

William Charles McMillan III Lecture Series

No:
Why Kids Need to Hear It
and Ways Parents Can Say It

by Dr. David Walsh



October 28, 2008

The Grosse Pointe Academy
Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan

William Charles McMillan III Lecture Series

In 1994, Mr. and Mrs. James T. McMillan II established an endowed annual lectureship in memory of their late son, William Charles McMillan III. The purpose of their gift is twofold: to honor William's tremendous intellectual curiosity and energetic pursuit of all subjects; and to emphasize and promote the importance of elementary education by inviting a nationally known speaker to The Grosse Pointe Academy each year.

William was a student at The Grosse Pointe Academy from 1973 until 1981 where, receiving love and encouragement, he learned to reach beyond his limitations.

Although weak physically, William was intellectually gifted and his passion for life, his love and concern for all living things, and his enthusiastic use of verbal skills changed the lives of those who were closest to him and left a lasting impression on all with whom he came in contact.

Never at a loss for words, he was bursting with impressions, questions and insights which came pouring out in a dazzling, dizzying torrent. It was rare to have a brief, superficial conversation with William. A friend commented, "I sometimes felt like I needed a seat belt when William was talking to me, because William would take us into outer space, back into primeval history, and then into a universe of his own imagining."

William believed that anyone could make a significant and lasting impact on the world no matter what one's age, size or circumstance.

These lectures on elementary education are dedicated to the proposition that every child can reach beyond his or her own limitations, that each child makes the world a better place. It is the goal of these lectures to take your mind where it has never been. So, fasten your seat belt and get ready to enter the universe of imagining - a gift to you from William.

Speakers

April 26, 1995 - Dr. Ernest L. Boyer
President, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

April 23, 1996 - Dr. David Elkind
Professor of Child Study, Tufts University

April 22, 1997 - Dr. Thomas Lickona
Professor of Education, State University of New York, Cortland

January 21, 1998 - Dr. Jane M. Healy
Learning Specialist, Educational Consultant and Author

March 10, 1999 - Dr. Thomas J. Sergiovanni
Lillian Radford Professor of Education and Administration,
Trinity University

April 12, 2000 - Dr. William S. Pollack
Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology,
Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School

March 7, 2001 - Dr. Mary Pipher
Clinical Psychologist, Author, Lecturer,
Adjunct Professor, University of Nebraska

March 6, 2002 - Dr. Anne Chapman
Author and Consultant

March 4, 2003 - Dr. Michael G. Thompson
Psychologist, Consultant, Author

March 4, 2004 - Dr. Susan B. Neuman
Author, Professor at University of Michigan,
Former Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education

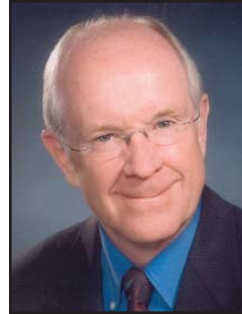
October 11, 2005 - Eric Jensen
Author and co-founder of the first international
brain-based learning program

October 10, 2006 - Dr. Wendy Mogel
Clinical Psychologist, Parent Educator, Author

October 9, 2007 - Rosalind Wiseman
Author of New York Times bestseller *Queen Bees and Wannabes*

October 28, 2008 - Dr. David Walsh
Clinical Psychologist, Parent Educator, Author

Dr. David Walsh



Best selling author, award-winning psychologist, internationally renowned speaker, and father of three, Dr. David Walsh has emerged as one of the world's most trusted authorities on parenting, family life, and the impact of media on children's health and development. He is the president and founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family based in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Dr. Walsh is a frequent guest on national radio and television, including appearances on *Sixty Minutes*, *Good Morning America*, *Today Show*, *CBS Early Show*, and *National Public Radio's Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *Talk of the Nation*. He has been the subject of three national broadcast public television specials, and his work is regularly covered in leading press publications.

Dr. Walsh has written nine books including the best seller *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*. His latest best-seller *NO: Why Kids of All Ages Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It* has ignited interest worldwide with editions already in nine languages. It also triggered a movement among parents and teachers called *Say Yes to No*. For more information about Dr. Walsh and his work, visit www.mediawise.org or www.sayyestono.org.

NO:

Why Kids of All Ages Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It

by Dr. David Walsh

Let me begin. Thank you very much for coming out to talk about kids. As was mentioned in the introduction, I work at the National Institute on Media and the Family. For 13 years, I have been saying whoever tells the story defines the culture. Because I believe so strongly in story, I would like to start with three of them. These three stories are all true, which is not always the case with me. Being Irish, I try never to let facts stand in the way of a good story, but these are true.

The first one takes place in a Target store sometime back. It was Saturday afternoon, and I had purchased the things that were on my list and was in the checkout lane. Ahead of me in line was a man and his little boy, and I'd say this little boy was about three years old. Everything was fine until the little boy looked to the left (we all know how those checkout lanes are organized), and there he was standing eye-level at a row of candy bars. It wasn't long before he had one in his hand holding it up for his father to buy for him. I was only 18 inches away so I heard the entire conversation. The dad said, very calmly, "No, you can't have that. We're gonna eat as soon as we get home so you need to put that back." Well, that was a signal to the little boy to up the ante a little bit. So he started to whine and he started to fuss, and I admired the dad holding out calmly, for about five seconds, at which point the candy bar went into the basket. Then the little guy, realizing he was on a roll, reached for another candy bar. His dad now was clearly frustrated. He used that "hushed voice" that all of us parents use from time to time, you know the one that sounds like this,

“Put that back! I said you could only have one! Now put that back or you are not going to get any,” at which point the kid not just upped the ante but increased the volume of the ante. So it wasn’t long before his voice could be heard in a good 50-foot radius and candy bar number two went into the basket. Then the little extortionist really went to work. He grabbed a third candy bar (I thought the dad was going to lose it right then and there). He told him to put it back, and when he said, “What’s the matter with you?” the boy went into a full Target meltdown. His voice could be heard in every corner of that Target store.

My question for you is: how many candy bars do you think that little boy left with? The answer is three. Little boy three, dad zero. And as the dad walked out of the store mumbling to himself, I kind of put myself in his situation. I’m not a mind-reader but I know what I’d be telling myself at that point. What I would be saying to myself is, “It’s only a candy.” And you know, when you consider serious problems in the world, what’s a candy bar? I mean, genocide in Darfur, war in Iraq, those are serious problems. Next to those, a candy bar is insignificant. Well, of course, as you know, the reason I am telling this story is that it is not about a candy bar. It’s about the lesson that that little boy learned. Because that little boy learned that “no” doesn’t mean “no,” it just means escalate.

Story number two: As was mentioned in the introduction, I wrote a book a couple of years ago called, *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain For You and Your Teen*. It’s about the mysteries of the adolescent brain, and as a result of that, I have had the wonderful opportunity over the last few years to travel around the country talking with professionals and parents about the mysteries of the adolescent brain. As I have done that, I have started to notice a pattern. The pattern is a growing number of us parents say “yes” to our teenagers even when we knew we should be saying “no.” A clear example of that is a practice that is kind of taking root in a number of communities, and that practice is teenagers, some as

young as 15 or 16 years old, going on spring break trips to places like Florida, Texas, and Mexico with no adult supervision. Now when you understand what's going on inside the teenage brain, that's really stupid. I've never talked to a parent who actually argued that that was a good idea, but I have talked to parents who have said "yes." That came to a head a while back when I was invited by a group of private schools to do a series of workshops on the upper Eastside of Manhattan in New York City. When I arrived in New York, I discovered that these private schools are among the most exclusive, where the rich and famous of New York send their kids. I did a faculty workshop in the afternoon and then a parent session in the evening. During the parent session on a spur of the moment (I hadn't really planned on it but I figured it would be a good example), I said, "Letting teenagers go on spring break trips with no adult supervision is really stupid," not knowing that at that very moment many of their kids were home packing their suitcases because by coincidence spring break began the following day. Needless to say, that sparked a lively discussion, and during the discussion, once again, I realized that none of the parents were arguing that this was a good idea. They all talked about how difficult it was to say "no." One mother said, "I hated to be in this position but all of my daughter's friends were going, and I didn't want her to be the only one left out." Another parent said, "I was afraid that if I told my 16-year-old son he couldn't go, he'd go anyway, and I didn't want to cross that bridge." They were all talking about how difficult it is to say "no."


