**Questions and Answers for Prizeworthy**

**By Mitch Abblett PhD**

**What is prizing?**

I titled my book Prizeworthy not praiseworthy. That’s because prizing is it different from praise. Adults praise kids frequently, and yet the way we often do it can have some problems attached to it that we don't intend. The research is clear around this problematic aspect of praise-as-usual. Praise is often contingent on kids behavior, and by that I mean we tend to praise kids when they perform a behavior that we want. What we don't intend is for them to get the message that they have to create certain outcomes in the world for us to accept and value them. Outcome-focused praise sounds like “Hey good job getting the A on your report card” or “You scored ten goals - that's amazing!” These comments may feel good to them, but it may set the bar around creating outcomes in the world that they can't always control.

Praise can often also be too focused on the whole person of the child. When kids hear things from us like “you're so smart” or “you're such a creative kid” or “you're such a charming or kind kid” it, again, might feel good to them and yet it can create an expectation in the child that we don't intend. It can solidify an expectation that they have to *always* prove their creativity, smartness, etc. and that raises the bar such that when they feel like they're falling short of that whole person standard it can creates inner pressure, anxiety and stuckness. It can downgrade their ability to attain what they’re aiming for at school, with friends, and in other endeavors.

Prizing is distinct because it's not so future focused and it doesn't over fixate on things in the past. It's much more about the here and now. Prizing is about the moment of interaction between the adult and the child. Prizing requires the adult’s mindful presence. It is about the adult fully showing up to the moment with clarity, awareness and compassion and that gets communicated in infinite ways to the child. To the kid, it feels like “this adult is fully present with me in this moment.” Prizing is also about possibilities. =The adult is seeing things so much more clearly and with broad awareness versus a tunnel vision of bias, assumption and rigid expectation. Prizing opens up the adult to possibilities and it invites the kid to show up to those possibilities as well. Prizing is also about inspiration because kids often get stuck trying to meet their needs. They may be struggling with their behavior or in some way using unskillful means to try to get their needs met. Prizing actions toward kids invite them to the possibility of doing other than the unskillful because it's done from a mindset of fully seeing the child and the situation with compassion.

**Why are the skill practices in Prizeworthy called “stretches”?**

I’m a bit of a word nerd and so when I wanted to come up with a new way to refer to skills to practice, I wanted to shoot for something more than merely labeling them “Practices” or “Try This.” I wanted to go for what they really are about when it comes to prizing kids – they are about getting very intentional with our interactions with children. So, as a card-carrying word nerd, I looked up the etymological origin of the word “intention.” To my geeked-out glee, the latin root of the word is *intendere,* which translates as “to stretch toward.” I was sold.

All of us have done physical stretches before, either before or after our current workout regimens, or at least in our school days when PE teachers or coaches had us do them. Stretches are ideally about effortful reaching with the body to create flexibility and responsiveness in the muscles and ligaments. Stretches are mildly (or moderately) uncomfortable and yet they are important for things turning out well in a workout. And when we stretch toward something (like the floor or the ceiling or an opposite wall) we don’t readily take hold of it, grasp it. It’s the effortful reaching itself that’s the point, the does the good stuff within us and makes us more able to handle the tough work to come.

It’s the same in parenting or working with kids and teens. We need to limber up our minds, hearts and get clear as to what we’re aiming for. The stretches in this book are not meant to solve every problem coming up in your interactions with kids. They are designed to help you build flexibility, mindfulness, patience amid chaos and change, and clarity as to what actually IS in a given moment with the child in front of you. The more you’re practicing with these “stretches,” the more you will be open, aware, clear, and most of all – present. You will be much more likely to see behind the surface of things, connect with the prizes hidden in plain sight among the nuances of situations, emotions, and actions.

I’ve gotten to a place in my own life where I see stretching as something that not only opens up my body and makes it more resilient, it helps me see that each moment is an opportunity to capture something of value if I’m willing. I need to be loose and willing to reach in that direction with presence and purpose if I’m going to connect, create or make a positive impact. I still can’t readily touch my toes though! Stretches are certainly not about perfection!

**What does “equivalence of experience” mean when we’re talking about an interaction between and adult and a child or teen?**

It has to do with a problem that many of us as adults run into when trying to engage or lead or manage kids. It’s the mindset that we use that we buy into where there’s some degree of blame -- the kiddo is doing a problem behavior *on purpose.* In our minds we’re perhaps telling ourselves the child is being “lazy” or “manipulative” or unwilling to try.  It’s also a problem that when we as the adult are emotionally charged up and reactive, we tend to reflexively and habitually try to get control -- of the child’s behavior, and to push away the discomfort of how we’re feeling in that moment.  These reactions give a sense of rightness and certainty.

