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FIRST PERSON

7 Things Children Wish Their Teachers and Parents Knew

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By Eileen Carr

October 22, 2019

I spend a large portion of my waking hours in the company of 9- and 10-year-olds. I'm a 4th grade teacher, and I'm often surprised by grownups' perceptions of childhood.

"What I wouldn't give to be a kid again ... "

"Kids have it so easy, they just play all day!"

"It must be so nice being around kids all day; they don't have any problems or issues."

I've spent the past year teaching my students to initiate conversations with one another and with buddies they made across the Pacific through video chats. When I talked with them about the experience, a theme emerged: They said they wished that adults knew more about their lives and experiences. Here's some of what I heard from them:

1. Kids want you to know how hard they're trying.

"Practice makes perfect."

"If you put your mind to it, you can fill in the blank." (Insert: play the piano, do well in school, understand math, speak up in class, manage your emotions, etc.)

These are some of the things children hear from adults. My students told me that they really are trying, but some things are genuinely difficult. For example, Mo has been learning to read, write, speak, and comprehend English for the past three years. He told me, "English is hard! When I speak, it's hard." Aicha added, "I wish my mom would

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understand that even though I pay attention during math, it doesn't always mean I understand when I get home."

Ty reminded me how easy it is to forget the challenges that come with not having mastered a skill, a topic, or a language. "They expect that I can control my anger, but sometimes I can't," he said. Kids are humans, and humans are works in progress. Sometimes—no, most of the time—we need to summon the benefit of the doubt and support one another's best efforts.

2. Kids want grownups to be happy.

Children notice your mood. They pick up on facial expressions, gestures, states of mind. According to Ty, "Grownups are so grumpy all the time!" From the looks on our faces, how could he think otherwise? Ella told me, "When our parents get really stressed, I want them to know that we really love them and care about them." They see us, they read us, and they want the best for us. You don't always have to be happy, but you should know that you're more of an open book to the kids in your life than you might realize.

3. Kids want to be believed.

Something spills, somebody's crying, something breaks: A kid must have done it. Why weren't they being more careful? Where was the oldest child? It's easy to jump to "blame the kid," but as Dustin said, "They think they know what happens, and we get in trouble for it." It's important for us to take that deep breath, ask what happened, and truly listen to children's accounts. Zen put it poignantly: "I wish they could trust us more. If we say we didn't do something, I wish they would trust us."

4. Kids want grownups to be more honest.

Kids aren't the only ones with an ardent desire to be believed, whether they're telling the truth or not. If you're going to be late, or you're not going to make it at all, tell the truth. A child could spend the next hour craning her neck, looking for you, waiting to see your face through the crowd. Sometimes the honest conversation is harder and more prolonged, but children deeply appreciate when you acknowledge the truth. They want to know what's going on in their lives.

5. Kids want electronics just as much as grownups do.

As grownups, we just need to acknowledge that sometimes we are hypocrites. Unfortunately, our kids know this. They notice our every swipe and screen binge. When adults overdose on screen time, we reckon privately with ourselves. But when we do so with kids around, we need to think about the message we're sending. If medium doses are okay and even necessary for us grownups, then maybe we need to make similar allowances for kids. Braden pleaded, "We have to play electronics. It doesn't have to be for a long time."

6. Kids want a break from over-scheduling.

Self-care isn't just for grownups. Kids get drained, too, but they're not often in control of their own schedules. There are the weekday activities. Trevor explained, "I have something else to do every day! Homework, Math Olympiad, swimming, tutoring, karate, Japanese school ... " Then there's the homework, every day, and sometimes even on weekends. Finally, the chores! Ramona lamented, "They think you have all this time to do all these things they want you to do, even when you don't have time." Grownups need down time to recharge, "me time" when they're the only ones calling the shots, blissfully unscheduled chunks of time to be filled with anything or nothing. Kids do, too.

7. Kids want grownups to love them just as they are.

Social media can make the most well-adjusted adult feel insecure: You need to work out more, be more beautiful, wear better clothes, eat healthier foods, take wilder vacations, buy a bigger house. Those voices aren't just getting to us grownups—they're also getting to the kids. And they're coming from us.

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Emma said, "Sometimes they compare me to someone else." Nicky added: "Sometimes, adults just expect too much from us. For instance, I'm not a genius but my mom expects me to be." We may think that we're expressing support and encouragement, but our children are hearing disappointment and regret. Jack struggled to find the words, then blurted, "They want me to be the best me I can be, so let me be me!"

Offering children a safe space to bond with peers across the world revealed so much to me about how similar they are, whether they're in Honolulu or San Francisco. In a classroom, students vastly outnumber grownups, which can pose management challenges for teachers. But they have so much to say, and they want us to listen. It's worth the trouble to help kids find their voices, share their messages, and experience the joy of being heard.

* Names have been changed to protect students' privacy.

Eileen Carr is a 4th grade teacher in Honolulu. She's spent 20 years teaching 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, as well as English and French as Foreign Languages in the U.S., Lebanon, Taiwan, and Martinique.

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