



# Head of School LINK

May 2016



## *Excessive Happiness and the Empty Self*

Parents enjoy making their children happy, and rightfully so. All things considered, happiness does a great deal to promote the emotional and physical health of our children. A cursory review of professional magazines and scientific literature written by today's leading public and Christian school educators reveals two very different approaches to scholastic instruction and character development as they relate to children's long term happiness. One teaches the student from the *sensate* culture, or from the physical senses (scientific naturalism), and the other from the *ideational* culture, which embraces the sensory world but also includes immaterial beliefs like the presence of God, or the fact

we are essentially eternal, spiritual beings living in temporary bodies.

Our postmodern, American society is clearly *sensate*, and some Christian educational pundits surmise such a culture is not sustainable because it limits students to the confines of empirical knowledge and omits discussions on faith. In the *sensate* world, the only things that are learned are those that appear in the physical world. Conversely, an *ideational* culture embraces biblical integration, like the instruction we provide at Prince, which is noncognitive in nature. An *ideational* culture not only embraces empirical knowledge, it

also speaks to a child's *beliefs*; the Christian *values* we teach are based upon God's unchanging word. In summary, the *sensate* world operates using empirical knowledge and empirical knowledge only whereas the *ideational* world operates using empirical knowledge and a noncognitive, spiritual domain. So how does this all relate to happiness?

If we accept a *sensate* approach to education, we are limited to the physical word; no gift of salvation, no God, no eternal existence - a scary, dark place. Some experts believe the finality of one's belief in a *sensate* culture will continue the moral decline of American society with fewer persons wanting to live a moral life for a purpose bigger than themselves - like the Kingdom of God - as they continue a preoccupation with being happy to enjoy all of life's pleasures before they are gone. In his book *Kingdom Triangle*, J. P. Moreland speaks directly to this topic and states, "When people live for pleasurable satisfaction, they become empty selves and, because God did not make us to live for happiness, their lives fall apart." Empty selves often overindulge in social media, professional sports, celebrities, movies, and other escape activities seeking happiness because too often they lack affiliation with something larger than themselves. Like leaders of big organizations who too often get emotionally isolated from others, empty selves can be very alone in a room of crowded people. A statistical analysis of the Boomer generation reveals a ten fold increase in depression compared to their parents, "The Greatest Generation," and experts attribute it in large part to their pursuit of happiness rather than living for a bigger purpose as their parents did for God, family, and country.

So what lessons can we take away from this discussion on happiness as it relates to our children as we enter the summer months? One recommendation is to be deliberate in looking for those "open windows" your child sometimes offers when least expected. When

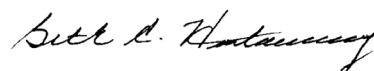
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your child opens one, use it as an opportunity to speak about spiritual matters. Consider talking about the safety, comfort, rich, and promised filled world that God offers through His son. Speak about the differences between *temporal happiness* like one's personal appearance, professional success, or popularity and how those pursuits contrast with *classic virtues* like character, wisdom, kindness, and goodness - reflections of one's true, inner self formed by discipleship to Christ. Perhaps you might designate one night this summer as "game night" where your *entire family* sits around the kitchen table enjoying one another and being a part of something bigger than themselves. Undertaking a one-day family service project in your local community this summer may be another idea to consider. As believers, it is good that we periodically remind ourselves that the more Christ becomes a part of our life, the less we become dependent upon the pursuit of pleasurable satisfaction for our happiness. One human example of this vain pursuit your children may recognize is Edmund, from C. S. Lewis's novel turned blockbuster movie *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, who eventually loses his taste for the temporary pleasures of "Turkish Delight" as he finally decides to pursue a bigger purpose. Have a great summer!

With warm regards and in His service,



Colonel Seth Hathaway  
Head of School  
Twitter: @PACS\_Head