

Grades do not define our worth

I remember the first time I felt like my pre-schooler was falling behind. I had just met another 3-year-old who could read. Actually read, not just remembering the words to a favourite story like my pre-schooler did. In fact, my kid was only just mastering the alphabet song! Should I have been spending more time with phonics flashcards? Maybe we needed to start doing worksheets? Was I doing something wrong?

Yes!

But I didn't need to pull out the flashcards. What I was doing wrong was focusing on observable outcomes. We want to see growth in the way our kids can count and read because those are the things we can easily measure. But the real work of pre-school and even primary school is much more important than A B C and 1 2 3. It's the work of teaching our kids social skills, the not easily measured attributes of being able to wait for a turn, process uncomfortable feelings, and problem solve.

Obviously, we do want our children to learn their A B Cs and 1 2 3s too. But we don't need to rely on tests and homework to measure their learning. We should be able to see it in the way they talk about the problem at hand, the way they apply knowledge to new situations, and in the way they creatively build on what they know.

We also don't need to compare them to their peers to see how they measure up. Childhood is a period of rapid growth and learning. But learning isn't linear, and it isn't consistent across every child. One child may be thriving academically – able to spell words even adults struggle with like 'definitely' and 'facetious'... but they can't do the monkey bars yet. Another child may be a competitive gymnast... but hasn't learnt all their times tables yet. And yet another child may be a maths whizz...but still needs to work on making eye contact with people while they're talking.

But just as we need to remember not to compare our kid to their peers, we also need to teach our kids not to compare themselves to their peers. This is important for students who are struggling, but just as important for those who seem to be at the top of the class. Here's how you can teach them, by teaching yourself first:

Step 1. Remind yourself that grades aren't everything

You probably grew up believing that your life prospects depended on the outcome of each test and exam you did. But look around you. Can you pick the ATAR score of your co-worker? Which of the parents in the school pick-up line was the best speller in grade 1? Which of the people at your church or gym or pottery class failed their Geography exam in high school? Can't tell? Of course not! Our grades are part of our story. But they do NOT define our story.

Step 2. Remind yourself that grades are much less important than social skills

We can teach a computer to do just about anything these days... except have feelings. In an increasingly digitised and technological world, if you want your child to have skills that truly set them apart, focus on helping them grow their emotional IQ. Empathy, creative thinking, grit...these are all things that are much more important than being able to spell flawlessly.

Step 3. Remind yourself that “comparison is the thief of joy”

Every child is on their own learning journey. Some kids may seem to be in the fast lane. Others may seem to be in the slow lane. But instead of comparing your child to another, compare them to where they were a year ago. Reflect on what they have learnt to do. Think about what they could work on further.

Step 4. Cultivate a growth mindset

If your child comes to you saying “I can’t do fractions”... or “I’m no good at colouring in the lines”... or “I don’t understand phonics”... just add the word “yet”.

“I can’t do fractions...yet” reminds them that while they can’t do it now, they can learn them one day.

“I’m no good at colouring in the lines...yet” encourages them that with practice, they can get better.

“I don’t understand phonics... yet” reassures them that they might understand it tomorrow.

Being able to accomplish great things doesn’t depend on high test scores. It doesn’t depend on being better than others. It just depends on an inner conviction that greatness can be accomplished. Believe in your child.



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