Now I would like to tell you a third story, and the third story is also true, and it is my own story. When I was a little boy, I remember that on a summer afternoon one of the most welcome sounds was the sound of the ice cream truck as it would start to wind its way through the neighborhood. Our hearing was so finely tuned that we could hear the tinkle of that bell from blocks away, and as soon as we heard it, we would take off running as fast as we could to get money for ice cream. I can remember tracking down my mother and then say-

ing, breathlessly I am sure, “Mom, the Good Humor man is coming, the Good Humor man is coming. Can I have money for ice cream?” Now when I was seven or eight years old, I didn’t keep a running tally, but I do have a clear recollection that my mother’s usual answer was, “No, not today.” It wasn’t mean. It wasn’t vindictive. It was just, “no.” Now when she said “no,” what do you think I did? I did exactly what that little boy in Target did. I did whatever I could to get her to change her mind. I would whine, which I didn’t do too frequently because my mother’s response to my whining was, “David, if you don’t stop whining, you’re not going to get ice cream for the rest of your life.” I would try bargaining. I would try charming. I came up with a strategy, which I felt was pretty clever for a seven- or eight-year-old kid. My strategy was this: if I go for the cheapest thing on the truck that is going to make a “yes” much more likely. Now I am going to date myself with this example, but the cheapest thing on the truck when I was a kid cost 7 cents. There was a 7 cent Popsicle, and I can remember saying to my mother, “Mom, I will get the 7 cent Popsicle. Surely you can afford 7 cents.” I can still hear my mother’s response, “Oh sure I can afford 7 cents but that has nothing to do with it. I just want you to learn a lesson. I want you to learn you don’t always get what you want.” Now when I was seven or eight years old do you think I appreciated the wisdom of that lesson? Of course I didn’t, but now I understand how important that lesson was.


Now, I just told three stories: Target, spring break, and my own story, and I think those three stories lead to a question. The question would be this: Does that mean that my mother and the parents of her generation were better parents than parents are today? My answer to that question is, “no.” That is not my conclusion. My conclusion is that I think that my mother and the parents of her generation had it easier. The reason I say that is because they were surrounded and supported by a culture that reinforced “no.” I think that parents today are every bit as motivated to do as good a job as possible for kids, but I think the job is much more difficult. I think the job has never been

more difficult because we, today, are surrounded by a culture that says “yes” wherever we turn.

Now that brings me back to the topic of media. One good thing that I said a couple minutes ago is that whoever tells the stories, defines the culture. I believe that’s really one way to understand the power of media because we human beings come from a long line of storytellers. We love stories and we always have for thousands of years. Stories are powerful because they are very, very good at transmitting values from one generation to the next, and from one group to another. What’s changed is not the power of story; what’s changed is who the storytellers are. Now the traditional storytellers are being pushed aside and being replaced by the electronic storytellers on the screen. Television, movies, video games, the Internet, MySpace, YouTube, and the list keeps getting longer, but they are still very, very powerful.



To illustrate that, I would like to use this example. Raise you hand, please, if you remember the television program *Happy Days*. Wow! Holy mackerel. Hundreds of hands. Anyway, when I say *Happy Days*, who do you think of? Fonzie of course. He is a cultural icon. The program *Happy Days* was on for eleven seasons, 1971 to 1982, and the ratings of *Happy Days* kept going up and up and up during those years. Well, there were some other people in the United States watching some other numbers but they were going down, down, down. Those people were leaders of the American Library Association, and the numbers that they were watching go down were the number of books that kids were taking out of American libraries. Somehow, the leaders of the American Library Association finagled a meeting with The Fonz and the writers of *Happy Days*. The result of that was the famous Library Card Episode which aired in the spring of 1977. You may have seen it, or if you’re not old enough to have seen the original, you may have seen it in re-runs. It was a typical *Happy Days* episode. It was funny, witty, and well-written, and in the episode, The Fonz got his first library card. His biggest surprise:



Library cards were free! In fact, The Fonz couldn't get over the fact that you could actually walk out of a public building with a book under your arm that you didn't pay for and the cops wouldn't stop you. That one episode, as I said, had aired in the spring of 1977, and in the year following that episode the number of books that American kids took out of libraries increased by 40 percent. One episode! So it's powerful.


I think that we are all well aware of the good power that the media can exert. We could all, I am sure, make our own private list of favorite movies and television programs that haven't just entertained us but have even inspired us perhaps. The new interactive technology is amazing, as is the ability to track down information with the click of a mouse in a matter of seconds. That would have taken weeks to track down in prior generations. So there are tremendous benefits from this new technology. But, of course, because it is powerful there is also a downside. And there are things, a list of concerns that is growing. Usually when we talk about the concerns, there are certain topics that get to the top of the list. Things like media violence, for example. I testified before Congressional Committees five times in the last ten years. All five times it was the same issue: Media violence. Now I am not suggesting for a second that we shouldn't pay attention to things like media violence or emerging issues like video game addiction, cyberbullying, and predators in cyberspace, because all of those issues are important. But the point I want to make tonight is that I think we need to pay attention to another effect which is more subtle but more pervasive. All of us -- even the kid who has never played an M-rated video game and even the kid that has never gone to an R-rated movie -- all of our kids and all of us have been taught by the media to apprise four cultural values: More, fast, easy, and fun. We are constantly told that whatever we have, we need more of it. Whatever model we have, there is a better one right around the corner.

When I was doing background research for the book, I ran across a quote from a retailing executive who said at a business meeting, "Our job is to make people unhappy with what they've got,"


which of course, makes sense. Because if we are unhappy, what will we do? Switch to Brand X or get the newer model. We are constantly told that everything should be easy and fast. I was writing that particular section of the book (the section on Delay of Gratification), it was a cold January morning in Minnesota, and I couldn't get it to sound right. So I was dealing with a mini writer's block. Well, I have learned over the years that the best way for me to deal with that is to take a break. So on that cold, January morning I pushed the computer to the other side of the table and opened up the morning paper. The page I opened up to was a full-page ad, and the block letters jumped off the page, "Delay of gratification stinks, buy 'em and ski 'em the same day." It was a ski ad, but the message was that we should be able to have whatever we want when we want it. And of course we are constantly told that everything should be fun.

One of the statistics that often surprises people about media is that at this point 28% of babies under two now have a television, or some video screen, in their bedroom. Twenty-eight percent of babies under two! Now I think I know one of the reasons for that. I think it is the effect of marketing products like Baby Einstein DVD's. Now, many of you probably know what they are, but in case you don't, Baby Einstein DVD's is an example of a product (it's the market leader and that's why I use it as an example) whose target audience is babies five months of age and older. Okay, in my opinion the smartest thing about Baby Einstein DVD's is the name. Because what it promises to the young parent who, of course wants the best for their little boy or girl, is a genius like an Einstein. And, of course, there is a threat. The threat is never spoken; it is between the lines. The threat is this: If your baby does not have these DVD's, then he or she will be condemned to a life of stupidity. There is no research backing up any benefit of Baby Einstein DVD's, in fact, some of the early research points in the opposite direction. University of Washington research shows that Baby Einstein babies at the age of three have smaller vocabulary than non-baby Einstein babies. As you probably picked up, I am not a big fan

of Baby Einstein DVD's, but the reason I'm not has nothing to do with the content. If you have seen the content or if you have them, they are harmless. It's shapes. It's colors. It's music. There is nothing wrong with the content. My problem with Baby Einstein DVD's is what they are doing. They are wiring those little baby brains to orient to screens before they can ever crawl or utter their first word. Moreover, they are wiring those little baby brains to always expect what? Entertainment and fun. They are being wired to expect fun. Then they get to school, and what do they run into at school? A human being for a teacher; what a bummer that is! Not every letter dances on the board, and there is not a clever little tune for every little concept. So now we have the phenomenon of little boys and girls, some as young as first and second grade, already coming home complaining of boredom. Of course they are bored; they have been trained to constantly expect entertainment.