With decades of scientific research backing it, up researcher Gerald Patterson calls the tit-for-tat emotional reaction pattern between kids and adults a “coercive cycle.”  By analogy it’s like the game tug-of-war in that the interaction becomes an emotional tug-of-war between the adult and the child, each looking to control away the discomfort of the moment and their minds mutually blaming the other for that “stuckness.”

The solution is this mindfulness-based mindset of flexibility and perspective (the “prizeworthy” mindset) that assumes a big AND -- an accurate, inevitable truth of both the adult AND the child having vivid thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations in a given moment. No one person‘s experience in that moment is more vivid than the other or more vital in their own perspective -- they are equivalent in that they are both happening in that moment and they’re both vivid and vital.

Yes, there may be distortion in terms of accuracy of fit with the facts of the situation -- for with or both parties.  And yes, there may be unskillful, ridiculous reactions for the child or adult.  So equivalence of experience is not about skill, it’s about leadership.  When the adult acknowledges that the child is having a vital and real experience, it helps the child sidestep the unskillfulness, the ridiculosity, and perhaps join them in unsticking the moment.  It doesn't mean you agree with the child’s thoughts or actions.  It means that you agree that they are a thinking, feeling and self-protecting human being.  Assuming and communicating that to a child, particularly during a tough interaction, does wonders to snip the loops of coercive cycles.  It creates possibilities versus solidifying toxicity.

When adults react unskillfully, kids get the message that we think they are NOT having a valid, vivid, present moment experience.  They then not only refuse to “go skillful,” they up the ante in some fashion.  With the skills in *Prizeworthy*, adults can instead learn to practice dropping into this principle of equivalence of experience and allow ourselves to see that the child’s experience is just as vital and real in terms of it happening in that given moment as ours is.  When we allow for that to be equivalent more becomes possible.

**Why is adult ownership of error so important in the Prizeworthy approach?**

Most of us as adults don’t like to openly admit our mistakes, especially in the moment when they occur, and especially when they occur in the “heat” of moments of intensity and upset. Because we have normally functioning human brains, we look to avoid painful experiences whenever we can. Admitting openly that we messed up and negatively impacted others is very uncomfortable and so it makes sense that people learn to avoid doing this while growing up themselves. It may have even served a very valuable function in our distant evolutionary past to feel so uncomfortable about openly speaking the truth of our mistakes (particularly interpersonal ones) because we feared being ejected from our tribe and risking the dire stakes of going it alone in a hostile world as a result.

And yet we live in a different world now despite having essentially the same survival-focused wiring in our brains from the ancient past. If we as caregivers and helpers of kids are willing to sidestep our brain habit of avoiding ownership of errors and can take a “one down” stance and admit them – particularly to our kids – then they get a chance to learn to do so as well. To tell a kid that we messed up by raising our voice, blaming them, making assumptions, cutting them off while they’re talking, or any of an infinite variety of unskillful, yet universal, parental reactions, then we communicate a lot to them in key moments.

We let our kids know that we respect the undeniable truth of their emotional lives. We model the possibility of ownership of errors which lets them know we value their feelings. We teach them how repair of relationships is possible. We can truly lead them toward better communication and deeper connection within our family. We show them a way forward in tough moments that is probably the greatest gift we can give children. Ownership of error shows kids how courageous compassion is possible in a world that seems bent on separation and division.

When viewed in this way, what parent, teacher, or caregiver *doesn’t* want to show up to that sort of teaching?

**Why did you write this book?**

I originally wanted to write this because prizing kids has been the sum total of my treatment plan as a therapist for 20 years, ever since I first heard the term from my mentor, Dr. Sandy Kerr, in graduate school. I wanted to pass along this way of seeing into, reaching out to and responding to kids that I’ve directly seen be so helpful. And then the pandemic hit, my writing screeched to a halt, and I struggled along with most people to make sense of the world, my daily life, and my own patterns of emotion and coping. In short, I was having a hard time staying present emotionally and psychologically in my own life, including with my two kids. I felt quite the hypocrite trying to write about prizing children when I was having a hard time showing up to it myself.

With some time, much meditation practice, my own therapy and concerted effort on my part, I began showing up as a parent again, often in ways I never had previously. Not coincidentally, my writing picked back up again and it wrote *me* more than I wrote it. It seemed clear at that point what stories to render, what practices to include and how to organize things. While this book has been “in” me for a long time, it became something I could actually touch, feel, see and make visceral contact with after I did the “presence-ing” prizing requires. That why this book is coming forward now, even though (as my editor, Beth Frankl, well knows) it was a “bit” late getting done!

This is the best offering I can make at this point in time – a time that many hundreds of thousands – millions – of parents are reeling from the pandemic and straining to move their children and themselves forward into an uncertain post-pandemic world. I’m biased, but I believe we *need* prizing in our families. We need it in our world.