

Overcoming Fear of the Ordinary

BY WENDY MOGEL

MY FRIEND, Jan, who runs a fine local lower school, told of taking a mother on a prospective parents' tour of the campus. The mom said that her daughter Sloane had a strong interest in science. "At another school I visited, the kindergarten teachers put streamers in the trees to demonstrate the properties of wind to the students," she reported. "I'm hoping you would do that here too. I wouldn't want Sloaner to miss out." Jan hesitated and thought for a moment. "We have leaves on our trees," she responded. "They do kind of the same thing. Can't guarantee you we'll be using streamers." Of course, Sloane's mother did not choose Jan's school for her MIT bound four year-old.

I thought about this mother's decision, Why not seek the very best science curriculum right from the start? Why not give our children an edge? Shortly after, I read a third grade newsletter from another independent school. I noted that the word special was used five times on two pages. The Thanksgiving Sing was special. So was the Spellathon. The Emerging Artists exhibition was special. Even the unassuming Pie Drive was, for reasons not clearly revealed by the newsletter coverage, special indeed. And, finally, this year's third grade class was in itself a very, very special group. I wondered, Is it possible? So much specialness concentrated in one place? Was this really an extraordinary school with uncommonly dazzling children, committed teachers, generous and energetic families? In fact, this school is an admirable and solid place. The children are intelligent, sensitive and well-behaved, the teachers care, the parents give of their time and money. But it is not a terribly unusual school, and I questioned the benefit of believing otherwise.

As today's parents look at our rapidly changing, complex, competitive world, many react protectively. They put their faith in superior schooling and uncommon levels of achievement hoping that that this kind of preparation will elevate their children above the fray and armor them against an uncertain future. But there's a price to pay for so much striving and fanfare and even for so much excellence.

The head of a local school complained to me about his frustration with parents' high expectations: *Too many parents want everything fixed by the time their child is eight. They want academic perfection, a child as capable as any other child in the Western hemisphere. Children develop in fits and starts, but nobody has time for that anymore. No late bloomers, no slow starters, nothing unusual accepted! If a child doesn't get straight A's, his parents start fretting that he's got a learning disability or a motivation problem. Parents seem to think that children only come in two flavors: learning disabled and gifted. Not every child has unlimited potential in all areas. This doesn't mean most kids won't be able to go to college and to compete successfully in the adult world. Almost all of them will. Parents just need to relax a little and be patient.*

Teachers have their own reaction to the problem of exceptional expectations. Remember Lake Woebegone, the fictional town created by Garrison Keillor, where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average?" That sunny, statistics-defying state of mind is familiar turf for lower school teachers. They describe hearing the same song every year when it's time for parent conferences. One weary lower school head told me:

Parents are so nervous. If their child is doing well in everything it's like a badge for them that everything is OK. If their child is, God forbid, average, they panic. That's why so many teachers have started giving "Lake Woebegone" report cards, report cards that are a cross between a work of romantic fiction and a legal document. Teachers are afraid that if they give anything less than an A, parents will blame their child's poor achievement on the teacher's lack of skill rather than on the child's natural limitations. This is a shame, because real problems get glossed over or missed until fourth grade, when there's no more hiding it and the child's weaker areas show up on standardized tests.

And children themselves get bruised from the quest for the best. Listen to eleventh-grade Isabel, a top student at a top boarding school. She told me that she had been having a hard time with her schoolwork and her friends lately. Her teachers seemed to favor other students. The last two boys she hoped would become boyfriends hadn't been interested in her. She felt confused and hurt: *I know why this is so hard for me. My mom and dad always, always made me feel like I was the best: the most beautiful, the smartest, the most charming. And, mostly, I've done pretty well in everything. But now I'm now finding out that I'm not that unusual. Maybe I'm good enough, but I don't know anymore.*

Isabel is unusually insightful and clear about the sources of her problems. Other children, also suffering from specialitis, express their problems with painful symptoms. Some children who complain of headaches, stomachaches and chronic learning and sleep problems may actually be suffering from a disorder of parental expectations.

Donald Winnicott, the British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, in his book *Babies and Mothers* writes about “good enough mothering” and the “ordinary devoted mother.” He explains that “inherited potential will be realized” when “the environmental provision is adequate.” Adequate, not exceptional. We can only do our part. We can’t control the outcome. In our competitive world, it’s often easy to forget this and to blame ourselves, our child’s teacher, or other outside influences if our child’s school suddenly doesn’t seem like the best or our child is not achieving at an extraordinary level or doesn’t seem terrifically happy.

In order to flourish, children don’t need the best of everything. Instead they simply need what is good enough. This may include good enough (but dull) homework assignments, good enough (but a little crabby or uninspired) teachers, good enough (although insect- infested and humid) summer camps, and good enough (although bossy and shallow) friends. The Spellathon can be a success without being very, very special. Isabel can feel appreciated without hosannas. Consider that “good enough” can often be best for children, because when life is a bit mundane they won’t end up with expectations of themselves and those around them that can’t be met on this worldly plane. A Hassidic teaching speaks to the blessing of the ordinary. The rabbis advise that each of us should keep two pieces of paper in our pockets at all times. On one we write “I am nothing but dust and ashes,” on the other, “The world was created for me.” I once heard another beautiful spiritual teaching but was unable to uncover the source. I will pass it along to you. “Try to see your child as a seed that came in a packet without a label. Your job is to provide the right environment and nutrients and to pull the weeds. You can’t decide what kind of flower you’ll get or in which season it will bloom.”

When we accept that the “right environment” for children is both very special and very ordinary, we’ll give the children the soil they need to flourish. Even without streamers in the trees.

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