This past May, I was more dismayed than surprised to read the New York Times article about the scores of parents who are enrolling their three- to five-year-olds in Junior Kumon enrichment programs. As some parents interviewed for the article expressed, their motivation in doing so was either to keep their children from falling "behind the curve" or, even better, to provide them with a "leg up on the competition."

One legitimate question to be asked is whether such programs can realistically meet either challenge. It may be that specific skills are mastered and retained earlier by children who participate; however, there exists little evidence that young children who spend their time being tutored at Kumon — or anywhere — wouldn’t be better served in the long run by devoting that same time to playing in a sandbox. As Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a psychologist at Temple University, argues, “When you’re learning how to balance things and calculate how tall you can make your building, you’re learning how to be a physicist. Having your kid… fill in worksheets at age two and three and four, to the best of our knowledge so far, does not give your child a leg up on anything.” She adds, “Einstein never used flash cards.”

While the impulse among many of today’s parents to offer their children every possible advantage is understandable in our uncertain economic times, the rush toward this drilling of academic skills at these young ages seems to me more about meeting adults’ needs than those of children. In other words, the over-emphasis among parents and many schools on acceleration of academic teaching to young children is fueled more by adult anxiety rather than by an understanding of children and their healthy development. And herein lies a challenge for those of us leading elementary schools today.

In this regard, our work is as much pastoral as it is academic.

Being the Presence We Need to Be
As a participant at last February’s NAIS Annual Conference in a panel discussion entitled "The Road Not (Yet) Taken: The Decision to Head an Elementary School," I shared what I saw as an additional role for heads of school — one I hadn’t anticipated fully beforehand. Being the leader of a small elementary/middle school is akin to being the leader of any tight-knit community. There’s a pastoral quality to knowing and caring about each student, reaching out to staff members on a daily basis and during times of need, and presiding over events during good times and bad. I vividly remember my first year when a beloved past staff member and her husband were brutally murdered. All around me colleagues mourned while, never having met this teacher or her husband, I found myself thrust into a role of seeking to comfort, communicate, and lead.

Being a consistently calm, reassuring, and caring presence for children, colleagues, and families is an elusive but worthy goal for heads of school. None of us, I’m sure, ever gets this quite right with all of our community’s constituents, especially with parents, but it’s certainly an important and needed undertaking.

Teachers and administrators are sometimes quick to criticize parents or hold them accountable for many of the negative student behaviors they see in their classes. It’s easy to do so, but more often than not it’s counterproductive and unfair. Rather, we need to consider the role that parents and educators play together in the lives of children. While we, as educators, count on parents to help us to understand their children, I am finding that we have messages — but certainly not all of the answers — to convey to parents that have important consequences for their children in school and out.

Like many, I have been influenced by recent and not-so-recent scholarship focused on the undue stress that children are under in American society today. While stress is a natural reaction to new challenges, too much of it, too much of the time, clearly isn’t healthy or helpful. David Elkind, author of The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon (1981)
describes the stress our children are under, borne primarily of rising expectations from adults. As childhood today is seen more often as a time to amass as many skills as possible as quickly as possible, children suffer from fear of failure and from fatigue. Years ago, a child who wasn’t reading at age five simply wasn’t considered ready to read. There were downsides to this “wait-and-see” approach, because, at times, learning issues were not uncovered. However, the opposite extreme, and the one we seem to be tumbling toward with each passing year, is to label children failures for not meeting increasingly unrealistic milestones.

Even summer camps — once the bastion for non-competitive play, campfires, being outdoors, and learning to be part of a group — are increasingly focused on competitive sports and specialized skill-building. "When S'Mores Aren’t Enough; The New Economics of Summer Camp," published last summer in the New York Times, chronicled new challenges that camps (and campers) face by increased parental expectations. Mickey Black, director of Pine Forest Camp in the Poconos, laments the increasing competition from upstart summer programs designed to “hone lacrosse skills, improve algebra, and pad the high-school résumé.” For today’s campers, “No more the quaint summer idyll of lake and volleyball and s’mores. Today, former Brazilian pros coach soccer camp, Oscar winners officiate at film camp, computer game developers teach tech camp — all the better, the pitches go, to get Holly or Howie into Harvard, or at least to sharpen their skills.”

In Reclaiming Childhood: Letting Children Be Children in Our Achievement-Oriented Society (2003), William Crain amplifies similar themes: that children are being pushed harder and harder; that they need, instead, more unpressured time to develop; and that childhood cannot be seen as merely a race toward successful adulthood. He describes today’s “obsession with the child’s future” as almost epidemic. According to Crain, by blocking out opportunities for children to develop spontaneous interests, and by too narrowly defining the benchmarks of success, we deny children both the joy and the growth that comes from learning new skills and developing new capacities.