So more, fast, easy fun. Is there anything inherently wrong with what's behind those? I don't think so. Is there anything wrong with having nice things? Of course not. I mean, when I get a gift, I really enjoy it. Is there anything wrong with easy and fast? I don't think there is anything wrong with convenience. My wife, Monica, and I own a microwave. We own a dishwasher. I am not against convenience. Is there anything wrong with fun? I hope not. The problem is not with having decent things or with convenience or with fun. The problem is that when those get out of balance, when they get overdone, it makes it very, very difficult for us to teach our kids, and for our kids to develop, the trait that is going to absolutely be key to their success. And that trait is self-discipline. The goal is not to say "no," but the goal is to help kids develop the ability to say "no" for themselves.



The importance of self-discipline has been documented in research many times over, but there is a classic experiment that was done years ago in 1968. A group of psychologists at Stanford University recruited some parents to bring their little three- and four-year-olds, one by one, to the study. After they arrived, the psychologist


introduced himself, and then presented the children, little boys and girls, with a choice. The choice was this: Here's a marshmallow. Now you can either eat this marshmallow now or wait until I come back. I am going to go on an errand, and when I come back, I'm bringing back more marshmallows. If the first one is still there, I am going to give you more, but if you have already eaten the first one, then I am sorry, no more. After making sure that the little boys and girls knew the choice that they had, the psychologist then asked the parent to join him in the next room to watch through a 2-way mirror to see what would happen. They recorded every child. Some of the kids ate the marshmallow before the door was closed. Other kids did whatever they could to wait for that second marshmallow. They have recordings of kids who stood there looking at the ceiling so they wouldn't see it. They have recordings of kids who marched around the room singing at the top of their lungs so they wouldn't think about it. Some of the kids ate the marshmallow; other kids were able to wait. The genius of the experiment, however, was not what happened that day. The genius of the experiment was that they followed those kids for eighteen years, all the way through elementary school, secondary, post-secondary, and into early adulthood. The ability to wait for that second marshmallow was an amazingly strong predictor of their success in school, their adjustment, their happiness, even their popularity. I think that that experiment was a very clever way to measure that key, success trait, self-discipline. The research continues. A recent study, much more recent, comes out of the University of Pennsylvania, Martin Seligman and Angela Duckworth study, showing that self-discipline is twice as strong a predictor of success in school as intelligence. Twice as strong! My kid can be the smartest whipper snapper on the block, but if he or she has trouble managing his or her behavior, that is going to affect their success in their achievement.

And so the problem with more, fast, easy, and fun, is it makes it very, very difficult for our kids to learn that, and I think it is now spawning an epidemic. I have given the epidemic a name. I call it


DDD: Disciple Deficit Disorder. Here are the symptoms: A culture of disrespect, a sense of impatience, a need for instant gratification, unrealistic expectations, a sense of entitlement, self-centeredness, and rampant consumerism. Now I think what my responsibility, at this point, is to see if I can provide any evidence for that. You could be thinking to yourself, “You know, is there any evidence for this or is this just the opinion of just some guy who wrote a book?” I think the evidence is all around us. Let’s just take a look at some of it.

A culture of disrespect: Are there any teachers here this evening? Oh a number of them; thank you for coming out. As you may know, but the rest of us should know, your teaching profession is facing a crisis. Imagine this scenario. Imagine if 50 percent of the young men and women graduating from medical school stopped practicing medicine by the end of the fifth year. That isn’t true, but if it were, we would be having congressional investigations and blue ribbon committees impaneled to confront the crisis. That is exactly the situation with teachers in the United States. At the present time, one out of two new teachers has abandoned the profession by the end of the fifth year. Do you know what the number one dissatisfier is for American teachers? Student behavior. I hear it from teachers no matter where I go. West coast, Midwest, or east coast. I did a workshop out in San Francisco, Mission High School, the first high school founded in California. There, a young social studies teacher, she couldn’t have been more than 26 or 27 years old, told me after the workshop, “I think I spend 75 or 80 percent of my time and energy dealing with behavior.” Now somebody might say, “That is an inner city high school and it has inner city problems.” Well, I had a conversation with a math teacher not too long ago in Clayton, Missouri. Clayton, Missouri is a very nice, upper-middle class suburb of St. Louis. This teacher told me, “If I get through periods of the day with the lid on, I consider it a success.” You know, student behavior is showing up even outside the classroom, like Maplewood, New Jersey. Last year, Maplewood, New Jersey made the decision to lock the library doors during the after

school hours. During the after-school hours the library is locked. Why? No one could manage the out-of-control behavior of the kids. Now if you think Maplewood, New Jersey is some gang-dominated, drug-infested community, it could not be further from the truth. Last year, Money Magazine named Maplewood, New Jersey as one of the 50 most desirable communities to live in, and the library doors are chained because no one could manage the kids. Now as student behavior becomes more of a concern, it affects student achievement. It affects it in three ways, and a couple of them are obvious, I think. First of all, if I am a teacher and I have to spend more and more of my time and energy on behavior, that is less and less time for content. That is clear. The second one I think is pretty clear as well. There is kind of a tone of tension, and that is not an environment that is conducive to learning. The third one, however, is more subtle, and I didn't know about it until I learned about it from my kids.



Let me tell you a little bit about my daughter, Erin. She is now an adult, but she went to a very, very good public high school with 2000 kids, 500 kids in her graduating class. Erin went through high school with straight A's, a 4.0 average, and graduated as valedictorian of her class. I also realized that when Erin was a junior and a senior, I did not see her working that hard. So we would have conversations that went like this: I would say, "Erin, I certainly can't complain about your grades because you are getting straight A's, but I don't see you working that hard. Are you a genius?" And Erin's response was, "Well dad, of course I'm not a genius. Don't you kind of know?" I said, "What do you mean don't I know?" She said, "All of the teachers know that I am a good kid. All I have to do is show up, turn in my assignment, and I'm going to get my A." Then all of a sudden it hit me; well of course that would be human nature. If I'm a teacher, and if I have more and more kids whose behavior I am constantly worrying about, it would be so natural to make a deal. What I have learned is that the deal is never spoken, teachers have told me this, and in fact, many teachers have said they weren't even aware of it, and the deal is



this: If you don't give me a hard time, it will boost your grade. You may not get an A, but good behavior will boost your grade. I have talked to teachers all over the country and they are saying, "Yeah, that's what happened," and now we are starting to see the impact. Last year, a large public high school here in the twin cities, just about this time last year, canceled valedictorian. Do you know why they didn't have a valedictorian last year? There were too many of them. There were 43 kids with a 4.0 average in the graduating class. Now I am not saying those kids aren't smart, and I'm not saying those kids didn't work, but when you can't have a valedictorian because there are too many of them, I think we are seeing "the deal" at work.

