

When Good Enough Really Isn't

I recently reached out to several parents I know, asking what they could use advice on with their children. One of my friends brought up a common question.

"How do I get my child to do his best, when his half-hearted effort is already better than everyone else?"

Can you relate? This resonates with me personally and with so many other gifted individuals. I use to figure out within the first twenty minutes of a college class the minimum I needed to do in order to get an "A". Who's with me?

More importantly, who sees this in their child and is trying to address it? Here are a few suggestions from my experience as a gifted child as well as an educator of the gifted.

Define his worth apart from his intelligence.

Gifted children are praised so often for their intelligence that it becomes synonymous to them with their worth. Although it sounds contrary, this often leads to underachievement. If they control their lack of success, they don't have to face the fear of actually failing thus damaging their self-identity. A child who knows who they are apart from their academic abilities has a safety net that protects them from falling into this particular pit.

Examples: Take time to celebrate your child for who he is as a person. Make sure to let him know how much you love him, just because. Praise your child in all different areas, without focusing on just his intelligence.

Provide examples of excellence.

Help your children to develop a framework for excellence and hard work. Find examples in their interest areas of people who worked hard, faced adversity, and overcame obstacles. I personally love to read biographies. Your child's world is as small as you make it, and when you invite in heroes who have led lives that mattered you grow their world and their goals. In that same vein, be an example to your child of working hard. Talk to them about when it's okay to just get a job done and when you are striving for excellence.

Examples: A mother I admire showed her child the consequences of "good enough" by baking a cake with him. Instead of measuring, she repeatedly did what was "good enough" until her child had an end result I'm sure you can imagine. Then, they went on to measure carefully and cook properly and delight in the rewards of exercising care and rising above "good enough". This also provides a very illustrative teaching moment to refer back to as a family. Any time her son needs a reminder, she simply mentions that particular recipe or serves it for dessert before a certain assignment is due.

Praise appropriately.

Unfortunately, your child's mediocre work will often be better than that of many of his peers. I say that not to discredit the efforts of other children but because it can cause your child several problems. First it can lower your child's own standards of excellence. Second it can cause your child to earn praise where it is not do. When you praise a child for work that was effortless, it reinforces their lack of effort. You know your child. Praise where they have actually worked. Often, this might be for something non-academic. Maybe it was especially challenging to learn how to tie their shoes or jump rope. When you praise your child appropriately for their efforts, they learn what it looks like to face a challenge and be successful, as well as developing their personal work ethic.

This article raises some interesting ideas. I don't agree with it completely, but it will help you think about appropriate praise.

Give them something to care about.

We are all more likely to work harder on the things in which we are personally invested. What is your child passionate about? Find a way to teach them to work hard using that interest. My daughter is passionate about the homeless. She wants to have food to give them whenever she sees them at interstate exits, so she works diligently at her chores in order to earn money for a box of granola bars and bottled water to carry in our car. She cares about it which provides a clear, visual incentive her to work hard which we can then carry over into other areas of life.

Examples: While we might like it to be, this may not be something academic for your child. Choose a topic that they are passionate about to instill this message. Maybe a charity or a sport. The lessons they learn about what hard work looks like can transfer to their academics if you gently guide them using teachable moments.

Explain your expectations.

Gifted kids don't care just because you do. They only care when they are personally invested. If you don't explain to them why it's important to do their best, they won't. And if your reason isn't important to them then they really won't care! They need clear expectations on what "doing your best" should look like and why.

Examples: "We have worked all week doing rough drafts of our writing (stating the objective). Now it is time to write your final draft. It is important to make this your very best so that I can see what you are capable of (establishing your purpose). That means no eraser marks, clear handwriting, and no carry-over mistakes from your previous drafts (explaining the expectations). If you do not meet those expectations, you will have to redo your work and miss free time (making it relevant)."

Don't burn them out.

This can become particularly troublesome in school settings. Teachers overuse "do your best" and kids get burned out. Every assignment is couched with "do your best" until kids are bored and cavalier. Do they really need to "do their best" on a random practice worksheet? Is it really important to "color their best" on busywork? As a parent or educator, try to save "your best" comments for the times when you really would like to see your child exhibit their maximum effort.

Teach them to fail with grace.

Gifted children are used to success. It comes easily in so many areas for them as they naturally gravitate towards the areas where they experience the most achievement. And we, prideful parents that we are, inadvertently encourage this. We offer praise for things that are not necessarily praiseworthy in addition to celebrating them publicly and privately. Gifted children need to learn that it is okay to fail. They need to see that practice is a healthy part of learning. This develops resilience in children. We need to teach them through their failures AND their successes.

Examples: Don't let your child win at every game. Push them a little harder than you think they are capable of. Encourage them to enjoy certain activities just for fun even if they are not good at them, perhaps art or music.

Frustrate them daily.

I used to say this all the time when I was teaching. ALL children need to be challenged daily for two primary reasons. Number one, to grow. The brain is a muscle which needs to be exercised in order to be strengthened. Exercise is not always fun but it is always beneficial. Learning is exercise but too often it feels like play for gifted children because it is easy. The second reason, because being frustrated teaches coping mechanisms. If learning is always easy, your child will never know what to do when it isn't. No matter how bright your child is, they will eventually encounter something that is not. A common problem is for gifted children to simply give up (which they can control) instead of persevering (which they may not have ever had to do). By presenting your child with opportunities to face challenging situations daily, you force them to develop coping mechanisms that will serve them for life.

I hope this post has given you some ideas for how to challenge your underachiever.

Posted by Sarah Robbins Friday, August 29, 2014

<http://www.parentinggiftedkids.com/search/label/Parents%20of%20Gifted#sthash.i8Im9skA.dpuf>