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Home & Family

THE PARENTING PRINCIPLES



Staff photo by John Ewing

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A couple from the Hyde School in Bath have written the book on raising children with character.

By JOANNE LANNIN
Staff Writer

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Now, she stands back and lets her three-year-old son figure out puzzles or zip up his jacket by himself.

"As a social worker, my first instinct was always to fix it. What I learned is that it's OK to let our kids struggle," says Sinibaldi, who is a hospice

social worker in Brunswick. "I found that Nathaniel is able to figure things out eventually and he's so darn proud of himself when he does."

Sinibaldi changed her parenting ways as a result of her participation in a unique workshop that was conceived in Maine by Laura and Malcolm Gauld of the Hyde School in Bath.

"The Biggest Job" workshop is centered on the character-first philosophy developed by the Hyde School, a private boarding school that has been touted nationally for its ability to turn around the lives of troubled or underachieving students. Since 1998, more than 6,000 parents have participated in the workshop sessions around the country.

The Gaulds have just written a book that, like their workshops, lays out the Hyde School philosophy and shows parents how they can apply it to family life. Titled *The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have*, the book's premise, postulated well before Enron became a household name, is that society's measures of success—good grades, high-paying jobs and a comfortable lifestyle—are often achieved at the expense of the development of solid values such as honesty and integrity and character traits such as courage and concern for those less fortunate.

According to the Gaulds, while we say we want our children to develop strong character traits, the reality is that our culture, our schools and many of us value outward achieve-

ments and status symbols over character development. It's a contradiction that alienates many young people today and does nothing to prepare them for the challenges they will face in life. The Gaulds hope their book, which was published in February by Scribner, will fill the void they saw in bookstore parenting sections.

"All the books were variations on a theme," says Malcolm, who is the son of Joe Gauld, who founded the Hyde School in 1966. "They all asked, 'How can adults control the behavior of their kids?' We're trying to say to parents, 'If you work on yourself, you'll set a model your kids can emulate and will emulate. Character is inspired. You don't pour it in. You draw it out.'"

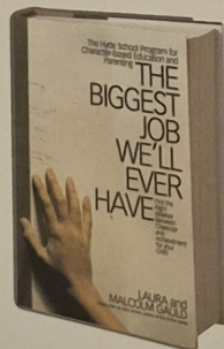
The Gaulds' book is divided into chapters that explain the "10 Priorities" they believe families should focus on to help their children strike a balance between character and achievement. Anecdotes from the Hyde School, their own family's experience, as well as written testimonials from Hyde School parents are sprinkled throughout the book. Each chapter ends with games and exercises families can do to bring the principles to life. There are also questions to be used to stimulate journal writing and family discussions.

"People looking for a quick fix won't be attracted to it," says Malcolm about the book. "It's a long-term thing. It's not a crash plan."

Both Malcolm and Laura Gauld, who have been married for 22 years, have learned first-hand the value of character-based education, as well as how raising children necessitates working on your own character development.

In the mid-1960s, Malcolm was an underachieving seventh grader who'd gotten in with the wrong crowd in his public junior high school. His father decided his son needed to be challenged by the Hyde School's overriding philosophy: that each student is gifted with a unique potential that he or she can achieve through the development of character and conscience with the help of others who are on the same journey.

For Malcolm that meant being challenged and challenging himself to take courses he found difficult, as opposed to courses that would afford him an easy A. It also meant, for example, figuring out a way to succeed in lacrosse, a sport he loved but one in which he had a difficult time because he was so slow that his teammates called him "Flash."



As he relates it in the book, Malcolm became such a proficient stick handler on his lacrosse team in college that he set a school record for most goals scored in one game.

"I doubt I would have developed my stick work had I been faster," he writes. "What I once perceived as a curse was now perceived as a benefit."

Laura, meanwhile, was a shy, quiet, competent student who had no problem succeeding in her public school in Beverly, Mass. But since her parents had sent her four siblings to Hyde, Laura went as well. At Hyde, Laura's teachers challenged her to come out of her shell. She may never have become a workshop leader had she stayed in Beverly.

