

Great Expectations: Helping Children Be Their Best by Patricia Sullivan 8-8-2008

All parents have similar dreams for their children. For some, it's dreams of their sons being NFL quarterbacks or architects. For others, it's their daughters growing up to be concert pianists or doctors. For others still, it's being the first in their family to graduate from college or to earn a doctorate. The common thread through all these dreams is children growing up to fulfill their parents' expectations of success. To some extent, all parents transmit these dreams to their children in the form of expectations. Many parents believe that transmitting a sense of high expectations to children is one way parents infuse them with confidence, self-esteem, and personal standards of merit and value. But too much expectation to succeed can be crushing, in some cases as destructive as telling children they're not good enough. The key is balance.

Expectations fall into two main categories: behaviors and accomplishments. Behaviors are the character traits parents want their children to develop or exhibit, such as good manners, ambition, diligence, and responsibility. Accomplishments usually are either academic (school performance) or recreational, in activities such as athletics, art, or music that are supposed to be fun and enriching. Knowing what should be expected of a child at any given age is a good start toward setting reasonable expectations.

That special something

"Parents need to be realistic," said William Sears, a San Clemente, California, pediatrician and parenting educator. "Identify your children's special something. What are they good at? What are their skills? Create an environment that fosters them," he said. In this way, "You can have expectations because you know they're good at that one particular thing."

Setting these realistic expectations based on a child's strengths will go a long way toward building the kind of confidence that is essential to long-term successes. "I'm a firm believer in setting up a child to succeed," said Sears, the father of eight.

Parents need to consider what it is that they want for their children and whether how they act on those expectations will actually help their children achieve those goals. All parents want their children to grow up to be happy, healthy, and strong.

Setting high expectations is one way many parents think they are working toward those goals. But if children are pushed to perform at levels for which they aren't ready, the result will be the opposite of what parents want. Instead of developing confidence, children may become afraid of taking risks, for example. Instead of being proud of their accomplishments, children can begin to feel like sources of disappointment for their parents.

Listen up 

Children will let parents know when they're overwhelmed, either directly or indirectly. "They'll tell you if [something's] too hard for them," said Janine Bempechat, author of *Against the Odds: How "At-Risk" Students Exceed Expectations*. When parents hear children say something like "I hate reading" or "I hate the violin," that's a very clear sign to step back. According to Bempechat, the goal is for children to be self-motivated, so proceed slowly and listen carefully to what they are saying.

Parents should build on children's strengths and offer support, said Martha Pieper, a Chicago clinical social worker who, with husband William Pieper, a psychiatrist, has written *Smart Love*. "Let children struggle as long as they're happy struggling," she said. "If they're uncomfortable, show them you'll help them when they ask. You want to offer positive, helpful encouragement."

What is success? 

According to Bempechat, the skills most essential to success aren't academic ones: "It's the smartest kids who often fall apart at the first sign of failure. Being smart isn't necessarily going to help you. But knowing how to pace yourself, how to keep going when you're completely stuck, and how to ask for help will."

The overriding concern parents have in setting expectations is their children's future success. But those expectations can have a negative effect if parents don't teach children the lessons they need to negotiate life. It's those life lessons—not academic knowledge or recreational skills, but qualities like diligence, perseverance, and responsibility—that will have the greatest effect on their lives. Parents need to remember that making sure their children acquire those skills is more important in the long run than whether a child gets an A on a report card or wins a swimming meet.

The article can be found on the National PTA website at: www.pta.org/archive

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