



## **PCW Speaker Series**

Tuesday, December 7, 2021  
Zoom Webinar

### **Connectedness:** **A Discussion with Dr. Chris Thurber and Dr. Hendrie Weisinger**

#### **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

PCW President, Elizabeth Savage, opened the event, welcomed attendees, and provided an overview of the PCW. Joan Friedrichs introduced the program's speakers:

- ❖ **Dr. Chris Thurber, Psychologist and Instructor at Phillips Exeter Academy**
- ❖ **Dr. Hendrie (Hank) Weisinger, New York Times bestselling author of *Performing Under Pressure***

#### **Introduction**

- Thurber said that the genesis for writing this book was the realization that loving, well-intentioned parents sometimes make things worse (through the harmful pressure they place on their children).
- Parents have been asking the wrong question ("How much pressure is enough?") instead of the questions that need to be asked ("What kind of pressure is healthy for children?" and "What kind of pressure is harmful?")
- They are not asking parents to lower their standards. It is not about dialing back the pressure, instead it is about the kind of pressure. They want parents to keep their standards high.

#### **Pressure Parents vs. Support Parents**

- Thurber and Weisinger's book came from an observation of two groups of young people. The first group of children/young adults were very successful and had very good mental health, and the second group, who may or may not have been successful, had severe mental health issues ranging from anxiety disorders, substance abuse disorders, eating disorders, depression, to suicide.

- They found that a differentiating factor between these two groups was how they experienced the pressure put upon them by their parents, i.e., parental pressure.
- Between these two groups, there were significant differences between the parents in three key areas:
  - Communication: Pressure Parents use criticism to point out flaws, use questions to interrogate, and use praise in a very superficial way.
  - Parental Involvement: Pressure Parents have no respect for their teen's boundaries.
  - Parental Warmth: Pressure Parents set up their relationship with their child as if it were a sports contract: "If you do well, you get these incentives, and if you do not do well, you get nothing."
- In addition, they found that Pressure Parents tend to focus on:
  - Scarcity of Opportunities: A Pressure Parent may make the observation: "There are only eight Ivy League schools."
  - Competitiveness: This sets up a sense of competition: "To get into these schools, you have to be better than the other kid. You must beat out your friend at all costs." (This type of focus on competition can encourage cheating.)
  - Importance: Pressure parents may say, "This is the most important test ever." A Pressure Parent exaggerates the importance of everything.
  - Perfectionism: Because of this scarcity of opportunities, the message is that work has to be perfect, which sets the child on the path to perfectionist tendencies.
  - Urgency: A Pressure Parent believes that, due to the scarcity of opportunities and competition, the homework, practice, etc. needs to be done now.
  - Control: Pressure Parents tend to hover over their child and exploit their power to control everything, including the conversation, topics, etc.

### **Transformations from Harmful Pressure to Healthy Pressure/Support**

- When used effectively, parental pressure can be transformed from the child feeling being pushed down and having to meet impossible expectations/demands into a feeling of guidance, support, wisdom, and motivation, which is how children should experience parental pressure.
- Thurber and Weisinger discussed the ways to transform harmful pressure into healthy pressure:
- Parent-centered Expectations to Child-centered Expectations:
  - Wanting our children to accomplish things that we failed to accomplish when we were younger is not a healthy dynamic. Even parents who do not think they are doing this, might take a look at what kinds of things they are emphasizing and what they think is important for their child to accomplish.
  - It is essential for a child's intrinsic motivation, the longevity of their efforts, and the sustainability of the child's goals that the child go after goals and outcomes important to the child, rather than the parent, and which reflect the child's signature strengths.

- It is okay to suggest activities to a child as all parents have values that they want to pass on to their child, but take a look at your expectations and make sure they are child-centered.
- Often parents pressure their children through guilt (“You know how much money we spend on violin lessons and you are not practicing?”) or manipulation (“Study harder and I will get you the iPhone”). These kinds of incentives often motivate the child to exhibit negative behavior, such as cheating.
- Conditional Acceptance to Unconditional Love
  - Conditional acceptance means that praise, attention, and time spent with a parent is conditional on a specific outcome.
  - Research suggests that better mental health and better performance is associated with a focus on effort vs. outcomes.
  - There is a misconception that in high pressure situations that people perform better, but the research is clear that this is not accurate. This is why it is important to praise effort, rather than focus entirely on the outcome.
  - Outcomes are important, but the most healthy kind of pressure should be focused on perseverance, effort, and resilience.
- Competitive Best to Personal Best
  - You should focus on the only core expectation you should have for your child, which is to tell them, “Just do your best.”
- Other transformations from Parental Pressure to Parental Support include:
  - Monologue to Dialogue
  - Hearing to Empathic Listening
  - Down Communication to Up Communications
  - Intrusive to Respectful
  - Political-Social Correctness to Individual Correctness

### Characteristics of a Support Parent

- Thurber and Weisinger discussed how Support Parents have characteristics which are reversals from the Pressure Parent attributes described earlier. These include:
- Validating Self-worth
  - A parent might say something like, “No matter what you get on the test, you are still my horse.” This communicates to your child that they still have value no matter how they do in school.
  - Weisinger gave an example of how his parents showed unconditional love to him by saying, “No matter what, you’re still our horse.” Meaning that no matter what he did, they would not stop rooting for him. Support Parents find ways to communicate to their child that they still have value no matter how they do in school, athletics, etc.
- Personal Best
  - Encourage your child not to focus on grades, but rather whether they are doing their best. You can say: “Only you know if this is your best.”
  - You want them to internalize always doing their best and not look to you or their grades for validation.
  - Let them know that their grades are *their* responsibility.