Last January, William Stixrud, a well regarded neuropsychologist, participated in our school’s annual speaker series. His talk, “Being a Non-Anxious Presence for Our Children: Why It’s Good for Their Brains,” focused not only on the way in which adult stress leads to children’s stress, but on how stress impedes brain development. Dr. Stixrud urged educators in the audience to challenge students without unduly straining them. He asked parents to avoid making decisions based on their fears about their child’s potential not being fully realized, or based on their worries that other kids would get ahead, leaving their child behind. According to Dr. Stixrud, over-stressed young people may work hard at first, but they lose cognitive functioning and, ultimately, see a decrease in their motivation to learn.

What schools and parents should strive for, instead, is what he referred to as a “flow experience,” where kids are highly focused, making a high level of effort, while also experiencing high enjoyment coupled with low stress.

Two additional, related points made by Dr. Stixrud have stuck with me: (1) that we are seeing an explosion of anxiety and depression among children; and (2) that, as parents, we can guide children, but we are primarily “along for the ride” with limited control to shape them into precisely what we might want them to be. The first point, and one with which Dr. Stixrud has experience on a daily basis, should be a clarion call for reconsidering the daily messages children receive from teachers and parents. The second reminds us that, while teachers and parents continue to play an important role in the lives of children, our primary function, as John Dewey would attest, is to help them to develop the tools they need to pursue their interests.

To illustrate this point, our middle school head, Peter Braverman, led parents through a risky exercise last August. He asked them to consider their middle school child through the lens of the opening lines of the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.” With some discomfort, parents reflected on ways in which their middle school child may not match their hopes or expectations. They wrestled with distinguishing among these qualities the ones that were fundamental to their child’s identity, and in doing so, were offered a not-so-subtle reminder that perhaps the most significant gifts parents can give their children are unconditional love and acceptance.

Schools obviously need to tread this ground with great care, but — given the climate described by Elkind, Crain, Stixrud, and others — it feels worth pursuing, particularly in highly educated and competitive areas of the country. This is not about accepting less from our children or our students; it’s about supporting their development in a way that will give them the best chance to thrive.

What are some implications of these ideas for elementary school educators?
1. Focus on igniting the spark in children.

Dr. Stixrud’s concept of “flow” — where students are highly engaged, but not highly stressed — should be a core tenet of our educational philosophy. To the greatest extent possible, elementary school educators should engage students in authentic challenges. More than merely asking children to provide the right answer to an adult’s question, igniting and sustaining one’s passion for learning necessitates students asking their own questions and grappling with issues that may not have one correct answer. While tests are a necessary part of a menu of assessments, an atmosphere dominated by testing — at the expense of more open-ended, authentic projects — discourages students from trying new things, impedes their understanding of where they need to improve, and weakens their ability to recover self-confidently from disappointment.

By designing and constructing catapults in science class, for example, our fourth graders are learning so much more about engineering, measurement, and teamwork than preparing for and taking any test alone could possibly have taught them. Our second grade literature groups engage students in student-initiated discussions about what they have read, reinforcing the power of reading and the skills involved in the give-and-take of ideas within a group — in ways beyond any worksheet’s capability. Our kindergartners, learning to count and categorize, create their own “hundreds museum” of objects as a way to connect math with personal interests.

These approaches to teaching mirror much of what we value in the real world of work — where success often depends upon creativity, perseverance, and collaboration. Ted Sizer argued that it is “people’s habits that we most value and respect.” He suggested that schools must therefore be designed to “nurture good habits.” In doing so, schooling should become less about teaching isolated skills and much more about “pushing out into the world young citizens who are soaked in habits of thoughtfulness and reflectiveness, joy, and commitment.” Daniel Pink, author of A Whole New Mind, would agree that creative skills, now more than ever, are those most critical for success. I would simply suggest that creating is more interesting than complying, and it leads to habits that carry one forward as a lifelong learner.

Elementary school educators have an obligation to ensure that students are learning the core skills that they need for middle school and beyond. This involves ongoing assessment of reading, writing, and math skills, as well as curricula reflective of state and national standards for each grade level. However, a program that emphasizes memorization over creativity, passive over active learning, and a one-size-fits-all approach over allowing students opportunities to make choices based on their interests at least some of the time, misses the critical opportunity to set children up for a life of learning.

2. Glorify effort and grit.

Last year, I joined my children’s martial arts class. A few other parents were doing it, and it seemed to me a healthy diversion and a better use of my time than waiting and reading email on my smartphone. For someone not particularly known for physical coordination, this has not been easy. My latest indignity, should I choose to see it this way, is that I am still one of the lowest-ranked students in the class, and this includes my two school-aged children and several kindergartners and first graders!