I just had an experience talking about this with a psychology seminar class at the University of Minnesota. I'm on my way over (this was just a couple weeks ago in the afternoon when I was invited by a psychology professor to talk to the freshman about this topic), and I'm going over saying, "I'm going to go over and talk to 19-year-olds about this. I wonder what their reaction is going to be." It amazed me. I couldn't stop them. They couldn't wait to join the conversation. One young woman said she felt completely ripped off. She said, "I sailed through high school and barely broke a sweat. Then I got to the University of Minnesota and it was like getting hit by a truck. I was completely unprepared." A young woman who went to a private high school told me that she got full credit for an assignment that she never even turned in. She got full credit because she was one of the "good" kids. So I think student behavior effects that the good kids get a boost. That, I think, is one of the contributors to a big concern that we have. That concern is, of course, student achievement.

Now here's a quick review of the history. Some of you might be old enough to remember, I certainly remember a time, when there was a widespread assumption in the United States. The widespread assumption was: Smartest kids in the world, best schools, no question about it! That's what I grew up with. That was what we all believed when I was a kid. Then came 1983 when Ronald Reagan was President

and Terrel Bell was Secretary of Education. He looked at the first legitimate international comparison of how our kids matched up with other kids in other industrialized countries. He was so upset by the results that he called the report a Nation at Risk because what the report showed is that not only weren't our kids not at the top, we weren't even close. In some subject areas, we were literally at the bottom on the Rankin's. So everybody in this auditorium tonight knows what has happened in the last 25 years since that report came out. We have had one program after another all aimed at improving the academic achievement of our kids. Latest version is, of course, No Child Left Behind. What do every single one of those programs have in common? Every single one of those programs has put all of the responsibility for improving the academic achievement of our kids on whose shoulders? Exactly: Teachers and schools. We are scapegoating teachers and schools. That is not to say, of course, that we would ever relax our efforts to improve education. The world is changing so quickly, and I know teachers are committed to trying to figure out how we can keep doing a better job, but if we think that we are going to get the improvement that we want without paying at least as much attention to the trait that we know that is key to success (which is self-discipline), unless and until we give that at least equal weight, we are going to continue to push a really heavy rock up a very steep hill. Which is why, after 25 years of effort, we have made very, very little progress. If you have looked at some of the most recent international comparisons, it is barely unchanged since 1983.

Now some people have said to me, "Oh Walsh, quit talking about those international comparisons. They are not worth the paper that they are written on. We test all of our kids and those other countries only test their best kids." First of all, that's not true, but let's just assume for a second that it is. Let's take out of the equation all of the kids who drop out of school before graduation, because while they're in school, I'm sure they're pulling down those averages. Let's in addition take off the table, out of the picture, all of the kids who just

squeaked by, pulling down those averages. Let's just take a look at our success stories. There are two tests that colleges use to make their admissions decisions: One is the SAT, and the other is the ACT. The ACT (American College Testing Corp.) does something every year that the SAT company does not do. At the end of the testing year, they pool all of their scores into a profile. It is the average score. Then every year, at the beginning of the school year in August, they release the profile of the incoming freshman class. What you see up on the screen are the recent results of an ACT profile. Only 50 percent of entering-college freshman had college level reading skills. That doesn't mean they can't read, it means critical thinking, critical reading. When it comes to math and science, it's scarier. Only 41 percent were ready for college algebra, and only 26 percent were ready for college biology. And those are the success stories. Every year colleges across America have to keep adding more and more remedial courses to get kids ready for the college courses.

I have had an experience in the last year or two that for me is very new. I have talked to educators for years but it's only been in the last year or two that I am getting invitations from college faculties to talk about this because they can't quite figure out what is going on. I talked to a writing professor at New York University a couple months ago. Now New York University is a good school, a very selective school, and he told me that every class that comes in their writing skills is worse than the class the year before. I talked to a professor at the University of Minnesota last fall who had just finished reading 65 term papers. She told me she thought one of the 65 was really well-written. I talked to a college philosophy professor at one of our best private colleges, who told me that he was really discouraged because at the end of the fall term, a group of students went to the administration to complain about him. One of their complaints was that he refused to give them a multiple-choice test in philosophy.

And now this is starting to show up in the work place. The economic competitiveness issue is becoming a serious concern for

American business leaders and should be for all of us. Many of you may be familiar with Thomas Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*. It has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for years. Friedman's argument, among others, is that the competitors for our kids today are not sitting in the next role at school; they are all over the world. And Friedman has a wonderful anecdote which captures a central message. Friedman writes, "When I was a boy and I didn't want to eat my dinner, my parents would say 'Tom, eat your dinner because there are children in China going to bed hungry.'" So now when my kids don't want to do their homework, I say, "Do your homework because those children in China are now hungry for your job." There are 1.4 billion people in China. There are more honor roll students in China than we have kids in the United States, and they are motivated.

I took my first trip to China last October. Monica and I spent the month in China traveling around, and I remember a scene in Dali, which is the western part of China. Dali is in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains, a beautiful little town. It was late in the afternoon and Monica and I were in the marketplace doing some tourist shopping. At 5 o'clock, all of the kids got out of school and they started coming through the village to go to the shops where their parents were shopkeepers. And like kids all over the world, they were running, shouting, and chasing each other, burning off all of the energy they accumulated during their school day. By about 5:20, I looked at Monica and I said, "Do you see what I see?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Get out your camera and take a picture because people aren't going to believe this." By 5:20 in the afternoon, what do you think was happening? Exactly! All of the kids were doing their homework. All over the place they were sitting on park benches and they were sitting on stools in their parents' shops all studying their English (every kid in China learns English) and doing their math problems. Those are the kids who our kids are going to be competing with. Almost two out of three Doctorates in Engineering in the United States are now awarded to foreign nationals. That does not mean foreign students who are

coming here to live; it means foreign students who are coming here to get their degrees in engineering and then going back home.

Cargill is a very important company headquartered here in the twin cities. It is a huge multinational agricultural business with 220,000 employees around the world. Because they are located here, I had the opportunity to talk to an executive in charge of recruiting. She told me, “In order for us to compete with companies like Monsanto, we have to find the best scientists in the world to help us stay on the cutting edge.” She said, “For years we found them here in the United States.” She said, “Now with every passing year it is less true.” Guess where they are finding them? Japan, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Finland, all of the countries, by the way, that are at the top of those lists on those international rankings. The Conference Board is an organization based in New York of America’s largest corporations. They issued a report a little while ago called The Workforce Readiness Report, and it was the judgment of American business leaders on the quality of young people coming into the workforce. The report was not good, but the big surprise was that the number one concern of American business leaders about young people coming into the workforce is work ethic. Not skills. They are worried about skills but they are more worried about work ethic. As they said in the report, “We can teach the young people the skills but they have to be willing to work hard, to delay gratification, to work as a team, and to cooperate.”

I more and more hear stories from business leaders. I talked to a woman who works for Wells Fargo who was wrapping up an interview with a young 20 something who had applied for a job as a teller. And she said, “What are your salary expectations?” Without hesitation, the young person said, “Eighty thousand dollars a year.” That’s more than three times what a beginning teller makes. The expectations are so skewed. Do you know that spending power of American kids, the money that they influence, has increased 500 percent in one generation? So it is really having an impact in terms of economic competitiveness as well.

Now I think there is another contributor to this that we need to talk about for a minute and that is something that is very, very important that I am sure you have all heard of. That is, self-esteem. A lot of people are surprised to discover that self-esteem is not a new idea. William James wrote about it in the 19th century. Now William James, the great American psychologist, describes self-esteem as “a set of opinions that I have about myself, and an opinion has two components: A fact and my emotional reaction to that fact.” Well, self-esteem didn’t really enter mainstream American culture until the 1960’s when more and more people started to talk about it. Then something happened in 1969 which made it a mainstream conversation piece. There was a book published in 1969 called *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*. The author was Nathaniel Branden and the book shot to the top of the best-seller list immediately. Parents and teachers across America were reading it and talking about it. The problem was that Nathaniel Branden changed the definition of self-esteem. What he emphasized is the emotional part and left behind the fact part, and that has led to three myths of self-esteem.

