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Parenting: Do You Want a Gifted or Hard-working Child?

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Giftedness is revered in our culture; inborn talent—whether intellectual, athletic, or artistic—ensures that children will be successful. How many times have you heard "Tiger Woods was born to play golf" or "Sarah Chang was destined to be a brilliant violinist"? Well, let me clear something up: No one is born to do anything, certainly not to swing a golf club or play a violin. The only thing that can be reasonably said is that some children are born with certain abilities that can help them excel at a particular activity. However, giftedness is no guarantee of success; the world is full of gifted failures. Yet so many parents hope beyond hope that their children are gifted.

Problems with Giftedness

Children have also come to believe the myth of giftedness. Whenever I speak to children, I ask them whether they would rather be gifted or hardworking. With almost complete unanimity, children say they would rather be gifted. When you're gifted, they say, everything is easy. Yet parents and children don't realize that giftedness can be as much a cross to bear as, well, a gift.

Because gifted children succeed at an early age with little effort, they have no ownership of their successes ("I got an A, but I didn't even study."). Without ownership, gifted children don't learn the connection between their efforts and their outcomes, and, without that link, they can't take pride in their results. They can't say, "I did well because I worked hard." They may also develop the belief that they will always succeed in the future without effort.

Another problem with being labeled as gifted, fairly or otherwise, is that natural ability is not something that children can control. Gifted children didn't earn their giftedness. They were just lucky in that their parents gave them good genes. And they don't actually do anything to succeed, so they don't know what to do to succeed in the future. When they succeed, they have to attribute their success to their ability. Unfortunately, if gifted children attribute their successes to their ability, when they fail—which they inevitably will sooner or later—they must attribute their failures to their lack of ability (they must be stupid or untalented) and, though children can acquire more skills, they cannot gain ability beyond what they were born with.

Challenges of Being Gifted

To illustrate the problems with being gifted, let's look at some of the challenges gifted

children face as they grow up. Because they're gifted, these children experience early success and little or no failure. These children get straight A's, compete above their age group in their sport, or take advanced classes in the performing arts. But sooner or later they reach a level where everyone is gifted (e.g., Harvard, the U.S. Olympic Training Center, or Julliard). At this point, giftedness isn't what makes these children special, because they're all gifted. And their giftedness isn't what ultimately determines who becomes truly successful. What separates those children who are simply gifted from those who are gifted and successful is whether they possess the skills to maximize their gifts.

Unfortunately, these children will find that their inborn talent is no longer sufficient to be successful. Because everything comes so easily to them, many never learn the skills-hard work, persistence, patience, perseverance, discipline-that will enable them to become truly successful.

Redefining Giftedness

You might be getting the impression that I think that giftedness is a bad thing. To the contrary. Its value-or the harm it causes-depends on how you and your children look at it. If you and they buy into our culture's view of giftedness, then, yes, I believe that giftedness will be as much of a burden as a boon. At the same time, giftedness can be a wonderful opportunity for children to accomplish great things.

Here's what I recommend. If you think your children might be gifted, have them tested by impartial experts-parents are notoriously poor judges of their children's capabilities. If your children truly are gifted, don't tell them. There's no point. Labeling children as gifted places unnecessary pressure on them. And whether gifted or not, there's nothing they can do about anyway. If they find out they're gifted, tell them that they're fortunate to have this talent, but it's only a starting point. Whether it is ever fully realized is entirely up to them.

Erase Giftedness From Your Vocabulary

Erase the word gifted from your vocabulary. Instead of emphasizing your children's giftedness, you should talk to them about the attitudes and skills-which are under their control-that they will need to fully realize their talents. Gifted children will only achieve true success if they enjoy the area of their natural talent, choose to pursue their talent, develop the skills necessary to maximize their gifts, and make every effort to fully realize their abilities. If your children aren't gifted, that's fine too, because they may have talents that haven't yet been discovered and they can still do their best and become successful.

Potential Is a Pipe Dream

Another word that is closely linked to giftedness is potential. I regularly hear parents, teachers, and coaches saying, "She has unlimited potential." But, as a basketball coach once said, "All potential means is that you haven't done a darned thing yet." When children are labeled as having potential, they're being told that they have something that they might not have and are being saddled with an expectation that they may not be able to fulfill. Saying children have potential is saying that we can predict who will become successful with great certainty. Yet we're lousy at predicting who becomes successful in

school, sports, the arts, or any other achievement area.

Think of all of the "can't miss" kids who missed or the prodigies who became prodigious failures. For example, National Football League teams spend millions of dollars each year in an effort to identify which college players will become superstars, yet these efforts often go for naught. Ryan Leaf was considered "a sure thing" as the number-two pick in the 1998 draft by the San Diego Chargers and yet he was a flop from the start and is now out of professional football.

I recommend that you erase the word potential from your vocabulary as well. Instead, I use the phrase "fully realize their ability." This means that whatever ability they were born with-and no one knows how much ability any child has-the goal is to help your children do everything they can fully realize that ability.

It's About Hard Work

Contrary to what many parents think, giftedness is actually overrated as a contributor to success. Dr. Anders Ericsson, a professor at Florida State University, has studied expert performance in sports, music, mathematics, and other activities. He found that so-called innate ability was unnecessary to predict who would become most successful. The single greatest predictor of who would become successful was how many hours they devoted to the activity. In a nutshell, the more they practiced, the better they were. Hard work means children putting in the necessary time, sticking with it when it's not always fun, persevering in the face of setbacks and failures, and developing all of the skills necessary to become successful.

Side Bar: Successful, But Not Gifted

I used to work with a junior sports program in Colorado. There was one athlete on the team, I'll call him Rick, who was really terrible. Everyone knew it, including Rick himself. Yet Rick was my poster child for the value of hard work. He was the first one at training in the morning and the last one to leave at the end of the day. Rick put in more time in the weight room, took care of his equipment better, and watched videos, read about, and talked to coaches about his sport more than any other athlete on the team. At competitions, Rick was consistently one of the worst finishers on the team. He was never going to be a good performer in the sport. Most people would call him a loser. "What a waste of time for Rick," they would say, "Why do something that you stink at?" Thankfully, Rick was raised with a different perspective on his sports participation. Can you imagine working so hard and never seeing tangible results from your efforts? But Rick didn't care about results. He just loved his sport.

Though Rick would never have athletic success, he was learning essential life skills that would serve him well later in life. Sooner or later, Rick was going to find something for which he had an aptitude and, combined with these life skills, he was going to be incredibly successful. After high school, Rick went to a good college, applied everything he learned from his sport to his academics, did extremely well, and is currently finishing medical school with an eye on a career in sports medicine. Rick, who was the antithesis of gifted in his sport, is what I call a success in every sense of the word.

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