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## What are we doing to our children?

Roger C. Schank

Milo isn't getting perfect reading scores in first grade. His mother is very upset; She is arguing with the teacher. Milo reads very well. It seems that he gets bored with the books that they test him on. His mind wanders and he sometimes misses a question thus relegating him to a secondary reading group where he must read the very books that bored him in the first place. He obviously wasn't perfect when they tested him on these books, so, according to the school, he must try them again. Milo likes to read. Soon he won't like it so much.

But this isn't a story about Milo, a very bright child who still likes school. It is a story about his mother, who happens to be my daughter.

My daughter Hana has recently become unhinged. I say this in a loving way. We have always been very close. She runs a successful business, is a very good mother, and manages her life well. I am very proud of her. But she has drunk the Kool-Aid. She is suddenly very concerned that Milo get into Yale.

Hana didn't get into Yale, despite that fact that I had been on the Yale faculty for many years at the time she applied. She went to Northwestern, in part because I decided to move from Yale when I heard that she was rejected. Her admission to Northwestern was part of a package deal. She doesn't think she learned that much at Northwestern and she thinks she would have had a better experience at Yale. She blames me for this.

How this was my fault is a bit confusing but it seems to boil down to the idea that I should have made her study harder. I should have hired her a math tutor. I should have made her do her homework and stopped her from doing the things she enjoyed doing instead. When her mind wandered and she was involved in some personal writing project I should have said: "No. Time for math." She really said this to me.

I am someone who has dedicated the major part of my professional life to understanding how learning works and trying to get others from training professions to school officials to understand how best to approach teaching and

learning. So, it is easy to imagine that I tried to put school in perspective for my kids and was not the kind of parent who demanded blind adherence to whatever the school was demanding of my kids. I thought, and think, that it is better for kids to be kids, to love learning whatever it interests them to learn and to have fun while doing so. I do not insist on blind memorization to pass tests.

Turns out I was wrong.

What happened?

This is easy to understand. Three things happened:

1. *No Child Left Behind* happened
2. Arne Duncan and his *Race to the Top* happened

1. My daughter moved to New York City

Oddly the last one is a more important indicator of the crisis we now face than the other two. The testing mania that has engulfed our school system is well understood and often commented upon. There needs to be tests all the time which means teaching facts that are testable. This idea has been around a long time. What has happened lately is that corporations have realized how much money there is to be made in testing and test preparation and test grading, so there are now more tests and more politicians whose souls have been bought by the testing industry. It is nothing new. It just got worse.

What is new is that while many kids have always wanted to get into Yale, at least in theory, now their parents are worrying about this when they are five, or earlier.

It is this concern that I am worrying about here. This concern assumes that going to Yale is important in some way and it also assumes that spending your entire childhood being stressed out about whether this will happen is not a bad thing.

Both assumptions are dead wrong. Raising children to pass tests cannot be a good thing unless one thinks that those tests test something important. And making children dream of Yale only matters if the children and their parents correctly assess what it is that Yale offers. Parents, in general, have no idea what Yale offers or why getting very good at tests may actually be a bad idea.

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