

Why Don't Kids Trust Us?

By Joseph W. Gauld

Posted 05/23/14

Our society is more fractured than we may realize.

The 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual survey, found only 18 percent of Americans expected business leaders to tell the truth and only 13 percent expected government officials to do so. A Pew survey indicates our trust problems should get worse. It found only 19 percent of Millennials (ages 18-33) trusted people in general, compared to 40 percent of Boomers (ages 50-68.)

Millennials have reasons not to trust us. Beyond passing our huge deficit to them, our educational system viewed them as competitive pawns -- note how their academic scores were always unfavorably compared with international students.

Lack of trust creates serious business problems and an unhealthy society. It must be addressed before any group or organization can operate effectively. How did we get this way?

I say the "we-they" student-adult culture of our educational system helps spawn the problem. Now having educated a generation in which less than one in five students trust adults, it's time we deeply examine just how we are raising and educating kids.

Kids generally do not like our schools. We have difficulty motivating them and 20 percent do not graduate from high school. Our growing emphasis on academic proficiency over decades has resulted in no real improvement on NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress.) Further, our students are increasingly out-performed by international students.

If schools were an enterprise, radical change would have occurred long ago. But our schools operate more like prisons, where the "customer" is seldom considered.

Two things should now be clear:

1. Academic proficiency is necessary for success in life, but the overall approach being used to achieve it is ineffective. There must be a better way.
2. Academic proficiency is not sufficient for success in life. The phenomenal growth of emotional intelligence training in industry says education needs to address the whole child.

Our mistaken idea of motivating students by competition not only undermines trust, it encourages students to try to outdo others more than to actually learn. Further, it incites baser instincts of aggression, dominance (like bullying) and unethical behavior like cheating.

Competition motivates activities like business and athletics, but curiosity motivates learning. Note the difference in the performance of home-schooled students (motivated by curiosity) who consistently scored an average in the 80th percentile on numerous academic national tests over a 25-year period, while the public school average was 50 percent.*

By utilizing competition, we have made learning seem difficult, even boring, and often superficial, forgotten after being tested.

Curiosity motivates real learning because children want to grow. However, their cerebral cortex of thinking, maturing at age 25, requires time to develop and handle abstractions. So we need a slower and much more thoughtful transition from the strengths of children's initial exploratory abilities.

For example, children's' minds have favored fairy tales over the ages, because they inspire their wonder, dreams, imagination, spirit and insight. This helps root their creativity -- the right foundation for academic proficiency.

Horace Mann, the father of American public schools, said if he had a year to teach spelling, he'd spend the first nine months on motivation. If our schools will work to make the connection between these exploratory potentials of children and what we consider academic proficiency, we could create a dynamic new student-adult relationship -- more a partnership.

Both students and adults would seek to respect the best in each other. Students would come to trust adults as mentors who understood their potentials and had the capability to develop them. Adults would in turn come to trust that students sought to learn the curriculum they helped adults develop.

This partnership could very successfully address such problems as lack of achievement, bullying, cheating and school shootings. Teenagers would be elevated to be the pre-adults they were meant to be. We are living in a jet age, stuck with an obsolete educational system. Addressing the complexities of how we learn to think would begin an exciting new educational culture -- youth and adults together.

*<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/aug/30/home-schooling-outstanding-results-national-tests/>

Joseph W. Gauld is the Founder of the Hyde Schools and the author of *What Kids Want and Need from Parents: How to Bond with and Mentor Children* (Argo Navis, 2012).