

Steven Hughes Fixes Your Parenting in 90 Minutes

By David Ayer

On Tuesday, April 7th, 2009, pediatric neuropsychologist and Montessori parent Dr. Steven Hughes returned to Portland to present 'Modern Parenting: Tips, Tricks, and Traps' to a large audience of Montessori educators and parents as well as interested attendees from beyond the Montessori world. Dr. Hughes' interesting, engaging, and direct presentation style left us with a lot to think about and specifics to bring back to our interactions with children.

The first part of Dr. Hughes' talk was an examination of the 'self-esteem' movement popularized and implemented in California in the 70s and adopted in educational settings everywhere over the last few decades. Hughes presented clear research findings demonstrating that raising children's self-esteem for its own sake and by means of praise and positive verbal feedback has no correlation, or even a negative correlation, with children's achievement and sense of self-worth.

Indeed, the main thing that raises a child's self-esteem (if this is even a desirable goal) is to help him or her learn to work hard and with persistence at difficult tasks and to successfully engage in work that is personally meaningful. (This may explain why Dr. Hughes is a frequent guest at Montessori events.) The sad fact is that most of this research was available before the self-esteem movement even got going. But no one bothered to look.

The result of the self-esteem movement has been a population of young people who rate higher on self-confidence, but also on narcissism, entitlement, and anxiety, than any group in history. And this result is not merely anecdotal, but measured in published scientific work. "We have succeeded in raising a generation of children," said Hughes, "who are not that much fun to be around."

How did this happen? Hughes suggests that the self-esteem programs filtered into the popular consciousness as parenting advice which pushed parenting strategies in an unhealthy direction. He presented a well-established analysis of parenting styles psychologists have used for decades.

In this view, parenting style can vary across two dimensions: warmth and control. High control, low warmth parenting has the label 'authoritarian'-think lots of cold, inflexible rules. Low control, low warmth is negligent, which Hughes hoped didn't apply to anyone in the audience. Low control, high warmth is permissive, a term that sent an anxious ripple of recognition through the crowd.

"Don't beat yourselves up," he cautioned us. We've been told for decades by professional educators that our children need love, support, and praise-without a lot of attention to limits and natural consequences. The most effective approach,

again supported by a good deal of research, is in the high warmth, high control box labeled 'authoritative.' Authoritative is different from authoritarian and can be captured in the phrase: 'the adults are in charge.'

It has become a familiar phrase in some parenting and education circles lately: 'Children need limits.' Indeed, there are some signs that the failure of self-esteem promotion has itself begun to enter the popular culture.

What's always refreshing about Dr. Hughes' presentations is the thoroughly grounded psychological and neurological research he brings to the discussions, while remaining grounded in accessible language and familiar experiences. Just one of many examples was a digitally animated brain scan of gray matter development in children from birth to age six. The image clearly showed the spread of neural activity from the back of the brain, where sensory and motor control are located, towards the frontal lobes, where executive function and decision making take place. The picture makes it clear: executive function is the last area to develop. Recent studies have shown that this area of the brain is still developing well into adolescence (which explains a lot!).

The conclusion is clear as well: as Dr. Hughes puts it, "Be your child's frontal lobes!" Be fair, but firm. Set limits and stick to them. You won't always be their best friend, but they'll thank you for it later.

Dr. Hughes talk was part of Montessori Institute Northwest's lecture series. Kathleen Lloyd speaks in April 2010 on self-regulation.

About David Ayer: David discovered Montessori through his daughter, Virginia, who attended Whole Child Montessori School, and his wife, Elise, who was teaching in the upper elementary at Montessori School of Beaverton. He earned his primary diploma at the Montessori Institute Northwest in 1995.

David taught at Vancouver Montessori School before starting the Montessori Adolescent Project Northwest with Elise. He continued his Montessori adolescent work at the Hershey Montessori Farm School and the Franciscan Montessori Earth School before joining Sunstone Montessori School as Assistant Director.

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