

Our Children's Mental Wellness - We Rise and Fall Together

By Vashti Summervill © 2020

Last week, three Idaho legislators walked out of a session where our Superintendent of Public Instruction was presenting a task-force backed recommendation for \$1 million dollars to be designated for training teachers to identify at-risk students, respond to a crisis and create healthier classroom environments. Our governor supports it.

According to the article in the Idaho Statesman "Idaho's suicide rate ranks about fifth in the nation and the new Youth Risk Behavior Survey shows that 23 percent of students have expressed suicidal thoughts in the last year, the highest level in a decade." ([GOP legislators walk out as Ybarra asks for teacher training funding for at risk students - Idaho Statesman, February 11, 2020](#))

There are many good people trying to help - both individuals and organizations.

This article and the legislators walking out of the task force presentation is upsetting. I am trying to turn my feelings into a productive upset and speak from my heart.

Rep. Barbara Ehardt, R-Idaho Falls was quoted in this article as saying "Let me start by saying I do not share your enthusiasm (for the social-emotional learning proposal). What kind of disruptive behavior are we talking about?" She said teachers were spending more time with children "in an area ... that really is a role that should be dealt with in the home. It seems like everything is flipping."

Rep. Tony Wosniewski, R-Post Falls, posed the question "Whatever happened to character development?" I do agree that there seems to be an erosion of character in our culture, not just with our youth. However, his solution was to ask legislators to think back to the 1960's when parents would "take us behind the woodshed, if necessary,"

I certainly don't have all the answers but I see a culture of families suffering. Every day I speak with parents worried for their children's safety and looking for resources that largely do not exist. Many of our kids are self-harming and self-medicating.

Yes, there also seems to be an erosion of character but the question has to be "what is behind that?" As a parent coach, I teach that behavior is always a message expressing a lack or need. I would ask all of our public leaders to consider this perspective and also reflect on how they are stepping up to be a role model for our youth.

I believe that we treat others only as well as we are treating ourselves. I have come across a few quotes recently that really stand out. Clinical psychologist Jody Carrington says "The next time you call a kid "attention-seeking", instead, describe the kid as "connection-seeking" and see how your response to the child changes."

The other unsourced quote is "The kids who need the most love will ask in the most unloving ways."

As a teacher, parent coach and parent, I believe that when a child isn't being his best self and we respond with gentleness, we begin to heal some of the harshness of the world.

No one I have met wants to be a bad parent. Most parents I know want to do better and most I know are doing the best they can with the tools they have. And that's the thing, we are facing really big social issues that none of us are really equipped to deal with it.

It is a commonly held belief that there is a correlation between technology use and the mental health crisis. Most of us quickly jumped on the smart phone and social media bandwagon and invited our kids to join us. Of course these screens aren't all bad. It is all in how they are used. You can use them to be creative or you can just consume. They can be a tool or a tether. We get to choose.

Seatbelts didn't used to be a thing. Science teachers encouraged us to play with mercury. Smoking used to be "doctor recommended." History is filled with examples of cool things to try without much forward thought as to what the potential hazards could be.

When overused as a consumer or as a tether, there are a few things that are happening to our developing kids that are contributing to this crisis. Kids are digesting the 24 hour negative news cycle and witnessing many adults display the same erosion of character Rep. Tony Wosniewski referred to. Once again, where are the role models for our kids?

They are hearing about climate change, scary viruses, mass shootings and threats of war and pondering their prospects for a future. They are comparing every aspect of their lives to others on social media where the yard stick for success is followers and fame. An average, simple life, which most of us have, has been made a bad thing.

Phones at night and a school schedule that begins too early means most kids are not sleeping enough. Many kids are acting as therapists for one another late into the night as several of their friends are having a difficult time coping with anxiety and depression.

Most of the apps and games cause compulsion looping by giving small hits of dopamine. I'm not a scientist but I would guess that screens have a physiological effect on several neurotransmitters that impact health and well-being.

Part of social-emotional development is learning to navigate and regulate emotions. Much of that is learning to sit in discomfort. Our phones distract most of us from working on our emotional muscles. Have a little down-time? We pick up our phones. Feeling a little bored? We pick up our phones. Feeling anxious, alone, sad, etc.? We pick up our phones. Adults are experts at role modeling this for our kids.

Like many of you who are reading this, I have been the parent of kids acting out. I have been the parent of a child who has self-harmed. It is a dark road and very difficult to find the right help and resources.

I have been the teacher in a classroom of 30 students with 6 or 7 of them acting out and disrupting instruction. These are not bad kids. They are kids suffering on some level, asking for attention and trying to get their needs met.

If you have been fortunate and the kids in your life are not struggling, perhaps you could share your ideas for what is working for you. Judgement and shame do not make the problems disappear.

At this point in time, the question of whether this is the parent's job or the school's job doesn't matter. We are all struggling. We are all in this together muddling through things none of us really knows how to navigate.

Lift up those working hard to do something, Add your ideas to the mix - creative and compassionate ideas. Not just returning to a time of taking kids to the woodshed or lamenting that things aren't working in the home.

Does bringing back the wooden spoon create true character or just fearful compliance?

If you believe this isn't a societal issue and want to blame parents, teachers, bad music lyrics or whatever, perhaps you could be motivated by economic goals. If we don't address these problems that we all played a part in creating, we will all pay with generations of an ill workforce - a generation so disconnected from self and others that they cope through violence against self or others or numbing to the point of addiction.

I would love for Rep. Wosniewski, Rep. Ehardt and the others who spoke out against the task force recommendations or walked out of this meeting to present some alternative ideas. We desperately need creative ideas. Parents need support and new tools to deal with the realities of parenting today. Teachers need this same support. Idaho (among many other states) is desperate for additional mental health resources. Kids and adults alike are desperate for deeper connection to self (tools for navigating

difficult emotions), deeper connection to others, to their community and to a sense of purpose.

Please don't walk out of meetings, suggest hitting and shame and judge those who are struggling. Let's get creative, roll up our sleeves and try some new approaches. If those don't work, get more creative and keep working until we make progress.

This is all of our responsibility. We rise and fall together.