

IN PRAISE OF THE AVERAGE CHILD

NOT EVERY KID'S TALENTS ARE IMMEDIATELY APPARENT. HERE'S HOW TO LET HIS BEST QUALITIES EMERGE NATURALLY. BY ELLEN H. PARLAPIANO

Each week at toddler gymnastics, Jennifer Singer compares her son Nicholas to the other 1-year-olds. Is he a better walker? wonders the Kinnelon, New Jersey, mom. Does he have the most teeth? How come he can only say “daddy,” while Alex (who’s 10 days younger) can also say “car”? Is there something wrong with Nicholas because he’d rather play with the toys than sit in the circle and sing “Itsy Bitsy Spider”? How will this affect his social skills—not to mention his chances of getting into Harvard?

From the moment our kids are born, we track their achievements and predict their futures. We compare them to the other babies and secretly gloat when our children conquer a milestone first. We wait for some special talent to appear—something that declares to the world, “My kid is great!”

But does a child have to be best at something? Suppose your kid is sweet and content, yet seemingly ordinary in physical, cognitive, and creative ability. Is he doomed to a life of mediocrity?

According to experts, he may actually be better poised for success than the early talker or violin virtuoso. “Being well-rounded and emotionally adjusted are key predictors of future accomplishment,” says Daniel B. Kessler, M.D., director of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at the Children’s Health Center of St. Joseph’s Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona.

So stop searching for your child’s gifts. Instead, respect his strengths and weaknesses, and let his unique attributes emerge on their own. Here’s why.

YOU CAN’T RUSH DEVELOPMENT. Every child progresses at her own pace. Attending a mommy-and-me exercise class may be fun, but it won’t make your baby walk sooner. Besides, the timing of milestones has little to do with cognitive or physical aptitude.

There’s a great range of what’s considered normal, notes Dr. Kessler, but all healthy kids acquire basic developmental skills eventually. Julie Pophal, of Madison, Wisconsin, thought her son Brett would be out of diapers at 2, like his brother Christopher. But when Brett showed no interest, Pophal put potty training on hold. “Once Brett was interested—at 3—it was a snap!” she says.

Try not to get obsessed by performance or percentiles. (When your child is in the work force, will it really matter where she placed on the growth chart?) Very few kids are superstars; most children—not surprisingly—are average, according to Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D., author of *Awakening Your Child’s Natural Genius*. “Unfortunately, in today’s achievement-oriented world, the word ‘average’ doesn’t evoke a lot of excitement,” he says. It almost implies that the child isn’t quite good enough.

Yet intelligence reveals itself in myriad ways. The secret: Allow kids to excel according to their own timetables and abilities. “Sending your child the message that average isn’t okay could undermine her potential,” says Dr. Kessler.

EVERY CHILD SHINES IN A SPECIAL WAY. Celebrate your child for who he is—not what you’d like him to be. Instead of wishing your son had a solo in the school concert, consider his

big smile as he sang confidently from the chorus. “Encourage kids to pursue activities that they enjoy, and support efforts over abilities,” advises David Elkind, Ph.D., professor of child development at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. The payoff? A secure child who knows your love isn’t contingent on test scores, musical aptitude, or athletic proficiency. That youngster will have the self-assurance to venture forth and find what he’s good at.

“Kids spontaneously move toward the areas they’re most interested in,” Dr. Elkind says. Provide opportunities for your child to try different activities, but don’t overwhelm him. A child needs free time (away from the TV and the computer) to discover his passions. Be a careful observer and a good listener. What is he most curious about? When is he most excited? In which activities does he lose all track of time?

Encourage a pastime for as long as it’s fun, but don’t expect it to last forever. Giving up ballet at 7 doesn’t brand your child as a quitter. (Microsoft CEO Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard, and it didn’t harm his future!) “Kids need to be allowed to stop and change focus as they explore different activities so they can find what makes them happiest,” says Barbara A. Wasik, Ph.D., an educational researcher at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. “Being willing to try new things and not being afraid to change your mind are characteristics of bright kids,” she says.

Pay attention to qualities that aren’t graded, like humor, compassion, individualism, and imagination. These may not provide the same bragging rights as straight A’s, but they’ll bring a child other kinds of immeasurable rewards.

“I was frustrated when Nicholas did not sit in the circle in gym class like the other babies,” admits Singer. “But then it