

Teachers, It Isn't Your Job to Judge Parents

By Shawnta S. Barnes - November 19, 2017



The emotionally moving show *This Is Us* is currently airing its second season. Episode seven, “The Most Disappointed Man” made me think about how quickly and how easily we judge people who aren’t living up to certain

expectations. During this episode, viewers learn more about the life of Randall's father after he left him at a fire station.

Judge – You have no record, not so much as a traffic violation so I must admit I find this arrest rather disappointing.

William – What would you have me do, Your Honor? On every corner, there's someone selling, so I buy and I use. If you had my life, you'd probably use too. Just a year ago, my mother was alive and my girl was alive and we were having a son. Now they're gone. They're all gone.

Judge – (interrupts) Mr. Hill

William – So I come here and you tell me you're disappointed. Well guess what? I am more disappointed. I am the most disappointed man you've ever met in your whole damn life. So if you want to lock me up, lock me up. Put me inside because there is nothing out here for me anymore.

After viewing this scene, I immediately thought about how school staff sometimes treat parents. We judge some of our most vulnerable families because of choices they have made in the past or choices they are working through today. Instead of showing empathy, we share our disappointment with the child or with the parents. We lecture them about what they should do and sometimes even tell them how to do it. "If you would only read with your child, every night then he would meet grade level benchmarks." Many educators don't have the same life experiences as the families they serve. They haven't had to choose between buying groceries or paying their utility bills. They haven't had to hope their children will be okay with the cheapest child care service they can find while they are working a second job. It's easy to chastise, but what we really should do is connect families to supports and resources that will help. When wrap-around services are working effectively, both parents and teachers get what they want, a successful student with unlimited potential.

If you were wondering, the words William shared did strike a chord with the judge.

Judge – I gave a young man ten years today, younger than you. He stole a TV; ten years for stealing a TV, wasn't even a good TV. I didn't want to do it. Just like I didn't want to give five years to a different fellow yesterday, 15 years to another guy the day before that. I'm a judge and the strange thing is I don't make the rules, so round and round it goes. I know the ending to each one of those stories. They haven't even been written yet. I'm here, Mr. Hill, because you said something yesterday and it stuck with me. You said you were the most disappointed man in the world and I'm here to tell you I fear I am close second Mr. Hill because I'm the man who writes terrible stories day after day and I can't change the endings and that sir is a horrible disappointment so I want to see if we can find a different ending here. I'm going to take a chance on you get you out, get you help. I don't expect you to be perfect and I know you'll make mistakes like the rest of us.

Educators need to be more like this judge and have a change of heart. We need to help families have a different ending to their stories. Many families we are disappointed in are in survival mode. We have the power to break the survival mode cycle. We should work with parents as partners to help their children become academic success stories, so they can grow up to have a life where they are thriving and not just surviving.