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Grade Expectations

Helping gifted/high-ability learners stay grounded

By Dr. Joanne Foster

Well-meaning parents and family members often push children to excel (Think of the old adage, “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well”). Educators encourage students to strive to achieve their best work. Children themselves sometimes set very lofty expectations. All of this can be extremely admirable and motivating — or unduly burdensome and anxiety-provoking. How does one tread this fine line when encouraging a gifted/high-ability learner??

An encouraging environment

It’s important to foster a stimulating learning environment with expectations that are appropriate to individuals’ abilities and developmental readiness. Not surprisingly, stress can negatively affect learning. Research shows when a person feels anxious or intimidated, it’s difficult to concentrate or process subject matter. Alternatively, if someone is engaged in something satisfying, learning is more enjoyable, which in turn helps to sustain interest.

Students require a balance of learning opportunities — ideally ones that spark critical thinking, creativity, inquiry and excitement. Work that’s too easy is a turn-off (“Why bother? It’s a waste of time.”). Tasks that are too difficult can be frustrating and cause self-doubt (“What if I fail?”). Activities that fall into a student’s comfort zone — readily accomplished with good old-fashioned effort, persistence and perhaps some help — are most likely to result in a pleasurable experience all around (“This is interesting!”).

People have different learning preferences. Some children thrive in relaxed settings, others do well with strictly enforced rules; some like complex content, others prefer simplified material presented in increments; some work best independently, others favour group work; some enjoy active participation, others are shy; and so on. We cannot expect everyone to flourish in the same ways, and so we have to ensure that learning environments are appropriately differentiated and welcoming for all kinds of learners.

Expectations and enthusiasm

Help children set reasonable goals and expectations. Keep the bar high, while providing guidance and support. This raises confidence levels and productivity, and conveys the messages, “You can do this!” and “I’ll be here if you need me.”

It’s also important to respect and encourage their specific passions, regardless of your own expectations. Consider these two stories about gifted learners:

Mauri hurries home from school, rushes through his homework and then buries himself for hours in projects of his own making. He’s investigating the medicinal properties of volcanic ash, and he’s also replicating spider web designs on the family computer in an attempt to develop a play structure for therapeutic use in children’s hospitals. Mauri’s mother repeatedly tells him to go outside and have some fun. “This is fun!” he says.

Tobey is an A+ student in everything except math. She struggles with it no matter how hard she works. She'd much rather write. She's creating a poetry anthology, showcasing characters from the works of C.S. Lewis and Lewis Carroll (she calls it "Lewis-Lewis") but she has little time to devote to this endeavour so she has to squeeze it in. Her parents insist it's more important for her to bring her math grades up before focusing on "peripheral" things.

A person doesn't have to be a top-notch academic to have serious interests, exciting ideas, creative impulses or highly-developed talents. Exceptional ability comes in many forms, and parents and teachers can and should help children harness and develop their personal enthusiasms.

How? Keep communication channels open, provide ample resources, and offer reinforcement and constructive feedback. Be flexible and modify expectations as necessary. Preferences and learning styles can change over time across a child's development, so give them some latitude. Encourage their creativity. Remember it is generally not constructive to pressure children into doing things, or to coerce them to meet the expectations of others.

The gifted label

The gifted label is like a rose with thorns. It can be self-affirming and motivating. Or it can lead to unrealistic expectations, misconceptions, and concerns. Being identified as gifted, and then having to live up to that label, can be worrisome for a child, especially if the designation is accompanied by unreasonable expectations or heavy responsibilities. It is far better to give children a chance to engage in learning opportunities that are commensurate with their abilities in different subject areas, at any particular point in time.

Some students are more successful in math or science or languages or athletics. Each child has an individual learning profile, with areas of strength and weakness. Not every assignment, activity, or achievement has to be stellar, because learning is actually about making mistakes. Gifted learners may find it relatively easy to achieve or even exceed some or most age-normal expectations, but they experience the same challenges as anyone else when moving from a current level of mastery to the next higher one in a given subject area — and they may also need assistance. Nevertheless, parents of gifted learners often derive a sense of pride and accomplishment from their children's successes, and so may have very high expectations for them. These may enhance a child's achievement and academic self-concept (especially if parents provide good opportunities for ongoing development). However, children may experience the pressure of having to excel in order to continue to please their parents, and even earn their approval. Parents must seriously consider giftedness in the context of what their children want to do and can reasonably achieve — and then reinforce their efforts.

Sage advice

Here are two final suggestions for parents seeking to nurture their children's high-level development while keeping demands in perspective: Clarify expectations, making sure they are well-defined, fair and realistic. And, continue to stay in touch with teachers, building bridges between home and school, among parent organizations and throughout the community.

Joanne Foster is an educator at OISE/U of T, and co-author (with Dona Matthews) of *Being Smart about Gifted Education, 2nd Edition*. Visit Dr. Foster online at www.raising smarter kids.net