Raffles Institution
2021 Year 6 Preliminary Examination
General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
Higher 1

GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

30 August 2021

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1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

Susan David writes about overparenting and why we should teach children emotional agility instead.

1 Today's parents are probably the most knowledgeable and conscientious in the history of the planet. Maybe that's because we have fewer children than previous generations did. Perhaps the trend is reinforced by the same connoisseur's impulse to be meticulous in their choice that has popularised handcrafted beers and locally sourced and oh-so-thoroughly provenance vegetables.

2 Whatever the reasons, as capitalism has gone global and the world has become far more competitive, we no longer believe that our children's success can be left to chance. In an economy in which the top 1 per cent can afford luxury beyond belief, the bottom 20 per cent can barely afford to eat, and those in the middle have to scramble like crabs in a barrel willing to pull others down just to get ahead, modern parents have taken a more curatorial approach toward childhood, with each very deliberate decision directed toward getting their offspring into the best university they can, and the kind of career to guarantee them a decent life.

3 At the same time, our collective focus to be more accommodating has expanded. It's a well-meaning reaction to more authoritarian parenting styles of the past, which had plenty of psychologically damaging side effects. But in our attempts to raise our children to be more capable and confident, we're now more attuned to shielding them from any adverse experiences that we worry may shatter their psyches. Unfortunately, this can mean our children don't gain valuable experiences of failure and moving on from setbacks, building their resilience in the process. What's more, parents today tend to misinterpret theories that 'acknowledge the effort not the result', popularised by psychologist Carol Dweck; hence, children today are often rewarded for simply trying – receiving an 'A for effort' or a medal just for showing up.

4 Unfortunately, these efforts underestimate a child's ability to learn and grow from experience (and mistakes) and can have a host of unintended consequences, often the exact opposite of what we had hoped to achieve. For one thing, a focus on achievement promotes a very narrowly defined concept of success – that is, getting a certain kind of job that, presumably, will allow the child to earn a certain level of income. That narrow focus on specific preordained paths to achievement is even more dubious because it assumes a static world, when, according to projections, 65 per cent of today's primary school-aged kids may end up doing work that hasn't even been invented yet, and there's ample evidence of that trend already. Many of the jobs in which people are employed today didn't exist ten years ago and the pace of innovation is only increasing.

5 To make matters worse, there's a growing cohort of kids on today's university campuses who did everything 'right' at school, aced their exams, got into a fancy university and find academic work a breeze, but are completely baffled by life. They have no clue how to deal with a housemate who's a slob, or a romantic interest who just isn't that into them, or, for that matter, with their micromanaging 'helicopter' parents who show up for unplanned visits ('Surprise!'), and continually check in to see how things are going.

6 Another unintended consequence of over-parenting is that kids can grow up thinking that their parents' love is conditional on their behaving a certain way. This leads to contingent self-esteem, the belief that their worth must be earned. Contingent self-esteem can manifest itself in the young woman who has always been praised for her appearance and goes on to develop an eating disorder. But it can also be visible in the overachieving student who studies hard, earns top grades,

becomes head girl – and maybe gets into a top university – but who falls apart when she underperforms on an exam. Or the athlete who trains every day and becomes a star footballer but then shuts down when he messes up at a key moment in the championship game.

7 No matter how hard you try to ensure that your kids are successful, happy, and safe, though, you can be sure that temptations will arise, and that change is inevitable. You can't predict – much less successfully navigate – a fender bender, a botched maths test, the party at which everyone is guzzling beer or the best pal who suddenly develops an interest in shoplifting. Nor can you ensure that enrolling a child in Mandarin Chinese lessons or whisking your child off to coding class will guarantee him or her acceptance into the university of their choice, or into a stable and fulfilling job down the line.

8 In our increasingly competitive and unpredictable age, one of the best things parents can do to help their children thrive is to teach them emotional agility, which is like a vaccine that helps inoculate kids against being overwhelmed by the moments of unpleasantness that life no doubt has in store for them. It won't give kids complete immunity, but it will help them develop the flexibility and resilience they need to flourish, even during hard times.

9 We all have moments, in which we think we might want to try something new but just can't get past our fear. For kids, however, facing nerve-racking experiences is especially challenging because they have limited experience in actually making such leaps. They haven't had time to build up a store of reinforcing outcomes – 'I've done this kind of thing before and it hasn't killed me' – so they're easily spooked by the autopilot response that holds them back.

10 Life is full of moments requiring us to make that leap, but making the leap is not about ignoring, fixing, fighting or controlling fear – or anything else you might be experiencing. Rather, it's about accepting and noticing all your emotions and thoughts, viewing even the most powerful of them with curiosity, and then choosing courage over comfort in order to do whatever you've determined is most important to you. Courage, once again, is not the absence of fear. Courage is fear walking.

11 Of course, a child's fear often stirs up a parent's own fear of fear. We're afraid of what our children's reluctance to embrace an experience will mean for their development (or, god forbid, what it reflects about our own parenting skills). We worry about what this reluctance might cost our sons and daughters. We want our children to thrive, and since we can so often see the way forward for them, we try to push them in that direction, assuming that, by doing so, our children will realise that whatever they were reluctant about really wasn't so bad. But as we know by now, emotional agility is not about doing things because you feel you should or because someone else wants you to. Rather, it's about being able to make your own intentional choices about how to behave. And that goes for kids too.

12 When we guide children towards emotional agility, we give them a lifelong tool. Every time we allow them to take a leap – not of blind faith, but of eyes-wide-open volition in spite of fear – they practise 'fear walking', a skill that will help them face many other, much more significant emotional challenges later in life.

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