

What Makes a Child Truly Great?

Parents are often driven by a desire to raise children who are "successful." But how do you measure success?

by **Tim Kimmel**

Let's take a quick inventory. You're going to spend at least 18 years raising each one of your kids. Before they finally slip over the horizon for good, you're going to lose a lot of sleep, spend a couple of truck loads of money, put some serious wear and tear on your body, and shed a puddle or two of tears. What do you hope happens? What do you want to see as the result of all of your efforts?

If we're followers of Christ, the next thing out of our mouth is usually some noble statement about our children growing up to have a tender heart for God (or words of equal spiritual significance). But when the actual targets of our parenting priorities are scrutinized, what often shows up is the harsh reality that although we are followers of Christ, we are also products of a very compelling Western mindset.

It's a philosophy that worships success and measures a person's significance by how well they embody its superficial and arbitrary standards. It's a worldview that is both intoxicating and contagious. Without realizing it, well-intended parents can easily find themselves repeating its mantra as they aim their kids at the future.

Our culture's definition of success

I call it the "success trap." It's easy to get sucked into as a parent ... even if you're serious about your faith. If I could synthesize the typical goals of parents formatted by our culture's definition of success, they would sound something like this:

"I hope my child ends up with a good job."

And what's a good job?

"One that pays well."

Parents become convinced that without the ability to make a significant amount of money, their children have little chance of a happy future. This, therefore, is the first priority of the success trap: **wealth**.

Okay, what else?

"I hope they marry someone who looks pretty good in the Christmas photos ... someone who is easy to gaze at when you wake up in the morning ... someone who can help them make great-looking grandchildren."

Thus the second priority of the success trap: **beauty**.

What else? Parents often wish their children could *assume some command over their destiny, and control the bulk of the forces that surround them*. Which is the third priority of the success trap: **power**.

Anything else?

"Yes, I'd love to see them get some recognition for all of their hard-earned efforts."

Ah, yes, the final priority of the success trap: **fame**.

The average parent may not articulate these priorities in such a succinct way. But that doesn't overwrite the true impact of the values we accentuate whether we want to admit them or not. Our true priorities are seldom what we say they are, but rather what we emphasize when we're mentoring our children through the daily challenges of their lives.

The things that are truly important to us often slip out between the seams of our conversations with the folks back home or over a latte with a friend at Starbucks:

“He’s captain of the wrestling team.”

“She’s president of the student body.”

“He got a 1400 on his SAT.”

“She’s going to a Division I school.”

“His fiancé looks like Jessica Alba.”

“She’s got a full ride to Stanford.”

“He has three different Fortune 500 companies chasing after him.”

Is there anything wrong with being proud of our children’s accomplishments?

Of course not. While we’re at it, is there anything fundamentally wrong with wealth, beauty, power, and fame? Not a bit ... unless you need any of these things to feel significant or complete.

Those who measure themselves by these four standards will never be content. But more important, they’re going to miss a huge opportunity to live the life God meant for them to live.

A better measurement

If a Christian parent is preoccupied with aiming their children at success, there are three things they need to know:

- These four standards of success aren’t the ones outlined in the Bible. God places no value on wealth, beauty, power, or fame as measurements of our significance.
- You don’t need God’s help if you want to build these standards into your kids' hearts. Unbelieving parents build these all the time.
- If you’re aiming your kids at success, you’re aiming way too low.

Let me suggest something far more exciting ... and satisfying. I call it *true greatness*. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). Jesus not only taught us what greatness was, but He also showed us what it looked like ... with every step He took, every breath He exhaled, and every word He spoke. And He calls us to build this amazing essence into the core of our children’s hearts.

True greatness is a passionate love for God that demonstrates itself in an unquenchable love and concern for others. True greatness has four powerful and defining qualities at its core: humility, gratefulness, generosity, and a servant spirit. It’s a magnanimous attitude that is sustained by God’s love and fueled by His amazing grace.

Parents who learn the secret of how to transfer a heart of true greatness to their children not only set their children up to live marvelous lives, but also get to enjoy the benefits of their efforts long before their children head out on their own. True greatness makes life within the home more peaceful, helps kids stay more academically focused, causes siblings to be far less competitive, elicits more respect for parents, and helps children become more morally grounded. The biggest payoff is how it enhances their children’s relationship with God.

When it comes to the vast majority of our kids, you need to know something that is extremely important about those four priorities of success: wealth, beauty, power, and fame. God may throw those into the lives of the truly great ... for free. Except now they can actually handle them well and enjoy them completely.