



Relationships *The Adlerian Team*

Accepting development diversity in our children

By Ed Murray

With the arrival of a new school year, families often feel the excitement and anticipation as another phase in their children's lives begins. For some families though, particularly families with older children, this anticipation may also include a kind of dread, as memories of previous years' struggles and conflicts around homework and low grades emerge. In families with more than one child, it may often be the case that one of the children has much more difficulty with academics compared to his or her siblings. For families with one child, it may be that he or she is not doing nearly as well academically as his or her same age relatives or peers.

When it comes to schoolwork, parents may at times wonder if their child has a learning disability yet marvel at how consistent and focused their children can be when it comes to computer games, listening to music, playing sports, or socializing with their friends. When children are able to focus and perform adequately or even excel at activities that they enjoy doing, they probably do not have a learning disorder. What is more likely is that their experience with academics, particularly with certain subjects and/or teachers, is one in which they feel discouraged and perhaps even incapable.

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING:

Often when parents mention to their child that their academic performance doesn't seem to reflect his or her true capabilities, they may be met with a variety of responses from the child that contain themes of school being boring or coercive. When parents have a child who is struggling with one or more subjects, there may even be a tendency to continually remind the child about homework and the value of studying. In fact, parents may feel that it is their duty as "responsible parents" to continually monitor and remind their children to do their schoolwork.

Education is important to a child's development. However, not all children who are the same age are at the same developmental level. Some children begin walking or talking relatively early, while others are late bloomers. Similarly, some children are more intellectually developed than their peers, while others seem to have more emotional maturity than their friends who are the same age. Yet, children who may be quite different from each other developmentally speaking, are usually in the same classrooms and are expected to perform at the same academic level. The reality however, is that children in the same classroom *are* at different physical, intellectual and/or emotional levels and these *developmental differences* often become reflected in their grades. Parents with the best of intentions, often urge their children to try harder with words like, "Come on now. I know you can do better

than that." Yet, in developmental terms, if their child has not yet reached that particular intellectual and/or emotional level, he or she may not be able to live up to these expectations. This, in turn, may bring on a more concerted effort on the part of parents who may eventually find they are fixating on their child's academic performance to the exclusion of other areas of the parent-child relationship. Their child may subsequently grow ever more frustrated and discouraged and experience a drop in self-esteem. A downward spiral may begin in which even the mention of school becomes a discouraging and perhaps even a punishing kind of experience for the child. When this trend continues into high school, teenagers may end up dropping out of school if the experience becomes too discouraging for them.

"RESPONSIBLE" PARENTING VS "GOOD ENOUGH" PARENTING:

An important part of our responsibility as parents is to encourage, guide, and support our children's education. As parents, we also strive to help our children learn ways to cooperate with others, develop a sense of independence, and struggle with adversity so as to gain a sense of accomplishment. Although learning to struggle with adversity and solve problems is an important part of the educational process, we have to make sure that the bar is not set so high as to end up fostering discouragement and helplessness, rather than confidence and determination.

Learning occurs best when children enjoy the process. If a child is having a difficult time with one or more subjects, parents need to offer encouragement, support, and especially acceptance. Parents can also explore with their child's teacher ways of supplementing learning at home. Finding the right balance between encouragement and acceptance of the child's current developmental capabilities is a good way to avoid fostering discouragement. We want to keep our children in the educational system, at least until they graduate from high school, so it's important that school not be turned into a discouraging experience for them.

In a culture that often seems to place a premium on "Being Number One," it's important to remember that we don't need to be "Super Parents" – we just need to be "Good Enough Parents." In the words of paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, a "Good Enough" parent is one who is "present" for the child, who is open and receptive to the child's developmental experiences, and whose words and actions reflect the consistent message: "What's this like for you?" and "So what can we do about it?" This level of acceptance and encouragement allows children to have their own experience that reflects where they are developmentally. It also supports and encourages their further progress both at school and in other areas of their lives.

In conclusion, it's more important to nurture the relationship with our children, encouraging independence, cooperation, and the willingness to struggle with adversity, than to risk discouraging children and damaging the parent-child relationship by insisting children perform better academically or complaining to them that they are not trying hard enough. It could very well be the case that a child is not developmentally able to do any better academically. Treating children with the same level of love and acceptance regardless of their marks will give them the support and security they need to develop their skills and abilities. Learning is a life-long process and accepting our children's current developmental capabilities can help ease the potential tensions of a new school year.

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