

## The Delicate Cycle

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*by Melinda Galloway*

### Spotless Expectations

Many high school students suffer from negative attitudes toward education that are either ignored or fostered by their parents. Gibbs et al. offer a taxonomy (2005) of parents peppered with descriptions of the overinvolved, including the “hovering parent” and the “aggressive advocate.” I am most familiar, however, with “dry cleaner parents”—those who drop off their children expecting them to be “cleaned up” by the time they are picked up after school. Such parents expect their minimal involvement to produce high-quality education for their children.

Whereas hovering parents are on hand for every landmark moment (such as chaperoning a prom), dry-cleaner parents show up only when an emergency is imminent. When things go wrong, their usual tack is to blame the teacher for his or her perceived shortcomings. It can become painfully obvious to educators who contact such parents that they seldom communicate with their children and expect little accountability for their children or themselves.

Over the past few years, parents who were oblivious to their children’s conduct or academic performance in my classes have been the most abusive to me. In one such incident, some parents contacted me about the “disturbing language” of a video I had shown in class. I explained that the video did contain strong language but that it was an approved and curriculum-aligned supplementary material whose language could also be found in several novels they had already approved for the child’s class readings. After several more phone calls to me, the school principal, and the board of education, it became apparent that the parents really wanted make-up work for their child’s repeated incomplete assignments, which had led to a failing grade in my class. As a timorous young teacher who wanted the matter to be resolved promptly, I

relented, and the child was allowed to make up the assignments. I was left feeling that I had been professionally blackmailed.

Parents who remain uninvolved until an academic crisis occurs are not uncommon. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) found that most parents of secondary-age students are left out of the educational process because they see their children as independent and resistant to parental involvement. Family structure, school invitations, and the parents' sense of self-efficacy were positively correlated with levels of parental involvement in school. However, the child's age was negatively correlated with parental participation. In other words, the older the child, the less the parental involvement, and the more a teacher needs to work to keep parents in the loop.

### **A Tear in the Family Fabric**

Unresponsive parenting frequently transfers child-rearing duties to schools and teachers. Some parental avoidance of child-raising responsibilities may be influenced by the postmodern view of parenthood: according to Elkind (1990), many parents no longer view children as sources of pleasure or as economic assets but rather see them as liabilities. That perception makes child rearing not only a forced activity but also one parents are eager to foist upon others.

Some parents refuse to accept any parenting role at all; others are merely oblivious of their children's welfare. When parents no longer see getting their children to school on time as their duty, teachers and other school personnel must often provide morning wake-up calls or even transportation for children. The list of students needing such assistance continues to grow at my school.

Additionally, issues once addressed by parents, such as dress-code violations, foul language, and disrespectful behavior, have begun to fall into the domain of the teacher. Parental responses I have received to notifications of misbehavior or failing grades often include "He's yours now," "I don't know what to do either," and even streams of expletives. Schools thus end up in charge of disciplining children and of modeling appropriate social behaviors as well. In many cases, the children's intellectual and social development has been handed over, in totality, to the school.

Some parents actually work aggressively against their children's success. Repeatedly, I have witnessed bright students withdraw from school solely on the recommendation of their parents. For instance, Coleen pledged to me as a ninth-grader that she would become the first member of her family to graduate from high school. Her parents as well as her siblings had all dropped out and received general education diplomas to join the workforce earlier than their peers. Despite her professed dedication

and intense pressure from me, Coleen met resistance at home about finishing high school. During the last semester of her senior year, she withdrew from school just nine weeks short of graduation.

### **Out, Out—**

Although an educator cannot mend every problem that emerges in a student's family dynamic, a teacher should understand that student relationships with parents profoundly affect academic performance. Surveys of adults, family histories, or even parent signatures can initiate student-parent interaction. Meaningful exchanges of information (i.e., opinions on current events or descriptions of relatives not previously known to the student) can result from inquiries about class assignments.

Conversations with parents may be difficult; it may be wise to have students formally write to parents. Such communications may include personal letters, written requests for assistance, and formal invitations to events occurring in the student's life. Because a student's act of writing conveys an extra effort to involve parents, even the most apathetic may respond to a child's written requests. For extra assurance that letters are delivered, a teacher should consider personally mailing the letters. Parental involvement can also result from posting grades online, making phone calls, writing e-mails, keeping a class Web site up-to-date, and creating newsletters.

### **Patching Things Up**

Because of changes in parenting patterns, some students may not recognize the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Although many at-risk students are initially resistant to rules, I have found that they will often happily trade power for predictability. With clear expectations for behavior, even the most behaviorally challenged student can prosper.

Classroom rules, which primarily help teachers manage a rambunctious classroom (Wong and Wong 2002), also appeal to students' sense of justice. Not only do most students wish everyone to be treated fairly; they also want standards of behavior clearly stated and enforced. When I fail to reprimand a student for misbehavior, his classmates scold him for breaking the rule and then chide me for not imposing the appropriate penalty.

Structure, though, is not enough incentive for some students. I have begun using a monetary system: students who display positive social and academic progress are allotted a certain "Galloway Dollar" amount. After saving their classroom earnings, students can use those dollars to purchase bathroom passes, homework passes, bonus points, and even pencils and supplies. After initial doubts about using a rewards model on the secondary level, I have found the approach effective. The rewards model

provides a tracking system that allows students to monitor their behavior and academic progress in precise, quantitative terms.

It is even more important for students to feel that their teachers are accessible. According to Acheson and Gall (2003), students perceive effective teachers as patient, amiable, fun-loving, and good listeners. Making the subject interesting is an added bonus (p. 58). A teacher's relationship with students and the teacher's attitude toward the subject are critical to learning.

## Breaking Cycles

Because cycles of negative attitudes toward schooling are fostered within families, educators must be willing to develop programs of assistance, intervention, and prevention to help students acquire an education. Although ideally teachers should involve parents in children's academic careers, unwilling parents can force teachers to take on the role of guardian, at least regarding academic success. Teachers can certainly bemoan the postmodern realities of parenting and the extra responsibilities placed upon their shoulders. Regardless, they can break the cycle of failure by making concerted efforts to keep students in school and by giving them tools that will help guide them beyond the high school years.

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