Character Education: the lost sheep of educational systems

When I first decided to leave my job as a psychiatric resident, I thought that by leaving the hospital, I would be re-entering the world of the sane. Of course, I only discovered that no one is really entirely sane in our world. The second eye opener was that I now became a marital and parental counselor, albeit without the title or the income. Every friend in need of advice turned to me.

Soon, I realized that the great majority of personal problems arose from either an immature personality or the inability to deal effectively with inter-personal relationships or both. Together with a friend, we proposed to a girls’ school the idea of a series of workshops to help wives and mothers. The workshops were very successful, but as a feedback, I now realized that young girls badly needed this type of training BEFORE marriage, and not after.

Most people seeking the advice of a marriage counselor are on the brink of divorce. This is the equivalent of seeing a doctor when one is in the final stages of cancer or struck down by a stroke or heart attack. It is more effective and important to learn about how to lead a healthy lifestyle when one is still young and healthy. Similarly, when a person already has severe biases about his or her spouse, it’s fighting an uphill battle to try to convince them they do have some redeemable qualities. It is much more efficient to prevent divorces by training young people on marriage way before they even know who they are going to marry.

Slowly, the idea of a course for high school students took shape. But it was not until years later that I first implemented such a course. The first wake-up call was rude! Students had many buried cultural and personal preconceptions about marriage. Many also had acquired unhealthy interpersonal attitudes. So I designed a course that would focus on other interpersonal relationships for middle school children. Which is when I found these kids did not even have a clear idea of who they were, what they thought, how they reacted, and what they wanted in life. I decided to start the course earlier and earlier until I finally realized it had to start from birth.

A child’s first relationship is with his/her mother. Then as the baby grows older, it learns to interact with the father, other adults and siblings. Just as it barely figures this out, it is now thrown in a preschool or kindergarten, where the law of the jungle or the law of the teacher rules. Most parents have somehow abdicated their God-given right to advise and guide their own children, probably because they unconsciously feel that the school will teach them these skills. Children therefore turn into bullies or victims as early as in preschool, and are at risk of doing so through the early elementary grades. Other children acquire an overblown or low self-esteem during this age as well. Since the kindergarten or elementary teachers are a powerful model for young children, their personalities and quirks become something that deeply affects the children.

Eventually, after the children learn about friendship in a haphazard way, they reach pre-puberty, when they wonder and waver about their selves and search for their identities. They do not know they can ask an adult to help, and many a child has taken a wrong turn at this age. Should they act like the peers in school? Should they follow their family’s principles? Should they tell on a friend?

Even more amazing is the fact that when you ask a teenager how they plan to get married, you get a blank look. None ever “plans” to get married. They expect it to happen by itself. It is a wonder that the divorce rate in the US today is only over 50%!

After a few years, my 10th grade marriage preparation course was finally polished and satisfactory. I gave a pretest at the start of the semester-long course and a post-test at the end of it. After the summer, one of the girls dropped out of school but visited us to let me know that she had gotten married and had transferred to a community college to take a fast track to graduation. She happily mentioned how the course had prepared her well for this, especially the segment on what to say and ask when meeting a prospective spouse. She had taken the course very lightly, thinking it would be years before she’d need any of the information, but life happened differently.

My only regret is that I was not able to help many other young girls who got into marriage prematurely, without being mentally ready. Some divorced within a year. Others remarried several times before finally settling down to a stable marriage.

What are schools waiting for? The most important set of skills needed in everyone’s life is missing in our education.