

# Speeches and Workshops by Michael G. Thompson Ph. D.

## *"Best Friends/Worst Enemies: Friendship Development, Popularity and Social Cruelty in Childhood"*

**ABSTRACT:** Children don't want adults to be involved in their social lives. They hate it when teachers "interfere." Yet teachers are witnesses to the exclusion of low-status children in elementary schools and the popularity wars of middle school and they must act to protect the weak. Parents also see the friendship difficulties of their own children. Some take their children's social ambitions to heart and worry that their children are not popular. Other parents hope the school can protect their children from all social pain.

Social cruelty among kids is one of the most difficult things that adults have to confront in raising or educating children. Experienced teachers can be confused about how to protect a child in class, for fear of putting a rejected or controversial child in "the limelight." They can also feel defensive when parents of neglected or victimized children come to the school for help.

This presentation walks teachers and parents through the complex social world of childhood and addresses a number of questions: What do social relationships in school predict about happiness in adult life? What is the normal sequence of child friendships, from the parallel play of the two-year-old to the intimate self-disclosure of the adolescent? Why do cliques form and what are the differences between boy and girl groups? Why are children scapegoated and how can their parents and school protect them? Dr. Thompson will draw on research to highlight the differences between friendship and popularity. He makes suggestions about the management of social problems in schools and makes the case that while all children yearn for popularity, it is friendship that helps children survive and thrive.

## *"Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Lives of Boys" also entitled "The Nature of Boys"*

**ABSTRACT:** What's the matter with my son?" Why is he an underachiever in school?" Why are boys so violent?" "Why won't boys talk to adults?" Educators and parents in the United States are engaged in an important debate about the way we raise and educate boys. After twenty years of illuminating research on girls and debate about gender equity in schools, it is time to consider some of the risk factors that afflict the lives of boys. They are four times more likely than girls to be sent to a school psychologist; they are diagnosed with 60-80% of learning disorders. Their areas of strength, physical activity and visual-spatial perception, are not as important as verbal skills in the feminine, quiet, word-dominated environment of schools. Boys do not do as well in school as girls, from elementary school through college and they are at risk for concluding that schools don't work for them and becoming withdrawn and bitter.

In early adolescence most boys begin to attach their sense of status to mastery and achievement. They are subjected to a powerful "culture of cruelty" which may require boys to adhere to a narrow ideology of masculinity: avoidance of feeling, avoidance of anything feminine, fear of

personal weakness. The result may be a boy who is or appears closed and often angry. In this talk, Dr. Thompson gives suggestions to teachers, fathers and mothers about how to support a boy in the early years of school and how to help a boy remain emotionally open in adolescence.

### *"Dealing With Difficult Parents"*

**ABSTRACT:** Ninety-five percent of parents are loving and concerned people who only want their child known and well taught. Though they may become anxious or angry at times, teachers should be able to handle their concerns. Five percent of parents, for reasons of their own mental disorders or troubled lives must act their difficulties out on the school and on teachers. It is essential that teachers be able to distinguish between these two groups and request administrative help for dealing with the tough minority. Dr. Thompson gives suggestions for managing the aggressive-intimidating parent, the anxious-incompetent parent and the denying-unresponsive parents.

### *"The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life"*

**ABSTRACT:** "The Pressured Child" is, in fact, a presentation for "pressured parents" who have forgotten what school is actually like. It is a talk for parents who are gripped by worries and misapprehensions about their children's life in school. In the presentation, Dr. Thompson describes the psychological journey that children experience during their thirteen years in school. He reminds parents that children are almost never judging themselves by grades: they are always monitoring their own development and constantly searching for three things: connection, recognition and a sense of power. He illustrates how children find those in many different arenas of school life. There are three kinds of children in school: 1) those whose journeys are characterized mostly by success, 2) those whose journeys are characterized by a chronic but manageable struggle, and 3) those whose journeys are characterized by fury and despair. Each journey has its own different pressures. Every child is constantly developing strategies for coping with the pressures that he or she feels.

In order to write the book, Dr. Thompson went back to school, following students, seventh graders through seniors, in independent, Catholic, and public schools. In the book and in this talk, he shares stories from the trenches, taking parents and teachers into the school day experience of children, illuminating how they manage their school careers and how the best educators and wisest parents can support them along the way.

### *"How to Raise Responsible Children"*

**ABSTRACT:** Dr. Thompson mixes anecdote and clinical experience with research on the outcomes of different parenting styles and comes up with a warm-hearted recipe for providing children with an internal foundation for moral behavior. Early in life every child needs a "secure base;" later a child needs a "framework" around him. Only when he feels securely anchored and contained will a child be able to follow rules consistently. How can a parent provide consistency

and how can he or she successfully communicate with his or her child around issues of responsibility? What do we know about the different outcomes of democratic, authoritative and authoritarian parenting? Which method of parenting produces the most competent child? Many parents have heard this talk and felt affirmed and challenged by it. Many teen-agers have heard it and have had to admit that it probably is....well...right.

