

Great Expectations

The gift of childhood—letting kids be kids

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Everyone knows that parents want their children to be happy, but sometimes we lose sight of what it means to be a happy kid and we end up placing our own values of happiness upon our children. Parents tend to measure happiness in tangible terms like good grades, starring roles, and athletic victories. Parents often want happiness for their children so desperately that they neglect to realize that wins and test scores do not equate to happiness, particularly when the process of obtaining those achievements stops being fun.

As parents, we have learned many lessons the hard way. So, there is a tendency to push our children to avoid the mistakes we've made as kids (i.e. "If only I studied more when I was younger, I could have made it to medical school"). But remember, your child is not you. Children need to go through their own growth and development and, yes, occasionally learn things "the hard way." They need to discover their own passions and learn how to achieve their own success. These things happen with patience, experience, and developmental readiness.

Some believe that children are too young to know what is best for them and so parents must push them — even do homework for them or run their student government campaigns — so that they can excel during the elementary and middle school years. This kind of perspective is actually doing the child a disservice. The following information highlights five rules for parents to help them guide their children to happily and healthily pursue their individual interests.

Make expectations realistic.

Children are not small adults, they are works in progress. Everything about children is under development. Most preschool aged children, for instance, haven't developed the visual tracking skills to catch or hit a baseball. Young children have short attention spans and require short periods of music instruction. Very few eight year-olds have developed the planning skills needed to "anticipate the play" in sports. Skills in each of these domains are acquired in a progressive sequence. Not every child will acquire every skill equally or at the same rate. There are no studies to suggest that pushing children to obtain skills early forecasts greater success later in life.

Parents should objectively note the skill level of their child and concentrate on what can be done to improve skills at that level instead of prematurely focusing on the next. For instance, in theatre, perhaps a child could focus on projecting her voice, or in soccer, kicking with either foot. Focusing on age appropriate skill acquisition is a key component to eliminating pressure. Realistic expectations can be used by parents to support ob-



tainable goals, like effort and skill improvement (e.g. "I like how you dribbled the basketball using both hands," "You did a nice job looking at the audience while giving your speech") instead of wins and losses, which tend to be more outside of a child's control.

Encourage but be honest.

There is only one Tiger Woods, Miley Cyrus, and Dakota Fanning... and he or she is

not your child. Precociousness is something these people were born with. They are, in a sense, talented freaks of nature: mutants. More likely than not, your budding singer, dancer, actor or athlete is not going to be a world-class performer. But, you are responsible for helping him become a world-class person. Parents can make their child feel self-assured and confident by being proud of accomplishments and efforts. Encouragement is motivating. Pump your child up any way you can: school work, chores, art projects, music performance or playing sports all warrant praise. The better your child feels about himself, the more apt he will be to take risks, try new activities, and learn from his mistakes.

Most importantly, be honest. Kids can recognize false praise. When your child forgets her lines in the school play, don't say, "You were great, you were the best." This will undermine the value of your future praise. Instead, point out the things she did well. Consider using a compliment sandwich: a critique surrounded by two compliments. For example, "You really looked special in your costume. Maybe we can work on your lines tonight to get ready for tomorrow. If you can deliver the ones you forgot as well as the ones you remembered, you are really going to be great." While parental pressure is a problem, children do appreciate parent support. Don't push, but be present. Cheer, but not too much.

Have patience and do not fear struggle or failure.

Any good refining process takes time. As obvious as things may seem to you, they may not be to your child's developing brain. Screaming at them from the sidelines does not help their learning process. Learning comes in spurts and when a child struggles, it is usually not the fault of the teacher. Even the best coach cannot help a player who is not mentally mature enough to visualize the game or to attend to the lesson. So, don't get mad at the piano instructor and keep an open mind about your child. There is an opportunity for students to learn more from the feedback given after a "C+" performance than what they learn when their parents do their elementary school science fair projects for them. The analogy of picking a fruit before it is ripe describes the consequences of forcing kids to advance too quickly. The end result is sour, and rarely sweet.

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Let your child follow their passions and “back off.”

Children will do their best when they are doing what they love to do. Encourage her to experiment with karate, take cooking classes, or whatever she enjoys. Communicate with your child about his or her desires. If she says she wants to be the best at something, help her to map out a plan. Have her take responsibility for her success by managing aspects of her activity, such as maintaining her own instruments or sports equipment, setting the alarm clock to wake for early practices, and establishing personal goals. Children will suffer “burn-out” if the goals are too high or the pace is too fast. Allow activity changes, take breaks between seasons and avoid the push for your child to become a one-sport athlete before high school. Remember, parents need to monitor their child’s overall schedule and pursue diverse after-school activities without over-booking each week. Children and pre-teens need unstructured play time and free moments to engage in creative activities that aid in brain development.

Avoid excess pressure.

Parental pressure is defined as the discrepancy between parents’ and child’s expectations. For example, a parent may expect their child to play sports in college, even though in reality that is a very rare accomplishment. The child, on the other hand may just want to have fun and play with friends. This sets up a conflict with the parent expecting practices to be serious and wins to be more meaningful than they really are. When parental love and approval are perceived as dependent on adequacy of performance, activities are bound to be stressful for children. These unnecessary levels of stress and anxiety initiated by parents have proven to be a major reason why 75% of youths drop out of sports by age 13. Avoid excessive pressure: parents pushing too hard may actually delay some of the natural acquisition of skills and maturation of self-confidence. Treating your child to extra lessons or private coaching will defeat the purpose of giving your child an advantage if it becomes too much for him. Remember, childhood is a time for experimenting with new activities, learning different things, developing social skills and having fun.

Certainly, your children are a reflection of your parenting skills. The ability to cope, interact with others and maintain a healthy self-esteem are all traits that develop best from a successful parent-child relationship. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that you are getting a “do-over” in life through your child. Share in your child’s developmental process, but do not interfere. When you catch yourself putting lipstick on your five-year old before her play auditions, designing the graphics for a 5th-grade book report, or writing a junior-high campaign speech, it’s time to back off. Remember, your child is not you.