Myth Number 1: Self-esteem is feeling good. If you ask a lot of people in the United States, “What is self-esteem?” a lot of people will say, “Feeling good about myself.” Now there is nothing wrong with feeling good about yourself but it is not the same thing as self-esteem; they are two different things. But once we defined it as feeling good about ourselves, then that led to Myth Number 2, which is that it is our job, as parents and teachers and anybody who works with kids, to make them feel good about themselves. One way to do that is to give them lots of praise. I thought that that’s what we were supposed to do, so I made sure that I told my kids how smart they were and how great they were, not knowing that I wasn’t doing them any favors (and I will explain why I say that in just a minute or two). This brings us to Myth Number 3: If I feel good about myself, then good things will happen. I will be more successful in school, I will be more successful in life, and I will be at less risk for problems. We have mas-

sive, well-funded programs in the United States based on a myth. Because if I measure self-esteem as feeling good about myself, there is not one research study anywhere, there is not one shred of evidence, that links feeling good about myself with success or less risk. In fact, one of the instruments that is often used to measure self-esteem is called the self-esteem inventory; guess where some of the highest scores are found? Prison, where there are some people who feel so entitled that they should be able to do whatever they darn well please. Then that leads to Myth Number 4: Stress, challenge and disappointment damage self-esteem, because if it is important for our kids to feel good, then we don't want them to feel disappointed and we don't want them to feel frustrated. Unfortunately, I didn't learn a lot of these things so much by research as by making mistakes. I can still remember one of the many mistakes. One of the things that Monica and I always thought was that if we wanted our kids to be responsible, we should give them responsibilities. So when our kids were little they had jobs. When they were little, of course, the jobs were little. Erin was about eight years old and it was her turn to do the bathroom. It was a Saturday morning and I came down to check and see how things were going. Of course, Erin was doing an eight-year-old version of cleaning of the bathroom, which didn't meet my very high standards. So I said to her, "Erin, here let me show you." That's what I said but that's not what I did. What do you think I did? Exactly. I did it for her. Why? It was easier for me. So I am cleaning the bathroom, and Erin was smart enough to figure this out in about two seconds. "This is cool; dad is doing my job so I'm out of here!" (And she disappeared.) Unfortunately for me, Monica saw the whole thing go down. So a couple seconds later Monica is standing in the doorway of the bathroom and she says, "Dave, what are you doing?" Can you imagine how defensive I felt? So I said, "I'm cleaning the bathroom, what does it look like?" She said, "Well, I thought that that was Erin's job." And I said, "Well she couldn't do it very well." Then Monica hit the nail on the head when she said, "Dave, you're going to have to decide. Do you

want a clean bathroom or a competent daughter?” She was absolutely right. I mean how many times do we end up doing for our kids what they should be doing for themselves? How many times have we taken out the garbage ourselves rather than argue with a ten-year-old? How many times do we do our own dishes because we don’t want to hassle with a teenager? We are doing things for our kids that they should be doing for themselves.

Now, I want to come back to the issue of praise because I mentioned that Myth Number 2 was praising kids. It turns out that there has been a lot of research in recent years on praise, and it turns out that’s a two-way sword as well. Of course, we all want to be helpful to our kids. It turns out that how we praise our kids is either helpful or not helpful. Now there’s a lot of research, but let me just describe to you one experience which is just an example of many. This experiment was done with fifth graders. So what they did is they gave these fifth graders a task that they were pretty sure they would be successful at, and sure enough, all the fifth graders completed the task. Then they randomly assigned the fifth graders to two groups. They went to the first group and they said, “You kids completed this task. You are really smart.” Then they went to the other group and they said, “You kids completed this task. You must have worked really hard. Way to go.” Then they went to round two. In round two, the kids had a choice between Task A and Task B. In Task A, they were told, I don’t know whether you will be able to do it or not but give it a try. For Task B, they were told, you shouldn’t have much trouble with that. You can choose. The kids who had been told that they were smart chose Task B. The kids who had been told that they worked hard chose Task A. There is a growing body of evidence showing that kids who are constantly told that they are smart start to become risk averse. Why? Because if I’ve just been told that I’m smart and now there’s a task that I may not be able to do, if I can’t do it what does that mean? Maybe it means I am not smart and I’m not going to run that risk. I am going to take the sure way out. And so there is a growing body of evidence that



how we praise our kids has a lot to do with whether it is helpful or not helpful. I have converted that research into four tips.

Tip Number 1 (and these are all based on the research): Praising the effort is actually more helpful to kids than praising the underlying ability. Kids reason that while there is nothing they can do about the underlying ability, there is something they can do about the effort. Tip Number 2: Praise should be specific and not generic. Rather than saying, “You’re really brilliant at math,” it is actually more helpful to say, “Good job on those multiplication tables.” Tip Number 3: Praise has to be sincere. Do you know kids as young as seven years old who can figure out when they deserve praise and when they don’t? And when they get praise that they don’t deserve, they come to two conclusions: One is, “I can’t trust you,” and second, “I must be so bad that you have to give me praise for that.” Once again, I can remember these mistakes. My daughter, Erin, played girls’ hockey the first year in Minnesota that the Minnesota state high school league sanctioned girls’ hockey. So she was one of those girl pioneers that played in the first years. Monica and I went to as many games as we could, and can remember there were games when Erin did not play well and the team did not do well. But trying to be helpful, we’d be going home in the car and I would say to Erin, “Erin, good game.” There would be silence in the back seat, and then a second after that she’d say, “Dad, you either know absolutely nothing about hockey or I must be really bad if you think that was a good game.” She knew that it wasn’t sincere. Now that doesn’t mean that I can’t encourage her, but it has to be sincere.

Tip Number 4 is: Praise should be intermittent, not constant. Anybody who has taken Psych 101 knows that intermittent reinforcement is much more effective than constant reinforcement. If you want evidence of that, after you leave tonight go to a casino, and watch all of the people standing for hours in front of slot machines waiting for the intermittent reinforcement.

Now, what does all of this have to do with “no?” I don’t want to give the impression that self-esteem isn’t important because it is, but we have to make sure we’re talking about the real deal. Self-esteem is like a mirror. Okay. Now what a good mirror does is it reflects back accurately. Self-esteem should be like that mirror. It should reflect back my strengths and the things that I need to improve upon. You know we can distort the mirror in two directions, and I think we are all aware of how destructive negative distortion can be. So putting kids down, criticizing them, and undermining their confidence can be terribly destructive to a kid. What we also need to remember is that we can distort the mirror in the other direction as well, because real self-esteem is built on competence and achievement. Notice I’m not saying excellence and being number one, being the best; but rather I’m talking about competence and achievement. If you translate it into real life it kind of looks like this: Imagine I am in fourth grade and I’ve got math problems to do for homework. Now when it comes time for me to do my math problems, I can guarantee that I can think of at least one thousand things that I would rather do. I would rather be making a peanut butter sandwich, playing video games, watching T.V., teasing my sister, fighting with my brother, you name it, I would rather do than do those math problems. I am only going to get them done if I can manage myself (self-discipline) well enough to get myself in the chair and get those problems done. Then the next morning when I turn them in at school, it’s not like this big deal, but it is a micro boost in real self-esteem. And it’s not just school stuff; it’s life stuff. If I’m a kid and I can discipline myself well enough so that I can share my toys with other kids, take turns, cooperate, put their needs ahead of my own, what’s going to happen? Kids are going to want to play with me. I’m going to have friends and am going to be popular. Then the feelings that come from that are based on real self-esteem. So self-esteem is important but we need to make sure we are talking about the real deal.