### *"Adolescence is Hard Work"*

**ABSTRACT:** There are five developmental challenges which every adolescent must meet. There are no shortcuts and no exemptions, and these challenges are, from a psychological point of view, very strenuous. At the same time, most adolescents meet them with grace and ingenuity. Despite the images of rebellious and antisocial adolescents in the popular media, fully two-thirds of children have smooth or stepwise patterns of growth during the teen-age years, only one-third a tumultuous pattern. This humorous talk, illustrated with cartoons and drawings, provides useful perspective for parents of adolescents and calming preparation for parents of about-to-be-adolescents.

### *"College Admission: A Failed Rite of Passage"*

**ABSTRACT:** This talk is an emotional survival guide to the college admissions process for high school juniors and seniors, as well as their parents. The end of high school and the transition to college confront both child and parents with numerous developmental challenges. To the extent that people think the process is just about the RIGHT college, or worse yet the ONE AND ONLY GREAT college, both parents and child are at risk for alienation from one another and disappointment in themselves. Everyone survives the college application process, more or less gracefully. Dr. Thompson gives a number of suggestions regarding how families can develop a philosophy about the process and enjoy it more.

### *"Going Beyond Fear in the Parent-Teacher Relationship"*

**ABSTRACT:** Even in the closest of school communities there is a latent fear that infects the working relationship between parents and teachers. Parents can come to school conferences feeling amateurish, anxious and exposed. Teachers often feel devalued and defensive and they experience parents as potential critics. In a talk filled with humorous anecdotes, Dr. Thompson describes the seven fears on each side of the parent-teacher equation and gives suggestions to both teachers and parents that will help them improve their communication. Better relationships between teachers and parents improves the education of children, because children thrive emotionally and are in less conflict about school when the adults in their lives are in agreement about them.

## Boys

- **"Raising Cain: understanding the nature of boys"**  
(speech or full-day workshop with video clips)
- **"Coming to Grips with Boy Underachievement"**  
(60-minute speech for teachers with video clips)
- **"It's a Boy: the development of boys from birth to eighteen"**  
(for parents with video clips)
- **"Top Ten Suggestions for Teaching Boys"**  
(60-minute presentation for teachers)
- **"The Impact of Technology on the Lives of Boys."**

## Child and Adolescent Development

- **"Adolescence is Hard Work"**  
(90-minute presentation and slide talk for parents)
- **"Distinguishing Normal from Abnormal Development"**  
(120-minute presentation and case discussion for teachers---elementary/middle version and secondary version)
- **"Perfectionism and Eating Disorders in Adolescent Girls"**

## College Admissions

- **"College Admissions in Perspective"**  
(75-minute presentation and discussion for seniors)
- **"College Admissions: a failed rite of passage"**  
(75-minute presentation with Q & A for parents)
- **"College Crazyness"**  
(75-minute presentation for teachers)

## Parenting

- **"How to Raise Responsible Children"**  
(90-minute presentation for parents)
- **"The Importance of Fathers in Children's Lives"**  
(fathers-only talk)

## Parent-Teacher Relationships (Full-day Workshop or individual talks)

- **"Raising Cain: understanding the nature of boys"**  
(speech or full-day workshop with video clips)
- **"Going Beyond Fear in the Parent-Teacher Relationship"**  
(for teachers or parents)
- **"Understanding Family Styles"**  
(a slide talk for teachers)

## Parent-Teacher Relationships (continued)

- **"Dealing with Difficult Parents"**  
(for teachers, one-hour or three-hour versions)
- **"The Paradoxes of the Anxious Parent"**  
(one-hour presentation for teachers)
- **"The Rational and Irrational Expectations of Administrators, Teachers and Parents"**

### **Pressured Children**

- **"The Pressured Child"**  
(75-minute presentation for parents or teachers)
- **"The Impact of the Loss of Play in Childhood"**  
(75-minute presentation with video)

### **Psychological Aspects of School Leadership for Heads of School**

- **"Still Crazy After All these Years: reflections on long-term headship"**
- **"Bearing Other People's Pain as a Head of School"**
- **"Myths and Realities of a Head's Life"**
- **"Surviving, Enduring and Thriving as a Head of School"**
- **"The Life of the Spouse of a Head of School"**
- **"The Soul of Leadership"**

### **School Culture**

- **"Understanding School Culture and the Shadow Life of Organizations"**
- **"The Psychological Experience of Students of Color in Independent Schools"**
- **"The School Romance"**  
(with thanks to Dan Frank, Ph.D.)

### **Social Lives of Children**

- **"Best Friends, Worst Enemies"**  
(middle-school version, grades 4-8 & high-school version)
- **"Best Friends, Worst Enemies: friendship, popularity and social cruelty in the lives of children"**  
(parent and teacher versions)