

Kids Need Structure

TED Talk Speech

Colin Powell, 2012

I want to talk about young people and structure, young people and structure. This was last Wednesday afternoon at a school in Brooklyn, New York, at Cristo Rey High School, run by the **Jesuits**. And I was talking to this group of students, and take a look at them (shows a picture). They were around me in three directions. You'll notice that almost all of them are minority. You'll notice that the building is rather austere. It's an old New York school building, nothing fancy. They still have old blackboards and whatnot. And there are about 300 kids in this school, and the school's been going now for four years, and they're about to graduate their first class. Twenty-two people are graduating, and all 22 are going to college. They all come from homes where there is, for the most part, just one person in the home, usually the mother or the grandmother, and that's it, and they come here for their education and for their structure.

Jesuits—a member of a Roman Catholic religious order founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1534

Now I had this picture taken, and it was put up on my Facebook page last week, and somebody wrote in, "Huh, why does he have him standing at attention like that?" And then they said, "But he looks good." (Laughter)

He does look good, because kids need structure, and the trick I play in all of my school appearances is that when I get through with my little **homily** to the kids, I then invite them to ask questions, and when they raise their hands, I say, "Come up," and I make them come up and stand in front of me. I make them stand at attention like a soldier. Put your arms straight down at your side, look up, open your eyes, stare straight ahead, and speak out your question loudly so everybody can hear. No slouching, no pants hanging down, none of that stuff. (Laughter) And this young man, his name is -- his last name Cruz -- he loved it. That's all over his Facebook page and it's gone viral. (Laughter) So people think I'm being unkind to this kid. No, we're having a little fun. And the thing about it, I've done this for years, the younger they are, the more fun it is.

Homily—a sermon, usually on a Biblical topic and usually of a non-doctrinal nature

When I get six- and seven-year olds in a group, I have to figure out how to keep them quiet. You know that they'll always start yakking. And so I play a little game with them before I make them stand at attention.

I say, "Now listen. In the army when we want you to pay attention, we have a command. It's called "at ease." It means everybody be quiet and pay attention. Listen up. Do you understand?"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh."

"Let's practice. Everybody start chatting." And I let them go for about 10 seconds, the I go, "At ease!"

"Huh!" (Laughter) "Yes, General."

Try it with your kids. See if it works. (Laughter) I don't think so.

But anyway, it's a game I play, and it comes obviously from my military experience. Because for the majority of my adult life, I worked with young kids, teenagers with guns, I call them. And we would bring them into the army, and the first thing we

would do is to put them in an environment of structure, put them in ranks, make them all wear the same clothes, cut all their hair off so they look alike, make sure that they are standing in ranks. We teach them how to go right face, left face, so they can obey instructions and know the consequences of not obeying instructions. It gives them structure. And then we introduce them to somebody whom they come to hate immediately, the drill sergeant. And they hate him. And the drill sergeant starts screaming at them, and telling them to do all kinds of awful things. But then the most amazing thing happens over time. Once that structure is developed, once they understand the reason for something, once they understand, "Mama ain't here, son. I'm your worst nightmare. I'm your daddy and your mommy. And that's just the way it is. You got that, son? Yeah, and then when I ask you a question, there are only three possible answers: yes, sir; no, sir; and no excuse, sir. Don't start telling me why you didn't do something. It's yes, sir; no, sir; no excuse, sir."

"You didn't shave."

"But sir —"

"No, don't tell me how often you scraped your face this morning. I'm telling you, you didn't shave."

"No excuse, sir."

"Attaboy, you're learning fast."

But you'd be amazed at what you can do with them once you put them in that structure. In 18 weeks, they have a skill. They are mature. And you know what, they come to admire the drill sergeant, and they never forget the drill sergeant. They come to respect him. And so we need more of this kind of structure and respect in the lives of our children.

I spend a lot of time with youth groups, and I say to people, "When does the education process begin?" We're always talking about, "Let's fix the schools. Let's do more for our teachers. Let's put more computers in our schools. Let's get it all online."

That isn't the whole answer. It's part of the answer. But the real answer begins with bringing a child to the school with structure in that child's heart and soul to begin with.