- Expressing Gratitude
  - All parents have moments when they lose their temper. One of the most important things you can do is to go back and apologize for the negative interaction and offer gratitude for the honesty that you exchanged.
  - You strengthen the relationship when you reflect on how you behaved, when you own your mistakes, and when you apologize and explain what you would do differently the next time.
- Encouraging Self-Disclosure
  - Self-disclosure means revealing feelings and thoughts about yourself.
  - Rather than just ask your child for facts (“What did you get on the test? Who did you speak to today?”), which is a superficial form of communication, try for a deeper exchange about thoughts and feelings (this can also be done while watching and reflecting on TV and movies). Instead you could ask them “How do you think you did on the test?” or “How did you feel about the test?” It may seem like a difference of semantics, but it will likely land differently to your child and could offer an opportunity to give feedback on their effort.
  - Parents often complain that their child does not speak with them, but the parent-child relationship is built on interactions and what we do impacts our children:
    - If we scream and yell at them, chances are they will do the same to us.
    - If we speak respectfully to them, the chances increase that they will be respectful to us.
    - If we talk more about our emotions, we increase the likelihood that our children will talk to us about their feelings and come to us when they experience distress.
  - Through modeling and encouraging self-disclosure, you will help your child develop emotional intelligence, which is necessary in any career and to get along with other people.
- Other characteristics of Support Parents include: Unconditional Love, Practicing Relaxation, Child’s Natural Interests

### **The Power of Empathy**

- What all people want, when experiencing strong negative emotions, is to feel understood, not necessarily to be given solutions.
- You can ask your child, when they are upset, “Do you want silence, solutions, or sympathy/empathy?”
- By being present with your child and allowing them to vent, you are communicating to them that it is okay and that you can tolerate the strong, negative emotions they are sharing. This in turn communicates to them: “I am not leaving you.”
- Empathy can be a bridge to your child

### **Ways to Visualize Pressure**

- Thurber described pressure like a shoe, which can be either like a stiletto/high-heeled shoe or a tennis sneaker.
- Harmful pressure is narrowly focused on a particular outcome that is so important it is a do or die scenario. Feeling this harmful kind of pressure is like getting stepped

on by a dance partner wearing a stiletto. It is going to hurt because all the gravitational force of the person's mass is concentrated on one point.

- Healthy pressure is where a parent is talking about opportunities and effort, looking at competition as an opportunity to collaborate, and expecting the child to do their best, not *the* best. It is like if your dance partner is wearing tennis sneakers and they step on you, it is not going to hurt as much.
- The kind of pressure all people need is where they feel a sense of connection with another person who is their cheerleader and pushes them to put forth a great deal of effort towards what it is they want to achieve.

### **Ways to Help Your Child Perform Under Pressure**

- The pressure that parents put on children is instinctive. We want them to do well. Holding children to high standards has an evolutionary effect, if it is healthy pressure. But many parents think they are helping their child, when instead they are inadvertently intensifying the pressure.
- Thurber and Weisinger described some of the ways parents can help their child perform under pressure:
  - Befriend the opportunity
    - Do not emphasize the importance of an event.
    - Try to have your child treat the opportunity as any other day.
    - Let your child know that it is an opportunity to show off skills.
  - Note future opportunities
    - Focusing on multiple opportunities reduces pressure. You can say, "There is always another test to take, there are other planes to catch," etc.
  - Write down and destroy fears
    - Studies show that if you write down your anxiety and fears, they are less likely to surface in the moment.
  - Other ways to help your child perform under pressure include:
    - Focus on what is controllable
    - Practice relaxation
    - Visualize success
    - Discuss parent support plan

### **Suggestions/Tips:**

- It is important to recognize that parents also feel a lot of pressure: Past Generation Pressure, Bragging Rights Pressure, Time/Schedule Pressure, Adult Peer Group Pressure, Sole Caregiver Pressure, and Access/Financial Pressure.
- Consider discussing your expectations of your child with your spouse, or a trusted friend/fellow parent and ask them if you are being realistic with your expectations of your child.
- Consider asking your child how you rate on the list of attributes of a Pressure Parent versus a Support Parent. Are your parental expectations realistic? (Many parents ignore the reality of the child's functioning and use their own aspirations rather than forming expectations. "No to aspirations. Yes to expectations.")

- Encourage your child to live their life according to their own interests and values, not others' interests/values, so they can navigate through life more effectively.

### **Speakers' takeaways:**

#### **Dr. Chris Thurber**

1. All parents make mistakes. Parenting is an iterative process and parents can learn from different resources, such as other parents and parenting books such as theirs. Parents can aim to be a better parent this week than they were the previous week.
2. When a parent does make a mistake, they should own the mistake and find time to discuss what happened with the child.
3. Mistakes can be a great opportunity to ask your child how you come across to them. You might ask your child: "What are things that I do that feel supportive and what are the things that tend to not feel supportive?" It takes courage and humility to ask those questions of your child.

#### **Dr. Hendrie (Hank) Weisinger**

1. Increase your awareness of how you interact with your child, especially with respect to communication. Are you using guilt, force, and manipulation, or are you responding with empathy? Are you asking just about facts and using superficial communication, or are you encouraging your child to articulate their thoughts and feelings? Are you using questions to check up on your child, or are you showing genuine interest in them?