



First Steps

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The Trouble with Perfect

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

Our culture makes us strive for perfection. We hear it in the doctor's waiting room, on the sidelines of the soccer field, during the coffee break at the PTA meeting, in line at the grocery store..." If you don't let your baby listen to Mozart in the womb, you compromise brilliance." "If they don't begin a language by age three, it will be much harder for them to learn when they're older." "If they don't get into honors math in eighth grade, they'll never get into calculus in high school." We live in a land of opportunity. To a mother in the twenty-first century, it means that all the strollers are lined up at the starting line, and it's every baby for him or herself. (Of course, mom pushes and steers for the first eighteen years.)

Source: Guthrie and Matthews; *The Trouble with Perfect*

Avoid the over-achievement trap and still raise successful children.

1. Look at your child as a unique person with her own skills and interests, strengths and weaknesses. You'll be less likely to push when you recognize that your child must make her own future just as you did.
2. Avoid labels. Just because your daughter is shy, doesn't mean that she will suffer from the same social anxiety that you did.
3. Remember to let your child enjoy the adventure of growing up and learning about life without putting pressure on him to excel at everything he does.



Parents manage their child's life because they're trained to do it and they're good at it. But is it for the best?

- Enthusiasm to keep trying is stronger when the child feels like he can have a say in the situation.
- A child is more likely to become frustrated and to give up when he is always told what to do and how to do it.
- A child who never gets to resolve his problems with a friend, never learns to settle differences.
- When parents push too much, they may damage their child's feelings of success and accomplishment.

*External motivation serves only for the moment,
but internal motivation serves a child for a lifetime.*

External Motivation (extrinsic)

"You should do it because..."

- your dad and brother do it.
- you would be good at it.
- you're tall, or short, or thin, or fat.
- you need an activity.
- I say so
- everybody likes to (play soccer, or swim, or whatever).

Internal Motivation (intrinsic)

"I want to do it because..."

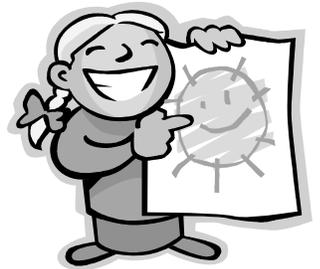
- it makes me feel good about myself.
- I like working at it and seeing improvement.
- I want to learn how to... (dance, play the guitar, etc.)
- because I love it.
- it helps me feel relaxed and happy.

Keeping Your Focus

Children need to be supported throughout their successes and failures. However, parents and caregivers need to pay more attention to the child's efforts than on the results of the efforts. Here are some ideas for keeping your focus:

1. Help the child develop a strong sense of self.

Children must be allowed to make mistakes. This is an important part in any attempt; no one neither child nor adult—can expect to be perfect. Failing to reach the goal the first time is all part of learning.



2. Concentrate on the activity itself.

Children become anxious when they are pressured into reaching goals rather than just doing an activity. They are more likely to give up or find themselves unable to do their best when they are pushed too hard by parents who always want them to “win” or be “number one”.

3. Allow children to have some activities that are all their own.

Sometimes, parents' forceful direction of a young child's activities can rob the child of the opportunity to explore his own interests. Children need a chance to play games, to participate in activities of their own choice, and to have creative play with no adult control.

Source: Rein and Rein: How to Develop Your Child's Gifts and Talents During the Elementary Years.

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.