"My biggest issue was genuine self confidence," she says. "I was forced to speak up. They made me do the announcements in the morning because they felt I needed that. There were a lot of things inside me that Hyde drew out."

Laura and Malcolm did not attend Hyde together. They met after Malcolm had become a teacher and Laura was doing a teaching internship at the school. At present, Malcolm is president and CEO of the Hyde School programs in Bath and Eustis as well as Connecticut and Washington, D.C. Laura directs Family Education Programs for the two boarding campuses, their charter school and their wilderness program.

Laura says she got the idea for the workshops and the book in 1998 after she'd given up teaching at Hyde to be home with her youngest child, Harrison, who had just been diagnosed with developmental problems related to autism.

After much reading and research, Laura decided to commit to an intensive behavioral approach that would involve Harrison, then 2 1/2, in 30 hours a week of commands, correction and reinforcement. She enlisted speech therapists, Hyde students and family members to be on the team that would take turns working with Harrison.

The first two months were difficult as Harrison rebelled against the intense interaction. Soon though, sounds turned into words and words into basic sentences. Harrison now is making his way in a mainstream first-grade classroom. He is able to handle transitions and situations, which can be difficult.

"While we won't pretend that there aren't dark moments when we worry about his future, we know at the deepest level this obstacle has been placed on his doorstep as part of his ultimate destiny, part of his unique potential," writes Laura in their book. "He will be what he is meant to become as a result of this struggle and his triumphs over his obstacles."

Laura realized as she worked with Harrison that her use of the Hyde philosophy had helped her deal with him and helped him rise to the many challenges in his path. She decided to find a way to bring the Hyde philosophy to parents who could benefit from its concepts, but for whom the boarding school concept might seem elitist. Thus were the workshops created and the book conceived.

"A lot of Harrison's success has been because of our focus on these priorities, like 'set the bar high,' and 'value success and failure,'" Laura says. "We need to liberate parents from this culture that says they have to look good and do it right."

The first priority, "Truth over Harmony," is the cornerstone of the "Biggest Job" philosophy. According to the Gaulds, parents have to be willing to stand up to their children and tell them the truth, challenging them to put forth their best effort, even when they know a battle will ensue.

"You have to let go of wanting to have a relationship with your child," says Laura, who is the mother of three children, ages 11, 9 and 7. "You have to be able to play hardball. Whatever you are asking out of your kids, you have to ask of yourself."

Laura advises parents who want to adopt "The Biggest Job" approach to begin with Priority 8, which involves creating a character culture in the family by doing three things: exploring a vision, demanding action and creating synergy.

The vision is set forth through a weekly family meeting, which starts with each member "clearing the decks," or dealing with festering issues. From there, the past week is reviewed—focusing on what each family member got excited about or learned about herself. Then, each family member sets goals for the following week, thinking about what they would like to improve upon with one specific action step.

The action step involves committing to some challenging task, such as maintaining some room or area of the house, cooking a particular meal or learning something new. Even small children can have a job, such as putting toys away, taking phone messages, behaving well in a restaurant or setting the table.

Synergy results from setting up a rotating schedule by which each family member gets to choose an activity that the whole family will participate in. This concept is called "mandatory fun." Its purpose is to expose family members to each other's passions.

"Shared beliefs and shared experiences are part of (how to provide) grounding for a kid," says Laura. "If you have a horrible time, you still can laugh about it later."

Susan Sinibaldi's family of three has begun having "small little talks" at the dinner table as a foundation for the kind of meetings outlined in "The Biggest Job." For now, she and her husband are committed to focusing on the principles behind developing character traits, as opposed to making rules to limit bad behavior. She expects to expand her use of the 10 priorities as three-year-old Nathaniel grows.

"We as parents are our children's primary teachers," she says. "It's never too early to talk about these things."

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