

Summer Stories, Good Play and Success in the Middle School

Joel Bicknell
Head of the Middle School

The summer provides a welcome lessening of time constraints placed on students and educators. We are afforded more time to pursue our passions. We get to determine, in large part, the demands placed on our intellectual, physical and spiritual beings. One of the great joys of ushering in the school year is hearing how families and faculty have chosen to spend their summers. The stories told of summer adventures provide a unique perspective on the individuals.

The summer provided an opportunity for me to direct a musical, sit on top of the world in Colorado, enjoy uninterrupted time as a parent and to read. One of the books that had a significant impact on my perspectives of working with middle school students was *Young People, Ethics, and the New Digital Media: A Synthesis from the GoodPlay Project*. As the tentacles of this book are far reaching, a full treatment is not practical. However, several ideas emerging from the project will help focus our work in the middle school this year.

In late 2006, housed at Harvard, the GoodPlay Project aimed to “investigate the ethical contours of the new digital media and to create interventions which promote ethical thinking and conduct”. No small task. The availability of mobile devices and ease of accessibility have introduced a new realm of play to our middle school children. When children without the life experiences to effectively manage ethical dilemmas are presented with them, poor choices can occur. Making poor choices and learning from them are an important part of growing up. However, poor choices that take place on the internet or cell phone have much more staying power. The consequences can have significant, long-lasting, negative impact. Texting or posting inappropriate messages or pictures become a part of an individual’s digital history that is accessible to an exponentially expandable audience. Thus, the need to address the ethics of new digital media is paramount.

For us in the Middle School, this conversation fits perfectly with our choice of respect as our theme. Defined by the GoodPlay Project, “respect involves openness to differences, tolerance of others, and civility toward people, whether or not they are personally known”. The researchers also recognize the relationship between respect and the understanding of roles and responsibilities. As we implement a new student leadership program this year, Student Congress, we look forward to engaging students in defining the responsibilities all of us have as members of the Holland Hall community. Those conversations will most certainly include what it means to be an ethical user of digital media.

Exciting professional conversations are unfolding as well across all three divisions as we consider the role of technology both within and beyond our classrooms. In the Middle School, this year, we are planning for the implementation of new technology in 2012-

2013. In those conversations, we must not only consider what technology will facilitate the development of understandings in our courses, we must consider how students are interacting with technology. Those interactions are nuanced with issues of identity definition, conceptions (and misconceptions) of privacy, ownership/authorship, credibility of information and meaningful participation. I expect a healthy, vigorous debate with all vested parties. As parents, these issues can be difficult to understand from our children's perspectives. At Middle School Council meetings, I look forward to engaging parents in an open dialogue as well.

Embracing the ideals of and setting time aside for "Good Play" comes much easier during the summer months. That being said, encouraging our kids to play by allowing portions of their week to be unscheduled during the school year remains important. I hope our students experience play both digitally and in the non-digital world.

Dr. Michael Thompson, in *The Pressured Child*, reminds us of characteristics common to all students. Two characteristics in particular resonate with me as we start the school year. All students yearn for feelings of success and they crave meaningful, reciprocal relationships with adults at school. I look forward to seeing our students engaged in activities where they experience success and to observing the teachable moments that forge meaningful relationships between our students and faculty. These experiences define the Middle School culture.

Thank you for entrusting us with the education of your child. As always, never hesitate to let us know if there's anything we can do to partner with you.