Now what does that have to do with saying “no?” Well ,part of what I have to be able to do is balance different drives. As you probably know, when we are born, there are a lot of things, of course, that we learn through experience but our brain comes pre-equipped with a certain number of drives. These are things that we do not have to learn; we come prewired. O There are a number of these. The fight or flight response, the drive to seek pleasure, the drive to connect with other people, and from that comes wanting to maintain the approval of the people that we care about. Empathy and guilt, those are all hardwire drives; we know that from research. If you consider that list of hardwire drives, when you start to think about it you start to imagine that those hardwire drives can conflict with one another from time to time. So, for example, let’s say that you and I are good friends. Okay. Well, if you’re my friend then I want to keep that connection. But let’s say that I’m doing something. I’m doing what I want to do, seeking pleasure, but what I’m doing is very, very offensive to you and you let me know that. Now I have to figure out how to balance those drives, because if I keep doing what I want to do, and that’s offensive to you, pretty soon it’s going to destroy our friendship. So what I have to figure out how to do is how to balance those drives. Balancing those drives means able to say “no.” You see they’re like a team of horses. If I can figure out how to get the reins in hand, and I can figure how to manage those, then that team of horses can take me to great places. But if they are out of control, I’m going to end up in the ditch. The problem with what the culture of more, fast, easy, and fun has done, is it has taken one of the drives (the drive to seek pleasure), and has taken it off the list and put it at the top of the list in a font that is ten times bigger than everything else, underlined it, capitalized it, italicized it, and put a spotlight on it and said “this one, the drive to seek pleasure is more important than everything else,” which makes it very, very difficult for kids to learn that balancing, to be able to say “no” when it is appropriate.

You know if we talk about this developmentally, the first job for us parents when we have a little baby is the basic health and safety needs (which of course are primary). After all of those are taken care of, the next most important job for a parent is to form a good, secure, emotional connection. Child psychologists call this “the attachment relationship,” because that is the basis of their relationship with other people. Now we’ve known from years of research how important that early connection is for healthy, psychological growth for the development of empathy. Now the point that I want to make is that good connection is also the basis for discipline and self-discipline, and here’s why. If the connection is intact, if there is this good, warm, secure, dependable bond between parent and child, then the child is motivated to keep the connection intact. So approval and disapproval will have an effect. See if there is no connection, then what do I care whether you approve or disapprove? I’ll just do whatever I darn well please. A complete lack of connection, by the way, is the breeding grounds for a sociopath, someone who has absolutely no concern for relationships. Once the connection is intact, then the child is motivated to keep it intact. So that is why I believe that it is impossible for little babies, and when I say little babies I mean from birth all the way up to 18 months, to misbehave. Now can a child at that age do things that drive us nuts? Sure, but they are not doing it to misbehave in the sense that they are not doing it because we don’t want them to do it. When a child at that age does something that drives us nuts, they are doing it because they’re hungry, they’re tired, they’re fussy, they’re teething, they’re exploring, they’re frustrated, but they are not doing it because we don’t want them to do it. That will change, however, and big change comes at about 18 months. At about 18 months, give or take a little bit, the child passes through a very, very important developmental milestone. Perhaps a way to explain what that change is by telling you about another experiment. I call it the Goldfish crackers vs. broccoli experiment, and it kind of goes like this. Imagine I’m sitting



across the table from a little baby who is 14 months old. Now, please remember the age because 14 months is important. Okay? So I am sitting across the table from a little baby, 14 months old, boy or girl, it doesn't make any difference, and on the table there are two bowls. One bowl contains those tasty Pepperidge Farm crackers called Goldfish crackers, and we have done enough research to know that all babies love Goldfish crackers. In the other bowl, there are pieces of broccoli, and we have done enough research to know that not many babies like broccoli. With that in mind, I take a Goldfish cracker out of the bowl, put it in my mouth and go, "Oh yuk, I don't like Goldfish crackers." A second later, I take a piece of broccoli out of the bowl and put that in my mouth and I go, "Umm, I like broccoli." Then I ask the 14-month-old to give me a treat. What do you think the 14-month-old will give me? (The crowd answers broccoli.) No, Goldfish crackers. It surprises a lot of people and here's why. See when I'm 14 months old, if I like Goldfish crackers, you like Goldfish crackers. A 14-month-old cannot tell the difference. Now if I do that same experiment with that same child at the age of 20 months, what will they give me? Broccoli, because at about 18 months, thereabouts, they go through a developmental milestone in which they start to realize that what I like and what you like aren't necessarily the same thing. Not only that, but what I want and you want aren't the same thing. Furthermore, I don't have to do what you tell me to! We have a nickname for this developmental stage? What do we call this? Exactly, the terrible two's. Why do we call it the terrible two's? Because what is their favorite word? "No." They say "no" even when they don't mean it just to let you know they can say it. That's the explanation for the child at this age who is walking to the china cabinet to play with the dishes where they know they are not supposed to go, and all the while they are heading over there, they're looking over their shoulder, perhaps even saying "no no no no no," because what they are doing is exercising their newly discovered self-will. There the message of "no" changes. See because "no" for the little ones is a redirect; it is a diversion and

redirect as you know. You know, “Don’t play with the china, here, play with this toy.” Whereas as a child, now is where they start to develop their self-will. We don’t want to crush it, but it is very, very important for the child to start to learn that there are limits, and that they have to learn how to say “no” for themselves. And by the way, the word “no” is not what is important. As you know, there are a million ways to say “no” without ever using the word. In fact, with children that age, you want to say it positively. You know, so for example, instead of saying, “Don’t stand on the chair,” it is actually more helpful to a child that age to say, “Stand on the floor.” It’s the concept that we’re talking about, not the word. What we want to do is help the child start to learn those limits.

Now there are two problems. Problem number 1 is that very few children learn this on their own. The overwhelming majority (99.99%) of children outsource it. And who do they outsource it to? To us. We’re the ones that have to teach them the limits. The second problem is that children do not learn this in one repetition. My extensive research has found that it takes the average child 1.7 billion repetitions to learn this lesson, because what they keep doing is testing the limits. That’s their job. Now how do we respond to that? Well, you know there are as many different styles of parenting and raising kids as there are people, but if we take a look at three general ways, one is permissive, and that’s what the culture encourages, “Never say no.” The problem is that then kids don’t learn that very, very important stay of self-discipline. Now we can go to the other extreme and get compliance, so I can become the ogre who instills fear. There’s a difference between compliance and having kids be able to internalize that. So what really is helpful for kids is a balance approach. The best balance approach that I know of, and that the research shows, is what’s called limits and consequences. This is where you literally let the child know what the rules are and what the consequences are going to be, and then if the child chooses them, it’s their responsibility. Our job, then, of course, is to make sure that we consistently give them the con-

sequence which, of course, is all nice and neat as we discuss this in an adult group on a Monday night, but in real life, of course, it never works out that way; it's much messier.

So I remember a situation with our middle child, Brian. He was about three years old when it was a very, very hot, muggy day in Minnesota during the summer, and it was so hot and muggy that Monica and I decided it would be a nice treat if after dinner we walked the three blocks down to the Dairy Queen. So we told all the kids, "After dinner, we're going to go to the Dairy Queen."

Everybody was happy about this. So we sat down to dinner, and unfortunately, whatever was on the menu that night was not on Brian's approved list of food. So Brian was having none of it.

"I'm not eating dinner. I'm not eating this. I'm gonna wait for Dairy Queen."

So I fell into that, you know, trying to persuade him, and cajole him, and pressure him, and stuff like that but was getting nowhere. I was getting frustrated, he was digging his heels in, he was getting frustrated, and so I figured to myself, "Dave, do you know anything about this at all?" So I did a psychological step back and I thought, "This is a situation for limits and consequences...ah yes." So I did a quick mental rehearsal in my mind for about a half of second and then I re-engaged Brian, and I said, "Brian, do you remember that we are going to Dairy Queen after dinner?"

"Yes, I remember," replied Brian.

And then I said, "Well, you know, Dairy Queen is dessert, and if you don't eat your dinner, you don't get dessert. So now you need to eat your dinner so that we can all go to Dairy Queen."

