

MANAGING MY PERSONAL BIAS AROUND EDUCATION:

Appreciating Different Learning Styles In Our Own Children

By Susan O'Halloran

My son, Richard*, never cared much about traditional school learning. School gave him a chance to sharpen his skills in ditching, fibbing and faking. When I was a kid growing up in my working class neighborhood, education was king. From day one, I heard, "You are going to college. You are going to college." My parents expected that my brother and I would be on the honor roll. It was more than a family goal; it was a community-wide aspiration. Many of the adults in my neighborhood had barely finished high school. We were going to be the first generation to go to college.

When I became a mother, it did not matter that I adopted my sons. I heard my parents' words coming out of my mouth, "You are going to college."

However, when my youngest son, Richard, hit junior high and switched from a pass/fail to a letter-grade system, he started bringing home Ds and Cs. I was shocked. My husband and I responded by mounting a campaign that made several modern wars look like small potatoes. My kitchen walls and several file drawers were filled with charts and formulas such as: "Skip class, trade in two desserts," or "This many completed assignments equals this many minutes of TV-watching." Anything to get my son motivated!

Then, one day, I had the good fortune to read some of Howard Gardener's writing. The educator and author Howard Gardener talks in several of his books about multiple intelligences. He points out that our present-day school system only promotes and rewards two kinds of brainpower: verbal and logic/math intelligence. There are five others: spatial, musical, kinetic, interpersonal (having people smarts) and intra-personal (being self-reflective or smart about yourself).

My son has several of these non-school intelligences. For example, he has spatial intelligence. If you are going camping, have Rich pack your car. You won't need rooftop storage.

Richard will get everything you need neatly stuffed into your car. Of course, you'll have to take him along to repack your car or upon your return you'll be forced to leave half your gear behind.

Richard also plays the guitar – musical intelligence – draws hilarious cartoons – visual intelligence - picks up dance steps quickly – kinetic intelligence – and was the one in our house with interpersonal intelligence. He always knew what was going on with everyone else.

Slowly, with Mr. Gardener's help, the charts and formulas came off the walls. Finally, we caught our breath and asked, "What strengths can we support rather than continually focusing on what's *not* working?" At last, we looked at this kid of ours and said, "What kind of smart are you?"

Soon after this revelation, we found ourselves in the chauffeuring business, trying to support Rich's more natural, outside school talents: Monday, soccer practice; Saturday, art lessons and so on. We cut a deal with Richard. "Okay, get C's and we'll get off your back. C's will still keep a few doors open. Maybe someday you'll decide college is for you."

I'm still waiting. Today, Richard lives in Alaska working as the head mechanic at a cannery. He loves working outdoors, climbing under trucks or crawling up huge cranes that lift commercial fishing boats in and out of the water. As long as he's operating heavy machinery, he's a happy man.

I say to myself several times a week, "He's happy. He's happy. He's happy." But the truth is that every time I see a news item that connects years of college with increased earnings, I have to grab my hand to keep from clipping out the article and sending it up north.

No matter how progressive I might think I am I have an emotional commitment to my prejudice. That's why prejudices can be so hard to get rid of. My emotional attachment to college defies reason and experience - we've all heard the stories of entrepreneurs who became millionaires without finishing high school. But the mantra, "You will go to college. You will go to college," was repeated in my family with such worry, angst and joyous expectation, I soaked it in. "You will go to college" is written in my DNA.

I cannot *eliminate* my bias in favor of formal education. However, I can *manage it* before I treat my son in patronizing, controlling, disrespectful ways.

All of us have prejudices. I discovered I had a bias in favor of college; others will have prejudices *against* those who did attend. The

question isn't whether we have prejudices, but what do we do about them? In his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey says, "We don't have to be the victim of conditions or conditioning. Between what happens to us and how we react there's always a degree of freedom. And the more we exercise that freedom, the larger it becomes."

I needed a dose of that freedom when it came to my son, Richard. In being aware of and managing my bias, I had the prejudice; it didn't have me. Only then do I have a choice. Instead of responding with unconscious, automatic, less than kind reactions, I learned to give my son the respect he deserves.

* I have changed my son's name to protect his privacy.

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