

This book was written for parents, teachers, coaches, and anyone working with children. It not only draws the reader to pay closer attention to the social needs of children but identifies the attitudes and behaviors that create inequalities within the family. If adults realize the impact that their words, actions, and decisions make on the children they encounter, they can begin creating environments where all children are encouraged, valued, and loved.

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FAMILY MATTERS: HOW SCHOOLS CAN COPE WITH THE CRISIS IN CHILDREARING

ROBERT EVANS
JOSSEY-BASS, 2004.
\$25.00, 320 pages

Reviewed by Sandra Rojas

Recent decades have been saturated with books, articles, and research on how schools can improve their scores and enable students to achieve high academic standards while offering a safe and engaging environment. In trying to understand why some students succeed academically while others struggle to learn, many solutions have been proposed. Parents, teachers, and school leaders have tried to understand the underlying cause of academic achievement or failure. Schools that are nationally recognized for offering the best academic environment are scrutinized to find the magic formula and the blueprint necessary to educate children successfully according to today's society. Parents often place all responsibility to educate their children in teachers' hands and either blame or praise them if their children do well. At the same time, teachers either complain about the parents of struggling students or admire parents if the students can accomplish their academic goals.

In *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope With the Crisis in Childrearing*, Evans (2004) attempts to explain the factors that affect today's schools, families, and society and that make students "harder to teach and parents harder to deal with" (p. 156). Evans invites the reader to think "about what our children need and what our schools can do" (p. xix) to cope with

the challenges of raising and educating healthy and successful children. This clinical and organizational psychologist begins the book with a clear introduction to the organization of the text and the main aspects to be covered in each section. Evans's introduction familiarizes the reader with the theme of the book and helps to provide a sense of the upcoming discussion, making the book reader-friendly for teachers, parents, and those who work with children and adolescents.

The first part of the book is dedicated to analyzing "the remarkable changing context of child development that has affected students' school-readiness" (p. xv) and reviewing several research studies and theories about child development and parenting trends. Evans identifies two pyramids in the structure of today's childrearing challenges and describes the underlying foundation of each pyramid using examples and observations.

The first pyramid involves the children. Evans explains how children's behavior and attitudes have deteriorated, making teachers and school leaders conclude that "students are harder to reach and teach, their attention and motivation harder to sustain, their language and behavior more provocative" (p. 6) and their overall readiness for school lower than ever. The author emphasizes the seriousness of these behaviors and points out violence as the extreme example of children's reactions in schools and other social settings. Evans reports that about 135,000 children bring weapons to school and more teachers are attacked by their students each year.

The second pyramid represents parents. Evans explains the attitude of parents today and their defensiveness regarding their children's success. More and more parents sue schools, teachers, coaches, and principals for many, sometimes absurd, reasons. Parents have abused their rights, and countless court cases reflect the anger and anxiety of parents who want their children to succeed no matter what. Many parents allow children to drink and organize parties themselves, and when the school intervenes, parents "hire lawyers to contest the discipline" (p. 12) set by the school. At the same time, many parents are not capable of dealing with situations and constantly ask teachers for advice in superfluous matters that are their proper responsibility. Common parent decisions are made by teachers. Parents frequently even recur to teachers to ask whether or not a certain time is good for bedtime.

Evans tries to define the key ingredients necessary for children to grow up to be successful in all aspects of life, describing the points that are essential in raising children who are healthy and well-adjusted to society. Although a fixed list of the steps to follow to be a good parent is not included, three characteristics that are essential to childrearing today are addressed: nurture, structure, and latitude. Nurture refers to the relationship between an infant and his or her mother and also relates to the "development of a posi-

tive sense of self” (p. 22) and the foundation of trust and citizenship skills necessary to be responsible and sensible community members. Structure, as defined by Evans, is “a framework for conduct, expectations for behaviors and performance” (p. 26) and directly affects the way a child responds to new experiences, especially those at school. Evans describes structure as a box that changes according to the cultural background and values that each family considers vital and indispensable. The contents of the box are the rules and limits unique to each family. Everything outside the box represents what is not appropriate or approved. When parents, as well as teachers, set clear expectations, rules, and guidelines for appropriate behavior, there is a greater chance to self-regulate and be considerate toward others. As expressed by Evans, children who know what to expect and how to behave appropriately in daily life situations tend to achieve higher academically. Furthermore, “raising children with a structure, even when it involves discipline, sends a positive message” (p. 30) and allows children to feel cared for and loved by their parents.