Brian's response, "I don't want to go to Dairy Queen."

That's not the way that this was supposed to work! I said, "Brian, do you like Dairy Queen?"

"No, I don't like Dairy Queen."

Oh boy, this is really going downhill!

“Brian, if you don’t eat your dinner, you’re not going to get Dairy Queen.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want Dairy Queen.”

“Okay, okay.”

It was clear. We finish, we clean up, and we all walk down to Dairy Queen...all five of us. We’re having a great time. We get down to the Dairy Queen, there’s dozens of people, it’s a hot summer night, and dozens of people are waiting in line for their Dairy Queen, when Brian looks up at me and says,

“I would like a vanilla cone please.”

And I say, “Brian, you didn’t eat your dinner so you’re not getting a Dairy Queen,” which sent Brian into a full Dairy Queen meltdown. On the corner of 44th and Lake in south Minneapolis he is screaming at the top of his lungs,

“You’re mean. Why won’t you give me an ice cream cone?”

The woman ahead of me in line turns around and glares at me, and she says, “Why don’t you give that little boy (this little blue-eyed, blond-haired kid), why don’t you give him an ice cream cone?”

I don’t know who I was more upset with...Brian or her! Because he knew the deal!

After about an hour, do you know what I was saying to myself? “Give him the stupid ice cream cone.” Do you know why? Because Brian had staying power. I mean, he could go on for a long time, and after a couple hours I’m thinking to myself, “This is not worth it; give him the ice cream cone,” which would have been the trap because then he would have started to learn the lesson, “all I have to do is fuss enough and I’ll get what I want.”

So as kids go through all of these developmental stages, their job is to push against those limits. And then they get to the teenage years. How many of you are parents of teenagers? Oh, there’s a lot of hands up. It’s the terrible two’s on steroids because they’re bigger, they’re smarter, and the stakes are a lot higher. Now, let’s talk about

teenagers for just a second because, you see, we've learned that with regard to teenagers, we have been making a big mistake. The mistake that we have been making is about the brain. We thought because it was the same size as an adult brain that that meant all the physical development was done. It turns out that even though the teenage brain is the same three-pound size as an adult brain, it's not the finished product that we thought it was. It's a work in progress. It's a series of major construction zones, and we haven't got time tonight to go through a complete tour of the teenage brain because that would be a workshop in and of itself, but so many of you put up your hands that we should make a couple of stops on the tour to give you an idea of the challenge of saying "no" particularly at this developmental stage.

The first stop on the tour is the prefrontal cortex. Where is it? It's right behind the forehead just above the eyebrows. This is a very important part of the brain. I call it the supervisor of the brain because that's the part of the brain that helps us to think ahead and consider consequences. It's also the part of the brain that helps us manage emotional impulses and urges. Now I don't know about you, but I sometimes need help with my impulses and urges. Just between the two of us, and please do not repeat this outside of here, but I sometimes have thoughts that are not very nice. I sometimes have urges that are not very good. It turns out that the part of my brain that helps me manage those impulses and urges is the prefrontal cortex. When the prefrontal cortex is not up to the task, what do we get? Impulsive behavior, risk-taking, disorganized thinking, and negative conflict-seeking. Calvin sums it up nicely in a cartoon. Calvin had been sent to the corner by his mother for his latest crime. Of course, he's talking things over with Hobbs, and his conclusion is, "Hobbs, my problem is my lips move when I think." That's a prefrontal cortex that is not working very well. Now, why is it important to know about the prefrontal cortex? Because all of you who raised your hands a couple minutes ago, parents of pre-teens or teenagers, should know that the prefrontal cortex, the brain supervisor, is one of the final circuits of the brain to get wired. It enters

the peak of a major wiring period as a boy or girl enters adolescence. The wiring continues throughout the teenage years and is not completed until the early 20's. Now, for all of you who raised your hand, does this start to make sense or what?

Remember Brian, the three-year-old who wanted the ice cream cone at Dairy Queen? Fast forward twelve years. He's now 15 years old, and we're sitting at dinner one night and Brian looks across the table at me and Monica and announces, "I no longer need a curfew."

I looked at him and I said, "Oh really, and why is that?"

He had it all figured out. He'd probably rehearsed it with his buddies who are probably having the same conversation in their house...what have they got to lose, right? So he says, "I'm a good kid, I get good grades, I don't get in any trouble, and don't you think it's about time you and Mom quit treating me like a kid?"

Now the best I could come up with that night, thirteen years ago, was, "Because I said so."

Today my answer would be a little bit different. Today my answer would sound something like this: "Brian, you may think you are fully mature but based on the latest brain research there are some very important circuits that have to get wired, and until that's done, you've got a curfew."

Because in this sense, that's what a curfew is. A curfew is a surrogate prefrontal cortex. And that becomes the role of parent, and teacher, and counselor, and coach, and that's the form of "no" for the teenagers. It's to literally service the surrogate prefrontal cortex while that young one is getting wired.

Now, one more stop on the tour because it really gets interesting, I think, when you don't just know about the construction zones but you start to see how the construction zones interact with one another. So let's go to the acceleration center of the brain. This is not an official name. Prefrontal cortex is official, you'll see that in text books; acceleration center is the kind of term that I use in my books

because I make up nicknames to let me help keep it straight. Acceleration center is the term I use to describe a process that happens in the brain, and the process involves chemicals. As you, I'm sure know, have lots of chemicals in our brain. Two major classes: Hormones and neurotransmitters. Let's start with hormones. What's a hormone? A chemical messenger. My nickname for hormones is Paul Revere, because what they do is they race around the body bringing messages from one organ to another. Our body produced about 50 of them in 12 different glands. Okay, three of the 50 are known as the growth hormones: Testosterone for the boys; estrogen and progesterone for the girls.

So, let's start with the boys, because it's a simpler story and there's just one. When the event called puberty begins, the production of testosterone ramps up. And when I say it ramps up, I am not fooling. Concentrations of testosterone increase by 1000% from the beginning of adolescence to the end. During adolescence, there are as many as seven surges of testosterone every day. Now, there's another part of the brain that we now know is very rich in testosterone receptors. In other words, this little part of the brain has a lot of little docking stations that are a perfect fit for testosterone molecules. In other words, this little part of the brain is saying to the testosterone, "Come on in because we've got lots of empty rooms for you." Now this little part of the brain has a funny name unless you speak Greek. It's called the amygdala, which is the Greek word for "almond" because it looks like one, but what you need to know is that the amygdala is the anger center of the brain. As the testosterone starts to flow, it starts to flood into the amygdala, which starts to light up like the Fourth of July. So what does that look like in real life? That's the easygoing, happy-go-lucky ten-year-old who can turn into a sullen, withdrawn, chip on his shoulder, fire-breathing dragon at the age of 14, and it's what's going on in his brain. It's as confusing to him on the inside as it is to everybody else on the outside. Because now he can start to experience these surges of anger which can sometimes come out of nowhere, triggered

by something like, “Would you please take out the garbage.” So now he’s experienced these surges of anger but we just got finished talking about a circuit that’s responsible for managing emotional impulses and urges, and that circuit is the prefrontal cortex, and what did we say about it? “It’s under construction.” This is not good. At the very time that the young boy needs help managing emotional impulses and urges, the emotional regulations that drug the brain is out to lunch. So that’s why teenage boys can be impulsive, risk-takers, and it’s why we sometimes scratch our heads and say, “How could such a smart kid do such a stupid thing?” The answer has nothing to do with smart; the thinking part of their brain is fine. It’s the emotional regulation of the center of the brain that is under construction.

