

Putting Pressure on Young People Only Makes Them Rebel

Myth Number 3 in the Series: Harmful Myths that Guide Canada's Public Schools

By Mark Holmes

“It is only tradespeople who are respectable. We are above respectability.” This remark is attributed to Lady Wilde, a bohemian in her time. Her son, Oscar, was not a rebel against extreme Victorian restrictions, but the natural product of a mother who rejected the accepted norms. The student rebels of the 1960s were usually painted (and often still are) as rebelling against the repressive rules of family and school. After all, that is what they said they were doing. But when the backgrounds of the rebels were investigated, they were found to come mainly from strongly liberal and permissive homes.

This is not to say that extreme repression cannot bring about rebellion. Research on the English élite boys' boarding schools in the 40s and 50s, where unusually-strong discipline and regular corporal punishment often administered by older boys were the norm, suggests that while the majority learned to toe the line, a minority rejected the entire dogma becoming strong socialists, atheists and, in a few cases, Russian agents.

The truth seems to be that fairly strong discipline normally leads to acceptance of the norms and values being taught, but that the rate of rebellion, while generally low, increases with the rigour of control. The most unconventional, exemplified most clearly by criminals, tend to come from families and schools where there is least control.

Research on American colleges has shown that, for the most part, the colleges have little or no lasting influence on their students' values or tastes, but that those that are extremely liberal in climate do enhance students' liberalism and those that are extremely religious their religiosity. It is common-place today for members of the educated and artistic élites to consider industriousness, perseverance and self-reliance to be bourgeois, middle-class attributes inappropriate for school or home; more important to them are individual choice, self-concept and self-fulfillment. Like Lady Wilde, they are above respectability.

But even liberal researchers agree that academic achievement requires clear standards and regular communication of demands and aspirations. It is a rare public school classroom today that has too much discipline, too high standards. Nevertheless, there is constant concern about not putting too much pressure on children — and accusations that many middle-class parents do just that. Yet the schools and classrooms that do

put pressure on children to achieve and behave are consistently the most successful.

Compare Upper Canada College with Main Street Public School, Alberta with Ontario, Japan with Canada; in every case, if one compares children of similar social backgrounds, the advantage is to the parents, teachers and societies that expect, demand and require more.

(Dr. Holmes is the author of the 1995 publication Canada's Educational Crisis: Problems, Causes and Solutions.)