

Parenting: Goodness as happiness

By [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#)

April 13, 2011

I spent last night curled around my toddler, bowl in hand, waiting for her to wake and vomit again. She had a miserable case of food poisoning that kept us both in and out of sleep until the morning.

I was thinking about relaying this episode to a seminary friend who recently asked me to “sell” him on the idea of children. Why have kids? he wondered. For my friend, as for many of us, choosing to parent is a matter of tipping scales. On one side is your economic, personal and social freedom, and career goals that are easier to achieve without children. On the other side is the fresh smell of a newborn, the fun of parenting, and the hope of lifelong companionship with your children. One day, perhaps, the scales will tip and the parenting side will become more important than the unattached side. And then you have a baby.

I think Richard Weissbourd would want to challenge this kind of discernment. Weissbourd is an education scholar from Harvard who writes about virtue and childhood. [His book](#) is on my reading list for the summer. In a recent post on [Motherlode](#)

Weissbourd talks about the self-esteem movement in parenting. His thesis is that self-esteem building now tops the list of values parents want to pass on to children. And our children’s basic morality suffers as a consequence.

Weissbourd’s research shows that most children assume that “being happy” is the their primary life goal; two-thirds consider this more important than “being a good person.” The self-esteem movement tries to bridge this gap. Weissbourd characterizes the trend as “fill yourself up first, and then help your neighbor.” The problem is that high self-esteem can just as easily lead to arrogance and harm. “Contentment infamously breeds indifference.” Additionally, Weissbourd sees the focus

on moment-to-moment happiness as robbing children of the opportunity to develop the skills to be a good friend, romantic partner, colleague or parent.

Weissbourd remarks on what a change this is from the generations before us:

After all, adults in previous generations didn't think that morality came from self-esteem or happiness. They commonly believed the idea, rooted in the Bible and much of Western literature, that morality came from suffering. Moral character came from making sacrifices, fulfilling difficult obligations, empathizing with the pain and burdens of others, and surviving hard times.

The "tipping scales" approach to parenting seems to me to be another instantiation of this phenomenon. It's not that children aren't a tremendous source of joy, of happiness even, but children also involve suffering. But maybe that's not such a bad thing. While short term happiness radically changes post-child, becoming "strong, caring adults, able to create a better and more just world" is a kind of happiness, too. And children may help us to become those things by virtue of the fact that they are mini-centers for training in perseverance, hope, and patience.

I realize I'm not saying anything new. [Augustine and Aquinas teach us](#) that happiness *is* the virtuous life that moves us closer God. Parenting just puts some flesh on that idea, concretizes our experiences of suffering as joy in a particular way. And on nights like these I'm glad to be reminded that it's possible even I might find some happiness in giving my life over to someone else.

Originally posted at [Sign on the Window](#).