When does the learning process begin? Does it begin in first grade? No, no, it begins the first time a child in a mother's arms looks up at the mother and says, "Oh, this must be my mother. She's the one who feeds me. Oh yeah, when I don't feel so good down there, she takes care of me. It's her language I will learn." And at that moment they shut out all the other languages that they could be learning at that age, but by three months, that's her. And if the person doing it, whether it's the mother or grandmother, whoever's doing it that is when the education process begins. That's when language begins. That's when love begins. That's when structure begins. That's when you start to imprint on the child that "you are special, you are different from every other child in the world. And we're going to read to you." A child who has not been read to is in danger when that child gets to school. A child who doesn't know his or her colors or doesn't know how to tell time, doesn't know how to tie

shoes, doesn't know how to do those things, and doesn't know how to do something that goes by a word that was drilled into me as a kid: mind. Mind your manners! Mind your adults! Mind what you're saying! This is the way children are raised properly. And I watched my own young grandchildren now come along, and they're, much to the distress of my children, they are acting just like we did. You know? You imprint them.

And that's what you have to do to prepare children for education and for school. And I'm working at all the energy I have to sort of communicate this message that we need preschool, we need Head Start, we need prenatal care. The education process begins even before the child is born, and if you don't do that, you're going to have difficulty. And we are having difficulties in so many of our communities and so many of our schools where kids are coming to first grade and their eyes are blazing, they've got their little **knapsack** on and they're ready to go, and then they realize they're not like the other first graders who know books, have been read to, can do their alphabet. And by the third grade, the kids who didn't have that structure and minding in the beginning start to realize they're behind, and what do they do? They act it out. They act it out, and they're on their way to jail or they're on their way to being dropouts. It's predictable. If you're not at the right reading level at third grade, you are a candidate for jail at age 18, and we have the highest **incarceration** rate because we're not getting our kids the proper start in life.

Knapsack—a canvas, nylon, or leather bag for clothes, food, and supplies, carried on the back by soldiers, hikers etc.

Incarceration—the act of incarcerating; to imprison, confine in an enclosure

The last chapter of my book is called “The Gift of a Good Start.” The gift of a good start—every child ought to have a good start in life.

I was privileged to have that kind of good start. I was not a great student. I was a public school kid in New York City, and I didn't do well at all. I have my entire New York City Board of Education transcript from kindergarten to college. I wanted it when I was writing my first book. I wanted to see if my memory was correct, and my God, it was. (Laughter) Straight “C” everywhere. And I finally bounced through high school, got into the City College of New York with a 78.3 average, which I shouldn't have been allowed in with, and then I started out in engineering, and that only lasted six months. (Laughter) And then I went into geology, “rocks for jocks.” This is easy. And then I found ROTC. I found something that I did well and something that I loved doing, and I found a group of youngsters like me who felt the same way. And so my whole life then was dedicated to ROTC and the military. And I say to young kids everywhere, as you're growing up and as this structure is being developed inside you, always be looking for that which you do well and that which you love doing, and when you find those two things together, man, you got it. That's what's going on. And that's what I found.

ROTC—Reserve Officers' Training Corps-- a college-based program for training commissioned officers of the United States Armed Forces.

Now the authorities at CCNY were getting tired of me being there. I'd been there four and a half going on five years, and my grades were not doing particularly well, and I was in occasional difficulties with the administration. And so they said, “But he does so well in ROTC. Look, he gets straight A's in that but not in anything else.” And so they said, “Look, let's take his ROTC grades and roll them into his overall GPA and see what happens.” And they did, and it brought me up to a 2.0. (Laughter) Yep. (Laughter) (Applause) They said, “It's good enough for government work. Give him to the army. We'll never see him again. We'll never see him again.” So they shipped me off to the army and lo and behold, many years later, I'm considered one of the greatest sons the City College of New York has ever had. (Laughter) So I tell young people everywhere, it ain't where you start in life, it's what you do with life that

determines where you end up in life. And you are blessed to be living in a country that, no matter where you start, you have opportunities; so long as you believe in yourself, you believe in the society, and the country and you believe that you can self-improve and educate yourself as you go along. And that's the key to success.

But it begins with the gift of a good start. If you don't give that gift to each and every one of our kids, if we don't invest at the earliest age, we're going to be running into difficulties. It's why we have a dropout rate of roughly 25 percent overall and almost 50 percent of our minority population living in low-income areas, because they're not getting the gift of a good start.

