

ASK BYFS

Kids with Character

Parent Question: What is the community's responsibility in raising kids of character? Families are making hard choices every day - how can the community come together to help families in this effort?

This parent is obviously referring to the fifth speaker in the Bedford Parent Education Series, Dr. Dan Kindlon and his presentation April 2, 2008, "Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Kids of Character in an Indulgent Age" based on his book by the same title. A licensed clinical and research psychologist specializing in behavioral problems of children and adolescents, Kindlon highlighted societal changes that increased the challenges parents face in child rearing. These are:

- More permissive society
- Less time with kids
- Increased pressure for academic success
- Sleep deprived
- More materialistic
- More protective

Some items might be issues with which the community in Bedford could help. For instance, in discussing the increased pressure for academic success, Kindlon mentioned statistics that show that increased homework does not produce a great outcome. In fact, the pressure can even encourage cheating, a value the community would most certainly not want to support. Kindlon then shared a story from his own family after noticing that his daughter had been working on homework for several hours and then wanted to delay her bed time to finish it. Kindlon said that they had to set a limit. They then wrote a note to the teacher the next day explaining the number of hours the child had been working and that it was their decision for her to stop and go to bed. As a community we should all be sensitive to the pressures schools are under to teach but also to the pressure children are under to learn. We need to work together to strike a balance for the child's benefit. The community can be sensitive to this and maybe review homework policy, especially around weekends and vacation times, when families typically try to spend more time together.

Another area that may relate to our community role is Kindlon's mention of our children, especially our teens, being sleep deprived. He said that the average teen needs

9 1/4 hours of sleep and gets maybe 6 hours! As a community how are we structuring our children's day to allow for adequate rest and enough sleep? Some years back the schools looked at changing the start time of the high school, similar to what some other schools across the country had done. Some parents thought that by just reversing the bus pick up, the problem would be solved. Thus, more teens would be awake at 8:30 a.m. than at 7:00 a.m., and our elementary kids - most of whom have been awake since the rooster crows at dawn - would have less time to fidget at home before taking the bus at 7. Of course this raised other issues, like having younger kids home alone longer after school in some cases and how after school sports would get scheduled, and the community just left the schedule the way it was. This could be one thing we as a community could revisit to ensure that our kids are not sleep deprived.

One thing that the community has done for the last several years to encourage a more balanced approach to life and family time is to offer Bedford Families Unplugged. It is usually a Wednesday night early in November that has been designated as a no-homework, no-sports, and no-activities night for Bedford Public School students. Additionally, the Selectmen ask all Town Departments and Committees to have no town-related meetings or events that night. All other Bedford groups are invited to join the efforts of the Bedford Community Partnership and to schedule no community or religious meetings on that night. The hope is that working parents can be home from work or school for dinner and make this night a special time of family engagement and communication. This day of connection, family time, and a symbol of the need to put our hectic calendars aside for a moment is surrounded by a calendar of leisure activities families can choose to do together. The goal is that families will then add regular dinner times and family activities and maintain a balance in their lives throughout the year and that will help their kids thrive.

Kindlon mentioned that kids with a higher level of education were more likely to use drugs. One thing that we as an educated community do to ensure that our youth make good choices is to offer consistent health education messages throughout their school years and to offer substance abuse education and prevention programs both in school and through Town departments like the Police Department and Youth and Family Services. That goes a long way to ensure healthy choices and a community norm of safety.

"What we want for our children is a perfect life devoid of hardship and pain," Kindlon states. "But their happiness as adults is largely dependent on the tools we give them, tools that will allow them to develop emotional maturity - to be honest with themselves, to be empathetic, to take initiative, to delay gratification,

to learn from failure and move on, to accept their flaws, and to face the consequences when they've done something wrong."

Raising kids of character is no easy task and it takes all of us working together to ensure that the next generations will be happy, successful adults and community members.

(Originally published May 2008)