

Exceptional Children How to raise independent, motivated kids who learn with excellence

Joanne Calderwood

Calderwood is writing mostly for women – her web site name suggests as much

It is URtheMom dot com. Mothers have always been more involved in raising children than fathers, which fact is all the more true with the proliferation of divorce and single motherhood in today's society.

The teaching profession has become more and more dominated by women. Throughout my life they predominated in primary school. Now women are the vast majority in high school and in the liberal arts faculties of the university. They are overrepresented now among administrators and professors of education. If you accept that men and women generally represent different values – the one demanding strength and character, the other offering nurture – then you would agree that the nature of education has changed.

Most observers would say that our society has been becoming feminized: softened, less rigorous, less harsh. While these changes have their beneficial aspects, they also make it more difficult in the ways suggested by Calderwood's title. Kids tend not to become independent. The schools protect rather than challenge them, and they do not become motivated to achieve excellence.

Calderwood proposes a course of action. In my words, it is "tough love" beginning from the time the kids are too young to even feel that it is tough. Call it discipline and self-reliance. It is harder to make the effort to discipline a kid than to give in and let him do what he wants: gorge on cookies, watch TV, stay in bed till all hours, curse you the way he hears his friends curse their parents, and so on. On the other hand, if you do, your kids will respect you, be happy, and grow up to be productive adults.

The results of a lack of discipline are all around all of us every day. It is evident in the coarsening of public discourse, our entertainments, and the shocking lack of respect kids show for parents, teachers, and even each other.

Though blame is to be found at every level of society, school, simply because of the central role it occupies in kids' lives is perhaps most culpable. Calderwood suggests that you take charge of your kids' education. Do it yourself. I heartily endorse this suggestion. The children of my first family had the best of private and public school education, despite which they never learned discipline and simple values. They just aren't taught. Moreover, when as a parent I tried to go against school, society and a new-age spouse I simply was not up to fighting the tide. I am grateful to the one child who will now tell me as much – I'm not totally crazy. Calderwood and my advice is to do it right the first time.

You will find many online resource resources for home schoolers. As for additional references, I recommend John Holt's somewhat dated "Teach Your Own" and John Taylor Gatto's excellent

“Underground History of American Education.” Also the thoroughly mainstream “Left Back: A century of failed school reform” by Diane Ravitch and “Judging School Discipline” by Richard Arum.

Some people judge the value of a book by its length. I judge it by how much I get out of it, the ease with which it can be extracted, and the book’s utility as a reference, a touchstone, as I implement its recommendations. This short book shines on all of the latter factors. I nonetheless look forward to Calderwood’s much longer book, “The Self-Propelled Advantage: The Parent’s Guide to Raising Independent, Motivated Kids Who Learn with Excellence” due out January 2013