight of hard truth. We earn our right to genuinely influence them.

#### Control is a myth.



#### 2. Don't think INFORM, think INTERPRET.

Consider this fact. This is the first generation of kids that don't need adults to get information. It's coming at them twenty-four hours a day, as they remain connected to their phones and laptops. They have lots of information. What they need from us is interpretation. Their knowledge has no context. They lack wisdom that comes only from years of experience. Adults must help them make sense of all they know; to help them interpret experiences, relationships, politics, work and faith via a wise, balanced lens. Discuss together what's behind movie plots, books, technology. Teach them how to think. Our goal must be to provide them with a healthy worldview.

They don't need us to access information, but to process information.

#### 3. Don't think ENTERTAIN, think EQUIP.

I've seen parents who become absolutely consumed with entertaining their child. There's a

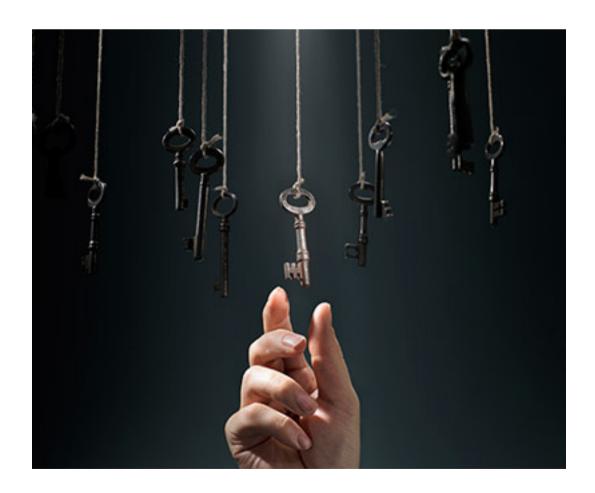
website in my community that furnishes moms with places to go to keep their kids entertained and happy. I know teachers who approach their classrooms the same way. Desperate to be popular with students, they do anything to keep kids entertained. I think a better perspective is: how can I equip my young person for the future? If I give them relevant tools to succeed and get ahead, they'll stay engaged. Happiness is a by-product. We must move from busying them so they're happy...to enriching them so they're fulfilled. True satisfaction comes from growth.

#### Happiness is a by-product.

#### 4. Don't think "DO IT FOR THEM" think "HELP THEM DO IT."

Adults have been committed to giving kids a strong self-esteem for thirty years now. We wrongly assumed, however, it would come from simply telling them they're special and awesome. According to the American Psychological Association, healthy and robust self-esteem actually comes from achievement not merely affirmation. In our attempt to provide everything they want, we've actually created a new "at risk" child: middle class and affluent children who are depressed because they didn't really do anything to achieve it. We must teach and parent for the long-term not the short term. Sure it's quicker to do it yourself—but it's better to transfer a skill.

## Healthy self-esteem actually comes from achievement not merely affirmation



#### 5. Don't think IMPOSE, think EXPOSE.

Kids have been given options since they were pre-schoolers. They've been able to choose what food they want to eat, what game they wish to play, where they want to go on vacation, what

sport they want to play this fall, you name it. So, when adults become scared their kid is falling behind, we tend to impose a rule or a behavior on them. While mandatory conduct is part of life, it carries negative baggage with it. When students feel forced to do it, they usually don't take ownership of it; it's your idea not theirs. Outcomes are almost always lessened. Why not think "expose" instead of impose. Show them something. Give them an opportunity they can't pass up. Make it enticing, as if they're going to miss out on something huge if they pass on it. It then becomes their idea. Instead of pushing the string, you're pulling it.

#### Give them an opportunity they can't pass up.

#### 6. Don't think PRESCRIPTIVE, think DESCRIPTIVE.

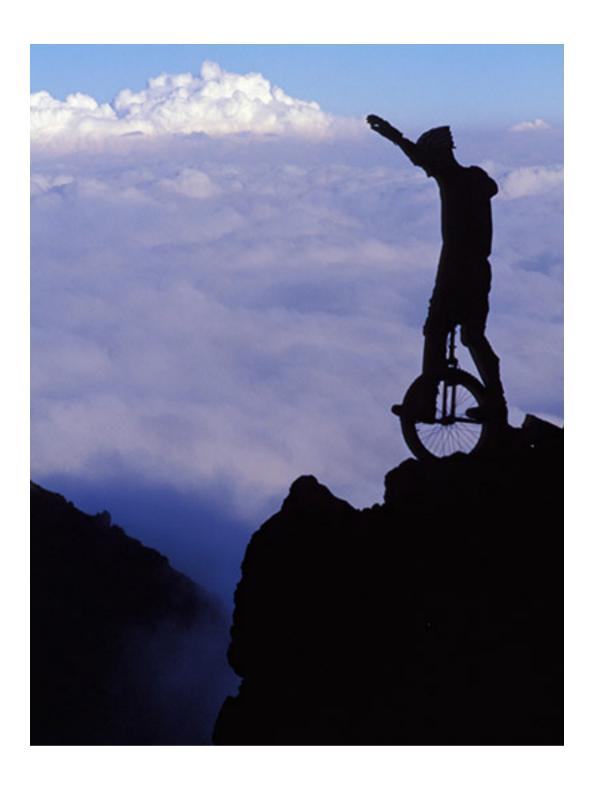
So many kids today have had everything mapped out for them by an adult. Recitals, practices, video games, playground time, lessons, phone games. Even Legos sets now have diagrams of what to build and how to build it. We're removing the need for kids to use their own imagination and creativity. Instead of prescribing what they should do next, try "describing." Describe an outcome or goal, and let them figure out how to reach it with their own ingenuity. Kids need adults to set meaningful goals but we do too much when we give them each step to take. This is where they can begin to develop some of heir own ambition and creativity.

