Stop Trying to Raise Successful Kids

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As anyone who has been called out for hypocrisy by a small child knows, kids are exquisitely attuned to gaps between what grown-ups say and what grown-ups do. If you survey American parents about what they want for their kids, more than 90 percent say one of their top priorities is that their children be caring. This makes sense: Kindness and concern for others are held as moral virtues in nearly every society and every major religion. But when you ask *children* what their parents want for them, 81 percent say their parents [value achievement and happiness over caring](#).

Kids learn what's important to adults not by listening to what we say, but by noticing what gets our attention. And in many developed societies, parents now pay more attention to individual achievement and happiness than anything else. However much we praise kindness and caring, we're not actually showing our kids that we value these traits.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, then, that kindness appears to be in decline. A rigorous analysis of annual surveys of American college students [showed a substantial drop from 1979 to 2009](#) in empathy and in imagining the perspectives of others. Over this period, students grew less likely to feel concern for people less fortunate than themselves—and less bothered by seeing others treated unfairly.