Now, the story of the girls is a little bit different because it’s not testosterone that increases so dramatically in her brain, but there are two: estrogen and progesterone. At puberty when they enter into production and to a production spike, they also enter into a dance. It’s a dance that repeats itself approximately every 28 days. It’s an even-flow pattern: As the level of one goes up, the other goes down, as the second goes down, the first goes up. And as you know, this even-flow pattern, as I said, repeats itself every 28 days. That’s not new. We’ve known about that. It’s the 28-day menstrual cycle, but now we have a better understanding, however, of how that even-flow affects another chemical in the brain. The other chemical is called serotonin. My nickname for serotonin is the stabilizer. When serotonin level is a particular range, our mood is stable, and when serotonin level starts to jump around, our mood changes. So as the young adolescent girl starts to experience the even-flow of estrogen and progesterone, it has a big impact on serotonin levels, which then start to dip and rise. When that happens, her mood can change on a dime. So what does that look like in real life? Well, the young adolescent girl can be as happy as a lark at 9 o’clock, in the pits of 9:30, euphoric at 10 o’clock, and homicidal by lunch. And when the serotonin levels dip, not only does her mood change, but emotional reactions get amplified.

So this is what happened one morning in my house when Erin was about 12 years old. She came downstairs before going off to school and decided to have a bowl of cereal. She got out the bowl, the spoon, the cereal, and poured herself a bowl of cereal, then walked over to the refrigerator to get the milk. When she opened up the refrigerator door, she discovered there was no milk, at which point she collapsed to the floor, sobbing, “I hate my life.” Monica and I raced into the kitchen to see what tragedy had happened, and between sobs, Erin was able to explain we were out of milk. Now, I think we’d all be frustrated if we didn’t have milk for our cereal, but I think we’d also agree that, “I hate my life” is a little bit of an amplification, but that’s what is going on in her brain.

So for both boys and girls, even though there are these differences, if we were to compare their brain to an automobile, it is as if the gas pedal is to the floor and brakes are on backorder. Which is why teenagers can be impulsive, pushing the limits, risk-taking, and by the way, it’s also the thing about teenagers that we love: The enthusiasm, the passion, the loyalty, it’s all part of the same picture. So even during those years, they still need “no,” but just a different version from when they were ten because they’re not ten anymore. So we need to loosen up, but the mistake that many of us make is that we are not just loosening up, we’re letting go. It’s the teenager’s job to ask for a divorce. The mistake that many of us make is that we grant the divorce they’re asking for. The request for a divorce comes in phrases that sound like this: “Get out of my life.” “Leave me alone.” “Why are you doing this to me?” “No one else’s parents are like you.” But our kids need those limits and those consequences even through those years.

And so, how do we respond to all of this? Well, I think we need to support our kids but not rescue them. We need to encourage them, but not coddle them. Part of what our kids need to be able to do is figure out how to bounce back from disappointment. They need to figure out how to handle challenge. How will our kids learn how to deal with disappointment if they never get any practice? We need to

get our kids what they need but not everything that they want. Did you hear Oprah Winfrey's response after she was challenged about her wonderful gift to schools in Africa? Oprah Winfrey made a decision to take \$32 million out of her bank account and give it to schools in Africa. Now Oprah Winfrey is a very wealthy woman, but \$32 million is still a lot of clams, and when she announced that a young reporter challenged her and said, "Oprah, our American schools need money. Why are you putting your money in Africa?" you know what she said? Oprah said, "When I ask kids in the United States what they want, they tell me Ipods and cell phones. When I ask the kids in Africa what they want, they tell me they want to go to school. So that's where I'm putting my money."

We need to back up teachers in schools. I have literally heard from teachers who tell me that they don't discipline certain kids. The reason? They don't want to fight with their parents. I talked to a teacher at a very expensive private school here in Minnesota who told me she doesn't give C's and D's anymore. I asked her, "Why?" She said, "I don't want to argue with the parents." There isn't a kid alive who will not quickly figure out that if I can get mom or dad in the fight with school, I'm off scot-free. The problem, in the long run, is that the kid is the loser in that proposition.

We need to have clear and high expectations. We need to become media-wise. This technology is not going to slow down. The changes are going to come fast and furious, and we have to figure out how to make sure it benefits our kids and doesn't harm them. We have to have clear and high expectations. We need to expect kids to do chores. Set and enforce clear limits and consequences, and expect kids to volunteer, particularly kids who are lucky enough to be born into affluence or a good family. Those kids need to learn that just because they've been born on third base, doesn't mean that they hit the triple, that they have responsibility to other people because that's what builds a strong community. Even if we do all of these things, it's not enough,

and the reason it's not enough is because what we have been talking about for the last hour and a half is a virus, a social virus. The only way to combat a social virus is with another social virus. The good news is that there is another social virus that is starting to take root, and it's called, "Say yes to no." Teachers and parent groups, all over the country, are starting to have conversations about this. Why? Because we need to talk about and support one another. It's hard to do. It's hard to know what to do and to get suggestions and support and encouragement. It becomes so important, so I hope what we do here now is not just think about this, but we start those conversations. We start them in the schools, we start them in PTA meetings, and we start them in our places of worship where we talk with other parents about how we go about restoring the balance. We need to do a course correction and it's hard to do alone. We need to do it together. And the good news is that there are more and more of us realizing that it's time for a course correction... not to return to any kind of a boot camp approach to parenting, but for the success and happiness of our kids.

I have told some rather unflattering stories about Brian this evening, so I want to tell one more story. Brian is 27 years old, and he got married last summer. We now have a Peruvian daughter-in-law, Marcio, and they got married in Cusco, Peru. So last Labor Day weekend our family went down to celebrate Brian and Marcio's marriage. When Monica and I checked into the room that they had reserved for us at the hotel, on the table next to the bed there was a big vase with a big bouquet of flowers. Next to the bouquet of flowers there were two letters: One said "Dad" and one said "Mom." I, of course, opened the one that said "Dad". (Very bright, huh). I tried to read the letter and I couldn't. And the reason I couldn't is because I couldn't see it. And the reason I couldn't see it was because my eyes were filled with tears. I never, ever thought that I would see Brian write the things that he has written or hear him say the things that he has said in the last couple of years, because when he was 15, I was the biggest jerk in the world!

Raising kids is not a problem to be solved, it is a mystery to be lived. At the end of the adventure, we'll be able to answer the question, "Who done it?" And from there, to paraphrase Dr. Seuss, "They'll have places to go and fun to be done," and thanks to your help, the game can be won.





The Grosse Pointe Academy is an independent, coeducational day school serving children in early school through grade eight. A Grosse Pointe Academy education emphasizes the value of each child and the growth of that child. We provide an education of the highest quality in the pursuit of academic excellence, the arts and athletics. We impart to our students an education which is sound in moral and ethical formation. Our outlook is Christian and our heritage is Catholic. The Academy respects all cultures and religious beliefs. Incorporated as a non-profit institution, the Academy is directed by a Board of Trustees working together to serve the Southeastern Michigan community.

William Charles McMillan III



William was a student at The Grosse Pointe Academy from 1973 until 1981 where, receiving love and encouragement, he learned to reach beyond his limitations.

Although weak physically, William was intellectually gifted and his passion for life, his love and concern for all living things, and his enthusiastic use of verbal skills changed the lives of those who were closest to him and left a lasting impression on all with whom he came in contact.

Never at a loss for words, he was bursting with impressions, questions and insights which came pouring out in a dazzling, dizzying torrent. It was rare to have a brief, superficial conversation with William. A friend commented, "I sometimes felt like I needed a seat belt when William was talking to me, because William would take us into outer space, back into primeval history, and then into a universe of his own imagining."

William believed that anyone could make a significant and lasting impact on the world no matter what one's age, size or circumstance.

These lectures on elementary education are dedicated to the proposition that every child can reach beyond his or her own limitation, that each child makes the world a better place. It is the goal of these lectures to take your mind where it has never been. So, fasten your seat belt and get ready to enter the universe of imagining - a gift to you from William.