The third ingredient that Evans lists is latitude, which refers to the “support for a child’s autonomy” (p. 31) and the space provided for the child to learn from developmentally appropriate experiences. Evans accentuates the importance of balancing latitude.

To understand the factors that affect today’s education and childrearing, Evans distinguishes three types of parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. Authoritarian parents are very structured, rigid, controlling, and do not allow flexibility. Permissive parents are very tolerant and their only concern is to keep their children pleased. Most children raised with these dispositions tend to be self-centered and think that everything has to be done their way, which critically indisposes them to share and live in school communities. Evans also discusses the importance of parental roles and the consequences, positive and negative, derived from having involved parents. For example, a study conducted showed that there are two elements that characterize less violent students. These two elements are “two-parent families and community-based social capital” (p. 51), once more emphasizing the importance of nuclear families to set up children for success. Lastly, authoritarian parents “provide sufficient levels of nurture, structure and latitude” (p. 55), and generally raise their children to be less influenced by negative peer pressure, more successful academically, and more thoughtful when making decisions.

Moreover, today’s families are more likely to experience the influence of a society that has turned to materialism, is more hostile, and does not appreciate values. Children are left alone for many hours, parents work extended hours, weekends are busy with sport practices, and nights are usually spent

watching television. People claim that there is not enough time to spend with their families, and children are busier than ever with extracurricular activities. Thus, families spend less and less time together. A study showed that “only 34 percent of Americans say that their whole family eats dinner together regularly” (p. 70) and it is evident that children spend more time in front of the television than talking to their parents or spending time together. Society has created many alternatives to absorb time, and today it is easy to find refrigerators with LCD televisions and cars equipped with televisions and DVD players. Children and parents keep themselves busy and engaged in activities that require little or no interaction among themselves. Evans indicates that in America “we are earning more and living better materially but working longer” (p. 115) leaving little time to interact with family and friends. Lastly, individualism makes people more vulnerable, especially children, to search for self-complacency and leave behind, according to Evans, “self-sacrifice, service to others, or institutional obligation” (p. 129).

In the second part of the book, Evans emphasizes the importance of school and the influence that teachers have in children’s lives. It begins with a description of today’s challenges to educate and prepare children to be academically successful and socially adjusted. Although the author repeats many of the facts and assumptions that are exposed in the previous chapters, Evans’s arguments about school and its role are valid and helpful for teachers.

The needs of today’s teachers and the challenges that schools face every-day, especially when communicating with parents, are acknowledged. Evans offers suggestions to clearly and effectively communicate with parents. These suggestions, and most of the second part of the book, are presented with an abundance of examples that may interfere with the purpose of the book. Some of the suggestions Evans makes about communication with parents are strategies commonly used in different settings. Evans proposes that there are two important key concepts for communicating with parents. These two concepts are active listening and straight talk. The first one refers to “paying close attention to what people tell you” (p. 211) and making sure that you check for clarification and empathy. Straight talk refers to “being specific” (p. 217) and explaining with clarity the issue to be discussed. These two strategies help teachers and parents to communicate effectively, thus strengthening the school-family relationship.

While the contents of this book can encourage people to think more about the importance of the family and school partnership, the strategies given may seem unrealistic and impossible to achieve unless all schools and families are transformed. Even though the book tries to point out the value of healthy communication and parent-teacher relationships, there are many

factors that can affect this relationship and make the proposed strategies difficult to put into practice unless there is a compromise to change the way society views parenting and education. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that schools, especially Catholic schools, need to face the materialism and hedonism of today's society, taking measures to create strong bridges of communication between home and school. Perhaps then, children will transform society instead of society transforming the children.

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