Describe an outcome or goal, and let them figure out how to reach it with their own ingenuity

#### 7. Don't think PROTECT, think PREPARE.

Factors like child abductions, the Columbine High School massacre and the spread of terrorism have made adults paranoid about the safety of our kids. Schools, churches and homes take precautions to prevent anything bad from occurring: helmets, kneepads, safety belts, background checks and cell phones protect them from evil. Sadly, in our obsession over safety, we've failed to prepare them for adulthood. Most college students never graduate and those that do, most move back home. Instead of fearing for them, it's better to recall your entrance into adulthood and discuss what you learned that helped you succeed. The greatest gift a parent can give their child is the ability to get along without them.

The greatest gift a parent can give their child is the ability to get along without them.



#### 8. Don't think TELL, think ASK.

Many kids grow up with adults telling them what to do every hour of the day. Their lives have been scheduled thoroughly, structured tightly, and programmed by adults. This can disable them. I've met countless of college students who have never shared a bedroom, worked a job, or had much free time to use at their discretion. For many, it's their downfall. They aren't ready for freedom; they don't know how to self-regulate. That's why it's important, as these young people mature, for adults to begin doing more asking than telling. We must lead with questions. Why? They must begin to own the answers, instead of borrow answers from an authority. When they're told what to do, they don't have to be responsible for outcomes. It wasn't their decision. When we lead with questions, we force them to think and choose.

#### We must lead with questions

#### 9. Don't think COOL, think REAL.

So many adults—from parents, to teachers, to principals, to coaches to youth pastors—try so hard to be "hip" and emulate what kids are doing, thinking that if we can just be like them, they will like us. In reality, rarely can a grown adult, much less someone in mid-life, pull this

off without being laughable. No doubt we want to be relevant and current with our style and our content, but students do not look to adults to be cool. I don't know any who get their "cool gauge" from grown ups. While cool is good, they need adults to be authentic. Be who you are as you connect with them, and learn to laugh at yourself. Be self-aware. Know your quirks and blunders. Genuinely listen. Speak with them in a conversational tone that's believable. If kids were honest they'd tell you: the only thing worse than being un-cool is being unreal.

The only thing worse than being un-cool is being unreal.

#### 10. Don't think LECTURE, think LAB.

There's no doubt about it, when our young people do wrong, the first thing we want to do is lecture them. It's the quickest way to transmit an idea. It isn't, however, the best way to transform a life. As adults, we must begin creating environments and experiences from which we can debrief and process truths. There are life lessons to be found everywhere. Travel to new places, meeting with influential people, service projects, even movies and amusements can be sources of discovery and discussion in preparation for their future. It works like science class—along with a lecture, there is a lab in which to actually experiment. This is what students long for.

Worldwide, psychologists are discovering the downside of our obsession over our kids'self-esteem, safety and happiness. I am a leader, teacher and parent and I want these for all the young people I know. I am recognizing, however, that our strategies to reach our goals have been hollow. I am suggesting that maybe—just maybe—we need to change our minds about how we lead our kids.

There are life lessons to be found everywhere



# Thank you for Reading!

We hope this resource was helpful as you navigate your journey as a leader.

For a guide to spark conversations with students (at school or home) pick up a copy of the series: *Habitudes—Images That Form Leadership Habits and Attitudes*.

For a handbook on both the diagnosis and prescription for this digital generation of kids, check out: *Generation iY—Our Last Chance to Save Their Future*.

Interested in booking an event with Dr. Tim Elmore or one of the other speakers at Growing Leaders? Just email Chloe Lufkin at: Chloe@GrowingLeaders.com

To subscribe to Tim's daily blog, Click Here and you'll receive a FREE copy of the eBook What Students Wish Teachers & Parents Knew About Teaching. This resource takes a look at the ways in which students learn best and how we as leaders can adapt to it.

For any more questions, feel free to visit us at our website below.