My gift of a good start was not only being in a nice family, a good family, but having a family that said to me, "Now listen, we came to this country in banana boats in 1920 and 1924. We worked like dogs down in the garment industry every single day. We're not doing it so that you can stick something up your nose or get in trouble. And don't even think about dropping out." (Laughter) If I had ever gone home and told those immigrant people that, "You know, I'm tired of school and I'm dropping out," they'd have said, "We're dropping you. We'll get another kid." (Laughter)

They had expectations for all of the cousins and the extended family of immigrants that lived in the South Bronx, but they had more than just expectations for us. They stuck into our hearts like a dagger a sense of shame: "Don't you shame this family." Sometimes I would get in trouble, and my parents were coming home, and I was in my room waiting for what's going to happen, and I would sit there saying to myself, "Okay, look, take the belt and hit me, but, God, don't give me that 'shame the family' bit again." It devastated me when my mother did that to me.

And I also had this extended network. Children need a network. Children need to be part of a tribe, a family, a community. In my case, it was aunts who lived in all these tenement buildings. I don't know how many of you are New Yorkers, but there were these tenement buildings, and these women were always hanging out one of the windows, leaning on a pillow. They never left. (Laughter) I, so help me God, I grew up walking those streets, and they were always there. They never went to the bathroom. They never cooked. (Laughter) They never did anything. But what they did was keep us in play. They kept us in play. And they didn't care whether you became a doctor or a lawyer or a general, and they never expected any generals in the family, as long as you got an education and then you got a job.

"Don't give us any of that self-actualization stuff. You get a job and get out of the house. We don't have time to waste for that. And then you can support us. That's the role of you guys."

And so, it is so essential that we kind of put this culture back into our families, all our families. And it is so important that all of you here today who are successful people, and I'm sure have wonderful families and children and grandchildren, it's not enough. You've got to reach out and back and find kids like Mr. Cruz who can make it if you give them the structure, if you reach back and help, if you mentor, if you invest in boys and girls clubs, if you work with your school system, make sure it's the best school system, and not just your kid's school, but the school uptown in Harlem, not just downtown Montessori on the West Side. All of us have to have a commitment to do that. And we're not just investing in the kids. We're investing in our future.

We're going to be a minority-majority country in one more generation. Those that we call minorities now are going to be the majority. And we have to make sure that they are ready to be the majority. We have to make sure that they are ready to be the leaders of this great country of ours, a country that is like no other, a country that amazes me every single day, a country that's fractious. We're always arguing with each other. That's how the system's supposed to work. It's a country of such contrasts, but it's a nation of nations. We touch every nation. Every nation touches us. We are a nation of immigrants. That's why we need sound immigration policy. It's ridiculous not to have a sound immigration policy to welcome those who want to come here and be part of this great nation, or we can send back home with an education to help their people rise up out of poverty.

One of the great stories I love to tell is about my love of going to my hometown New York and walking up Park Avenue on a beautiful day and admiring everything and seeing all the people go by from all over the world. But what I always have to do is stop at one of the corners and get a hot dog from the immigrant pushcart peddler. Gotta have a dirty water dog. (Laughter) And no matter where I am or what I'm doing, I've got to do that. I even did it when I was Secretary of State. I'd come out of my suite at the Waldorf Atonia—(Laughter)—be walking up the street, and I would hit around 55th Street looking for the immigrant pushcart peddler. In those days, I had five bodyguards around me and three New York police cars would roll alongside to make sure nobody whacked me while I was going up Park Avenue. (Laughter) And I would order the hot dot from the guy, and he'd start to fix it, and then he'd look around at the bodyguards and the police cars—

"I've got a green card! I've got a green card!" (Laughter)

"It's okay. It's okay."

But now I'm alone. I've got no bodyguards. I've got no police cars. I've got nothing. But I got have my hot dog.

I did it just last week. It was on a Tuesday evening down by Columbus Circle. And the scene repeats itself so often. I'll go up and ask for my hot dog, and the guy will fix it, and as he's finishing, he'll say, "I know you. I see you on television. You're, well, you're General Powell."

"Yes, yes."

I hand him the money.

"No, General. You can't pay me. I've been paid. America has paid me. I never forget where I came from. But now I'm an American. Sir, thank you."

I accept the generosity, continue up the street, and it washes over me. My God, it's the same country that greeted my parents this way 90 years ago. So we are still that magnificent country, but we are fueled by young people coming up from every land in the world, and it is our obligation as contributing citizens to this wonderful country of ours to make sure no child gets left behind.

Thank you very much.