



Here's a lesson in thoughtfulness about our kids' goals, how they spend their time — and what they value most in life

Recently I was blessed to share a dinner with a family of five children in Scarsdale, New York, a well-to-do community less than an hour north of Manhattan. Over the course of our meal, I asked each kid and the parents to reflect on the unique quality or gift that God had given them.

The children started to share comments like, "I am really good in math," "I am a great cross-country runner," and "I can see a problem on paper and quickly see the solution."

Since this was not quite the direction I wanted the discussion to go, I rephrased the question. I said, "What is the hidden gift in you that has nothing to do with sports or your academic efforts?"

At that, the kids were silent — so I asked the dad to give his perspective on each child. He mentioned qualities about his children, such as "He is totally honest, and he always tells the truth, no matter what"; "She has a very tender and kind heart and cares in a special way about her little brother"; and "He is very gifted but he is not overly competitive. Winning or losing is not as important to him as long as he tried his best."

It was beautiful to see how the kids reacted and valued their dad's assessment. They took to heart his sincere appreciation of these hidden gifts, which were focused more on their character than on their natural human abilities.

Several years ago, during my ministry days in Washington, D.C., I heard from one of the moms that close to 50 percent of the senior class of an elite all-boys high school were on antidepressants. They were all waiting to hear back from the schools of their choice — and the pressure was simply becoming unbearable. From an early age, these kids were groomed to be Ivy League-bound, with many hours of private tutoring, extra SAT practice

tests, many extracurricular activities and/or years of trying to become the best athletes they could, with the hope of a Division I scholarship. It all came down to the acceptance or rejection email or letter that would arrive any day.

I knew a young man from this particular school who had a perfect SAT score and a 4.0 GPA. He was the captain of a sports team and had tons of community service hours — yet, despite all of this, he was still rejected by Princeton University. The admissions directors of some of these schools say they could fill their classes with kids with perfect SAT scores.

From an early age, far too many kids today seem to think that most matters is one's physical appearance, one's athletic ability and one's capacity to perform at an extremely high level in the classroom. While these things are important and have their place, parents do tremendous harm to their kids if they convey a distorted emphasis on these qualities to their kids. A report from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons even revealed recently that Americans spent more than ever before — \$16 billion — on cosmetic plastic surgery and minimally invasive procedures in 2016.

Although physical beauty and raw human qualities certainly catch the eye and can make a person more attractive — holiness and inner beauty move hearts and inspire others to be better people.

**I encourage all parents to help their kids see and understand their very personal, unique and God-given gifts.** Parents know their children better than anyone else — and I think this point of view and sensibility will help kids base their identities less on the world's view of success — and more on what God is asking of them.

After all, Saint Mother Teresa would never have been on the cover of Vanity Fair magazine — but what an incredibly beautiful heart she had. And how many special needs students exude so much joy, innocence and inner warmth? How many children truly have a caring and selfless heart? Shouldn't that be highly valued today? Parents, do your children know how to pray? Do they value the spiritual life and time spent with God? Are they tapping into the grace and peace that only God can give?

Character, virtue, compassion, kindness, self-sacrifice — all of this is what our country needs today in our future leaders. Parents' number-one job is to get their kids into heaven — not Harvard.

Yes, kids need to fully apply themselves in school. They need to give back through service hours, and, if they have athletic gifts, of course they should go for it. But allow them to do these things for the right reasons. God has given children special gifts — and He wants them to develop a plethora of virtues so that they can impact society for the good.

We need holy doctors, holy lawyers, holy bankers, holy accountants — and holy professional athletes. Holiness inspires, and this is what our culture most needs today. Parents, reach out to God to help you in this vital mission.

Fr. Michael Sliney, LC, is a Catholic priest who is the New York chaplain of the Lumen Institute, an association of business and cultural leaders.