

insights

Helping children who struggle with learning

by Michael Grose



Parenting is easy when you have a child who is talented and finds learning relatively easy. You can marvel at their performance and feel some measure of parental pride.

On the other hand it's frustrating and, at times, heartbreaking to watch your child struggle to attain even mediocre levels of success at school, in sport or in leisure activities. It's even more difficult if your child repeats a year of learning.

When your child has difficulty at school, your approach as a parent makes huge difference to their self-esteem, the relationship with their teachers and their attitude to learning.

Here are some ideas to keep in mind if you are parenting a child for whom success at school, or in other high-status areas such as sport, just doesn't come naturally.

1. Avoid using other children as benchmarks

Benchmarking your child's progress against that of other children is not a wise parenting strategy. Inevitably it will lead to frustration as there will always be a child who performs better than your own on any scale you use.

Each child has his or her own developmental clock which is nearly impossible to alter. There are slow bloomers, early developers, bright sparks and steady-as-you-go kids in every classroom. It's the first group that can cause the most concern for parents who habitually compare the slow bloomer to siblings, friends' kids and even themselves when they were in school.

The trick is to focus on your child's improvement and effort and use their results as a benchmark of progress and development. *"Your spelling is better today than it was a little while ago"* is a better measure of progress than *"Your spelling is the best in the class!"*

2. Focus on your child's talents

Be mindful that many successful people including Bill Gates, Richard Branson and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg struggled at school. Traditional learning wasn't for them. However they each had supportive adults in their lives who helped them find their interests and fostered their talents. Help your child see beyond any limits they put on themselves (*"I'm hopeless at school"*) to see the many other talents and strengths they have.

3. Develop a growth mindset

Recent research shows that people who believe they can increase their intelligence through effort and challenge actually do get smarter and do better in school, work and life over time. It's exciting to know that your child's talent and smarts aren't fixed. Their brain can always learn more, continue to grow and be stretched. Communicate a growth mindset to your kids by focusing your praise more on their level of effort rather than on their natural abilities or talents. Praise the strategies they use and look for opportunities to stretch their capabilities.



4. Be your child's cheerleader

Kids who have to work really hard to achieve need someone in their lives who is able to boost their self-confidence, particularly when they are struggling. Make a fuss over small successes so your child can puff up their chest every now and then. Many adults find it easy to encourage the kids who do well but balk at encouraging kids who struggle or find learning difficult. But it's these children who really need encouragement. As much as humanly possible, comment favourably about your child's effort, contribution and improvement in all areas of life. You can do it!

5. Increase their time in activities where they experience success

As a young teacher I remember when a father banned his son from playing football as his school results were poor. I was incensed. This boy found school learning very difficult and football was one area where he was able to shine. I suggested to the father that his son should spend more time, not less, playing football, as this was the activity where he experienced the most success. Children who struggle at school benefit from spending more time in environments where they feel confident and capable, as those feelings can eventually transfer over to other areas – including the classroom.

6. Be mindful that persistence pays off

Children who have to work hard and persist learn an important life lesson: that success in most endeavours takes effort. Those kids who sail through their childhoods without raising a sweat can struggle when eventually they do have to work long and hard to succeed.

Raising kids who find life a breeze is easy. However, parenting kids who take longer to mature, or kids that must put in a 110% effort to achieve, is challenging for any parent. Parenting a child who struggles, or has to repeat a year level, requires you to develop a growth mindset, focus on kids' strengths, be liberal with encouragement and have realistic but positive expectations for success.



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