Thomas Mills, the talented and dedicated teacher, reminds us not to focus on what others are doing. He insists that it is important that we do our best in every class and on every activity, and thus make progress through each karate and tae kwon do skill level at our individual rates. While child and adult participants alike tend to focus on attaining the next colored belt, Mills is all about the process of learning.

Perhaps he has been reading Carol Dweck’s Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. Dweck argues that what most influences how well we embrace risks — and, thus, how much we ultimately learn and achieve throughout life — is our view of human potential, especially our own. She contrasts prodigies who ultimately failed (because they feared failure) with individuals who transformed themselves through the power of effort. While our society tends to glorify those who seem to have effortlessly achieved fame, Dweck suggests that we dramatically overlook and undervalue the determination and effort that led to these successes. She asks, “What’s so heroic about having a gift? Effort is what ignites ability and turns it into accomplishment.” Dweck cites countless examples of those whose “growth mindset” enabled them to overcome setbacks and obstacles, from Seabiscuit author, Laura Hillenbrand, to Michael Jordan.

If we glorify effort, we accept what Benjamin Bloom concluded after 40 years studying the process of learning: “What any person in the world can learn, almost all persons can learn, if provided with the appropriate prior and current conditions of learning.” Even Alfred Binet, most known for his work with intelligence testing, fervently believed that children’s minds could be transformed through effort.
Elementary school educators, more than any others, must hold on to and communicate to children and parents these beliefs — to see students’ successes as a sign of effort, and to help them to view setbacks as opportunities to learn rather than as permanent indicators of their ability.

The concept of effort has gotten additional play in a September 2011 piece in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled, “What If the Secret to Success Is Failure?” Author Paul Tough focuses on the notions that: (1) there are qualities and habits — beyond a narrow definition of intelligence — that lead to success; and that (2) challenge and failure are a necessary part of learning. When we emphasize habits such as integrity, kindness, self-regulation, gratitude, and an unwavering dedication to achieve one’s mission (“grit,” according to the article), and when we help parents not to step in at the first sign of their child’s discomfort, then we’ve given kids tools that will lead to a “successful and autonomous adulthood.”

3. Stay attuned to developmental readiness and homework overload.

While making the case for “grit,” we must not confuse this with inappropriately stressful work. Some young children may be able to handle Junior Kumon, and some may find the work stimulating. However, I believe that for most three-year-olds, neither statement is true. And just as parents today are too often in a rush to see their young children advance academically, early childhood and elementary educators as well fall prey to demanding of children school work for which they are not yet suited. Teachers need to introduce students to new concepts when knowledge of child development tells us they are ready to learn them. This is when concepts “stick” and when the opportunity for joyful learning is most ripe. We would no more have four-year-olds in our pre-K classroom take a weekly spelling test than we would expect our eighth graders to master calculus.

Similarly, there is, and should be, a healthy debate about homework for elementary school students. At my school, students wait to begin formal homework until third grade because it is then, we believe, that they are mature enough to do the work themselves. This gives them a feeling of responsibility and pride in what they accomplish. Homework demands build incrementally from there up through eighth grade, both in terms of conceptual challenge and in time demanded for completion. There is a tipping point, though, where homework can become counterproductive to learning; striking the balance between giving children ever-increasing responsibility for independent work at home and causing unnecessary stress is a challenge all schools should consider seriously. Whether schools begin homework in kindergarten, third grade, or sixth grade, it’s important that homework be thoughtfully assigned to build skills and understanding and to provide time for reflection on lessons learned during the day. If homework is essentially “busy work,” and students do not understand the reasons behind their assignments, it is never worth giving in the first place.

4. Have the courage to talk with parents about their expectations.

We know that education is not a race, nor is childhood, and that being taught more, earlier, and at a faster pace does not makes kids smarter or any more eager to learn. Prevailing wisdom among parents, fueled by competition and cultural anxiety, however, suggests otherwise. And so it is our job as elementary educators to talk about this issue with parents in groups, when we are describing our programs, and individually, when we see a mismatch between what they expect from their child and what we know the child is ready to do.

It takes courage as well to talk to parents about acceptance and about supporting a child’s interests. Our students suffer, both in terms of anxiety and learning, when we are unwilling or unable to have these kinds of conversations.

When I speak with prospective families, I ask them to consider what they most want for their children. I prod by asking them to think about the qualities of the people whom they most admire. Without fail, I hear about individuals who have continued to learn throughout their adult lives, who are open to new ideas and alternative perspectives, who think carefully and reflect on their experiences, who take risks, who exercise creativity, who demonstrate resilience in the face of personal or professional setbacks, who are passionate about what they do, who speak up, who lead, and who collaborate well and respect others. In short, I hear about adults who have a spark — one that has set them up for a life of accomplishment, self-confidence, joy, and an ability to follow their passions.

How we all help nurture this spark during these formative years is the central question that should guide our work.

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