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It Takes a Village

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

From the moment they are born, and often before birth, we talk to our children. We want them to know and understand our language, the power of words. We want the best for our children, for them to be happy and content in life.

However, Tim Elmore suggests that as they grow, “we must be willing to sacrifice their temporary happiness for long-term happiness, including preparing them to be disciplined adults themselves. Instead of pleasure, let’s prepare them for fulfillment.”¹

Elmore expresses this concern because of what he sees in kids, identified as the most indulged young people in the history of the world. He quotes Elizabeth Kolbert, “It’s not just that they’ve been given unprecedented amounts of stuff — clothes, toys, cameras, skis, computers, cell phones, televisions, PlayStations, iPods (the market for Burberry Baby and other types of kiddie ‘couture’ has reportedly been growing by ten percent a year). They’ve also been granted unprecedented authority. Parents want their kids’ approval, a reversal of the past ideal of children striving for their parents’ approval.”

According to Elmore, five words today’s children deserve to hear are: *Watch, practice, no, wait* and *serve*. Children need adults to set an example for them more than they need entertainment. They need to see (watch) adults who show them how to be selfless and sacrificial. They need help (practice) getting ready for a not-so-pleasurable future where, for example, they will need to pay their dues on a job for a while. They need more than a buddy — someone who will say, “No,” when needed. Delayed gratification (*wait*) can be built into everyday life so kids can appreciate waiting for something they want. Research indicates that anticipation can be more enjoyable than the actual event.

To *serve* is to contribute, rather than to consume. We live in a consumer-driven society and parents struggle



with how to handle children’s consumer wants. Allison Pugh asked herself, “Why do children seem to desire so much, so often, so soon, and why do parents capitulate so readily?” Her research showed that children’s desires stem less from striving for status or falling victim to advertising than from a yearning to join the conversation at school

or in the neighborhood. Most parents respond to children’s needs to belong by buying the goods and experiences that act as passports in children’s social worlds, because they sympathize with their children’s fear of being different from their peers. Today, even under financial constraints, families prioritize children’s “feeling normal.” However, she found that at the heart of the matter is the desire to belong.²

So rather than decrying what’s happening to this generation of children and parents, each of us can be a part of the village that raises these beloved children by showing them they belong and saying the words both children and parents need to hear. Along with Elmore’s suggestions, we can add a few phrases: *In God we trust. Have faith, hope and charity. Be kind. Seek to understand God’s will. I love you and you belong here!*

Susan E. Murray is professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, certified family life educator, and licensed marriage and family therapist.

1) Elmore, T. (July 22, 2014). *Five Words Every Child Needs to Hear*. Available at www.growingleaders.com/Time-Elmore-Blog.

2) Pugh, A. (2009). *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. Summary available at www.ucpress.edu.