



Child Builders

Houston's Advocates for Mental Health in Children

Parental Expectations: How do they affect your child?

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Children are born with an innate curiosity about the world. They enjoy exploration and discovery. Ideally, if we as parents simply provide for their safety needs when they are young and foster their joy of learning, our children will thrive and grow on their own. No thwarting of their motivation should occur and they will be successful students as they move through elementary school, middle school, high school and beyond.

So, why do we see so many of our precious bundles of joy hit a stage where their internal motivation for learning ends and they don't like school anymore?

Sometimes parents place unrealistic expectations on their children. A bright child of average intelligence may become discouraged and over time lose that joy of learning and discovery if criticized by a parent whose expectations are too high.

Is the overly critical parent just plain mean? No. It is more likely that this parent cares too much. Perhaps the parents see themselves in their child. In a misguided effort to save their child from repeating their own "failures" they become over protective and over critical. Look at the toddler learning to walk. We see her struggle on unsteady legs and we hold our breath, but when she falls, she gets right back up again and keeps trying. As difficult as it is to let go, children must be free to make their own mistakes, learn their own life lessons and discover their own destiny.

Criticism too soon or too often usually conveys a lack of confidence in the child's learning skills and may result in a loss of self-respect for the child. As parents we've all had those moments when we've jumped in to rescue our child or made some comment that we can see crushes the child's self-confidence. We hear our own critical words echoing in our ears and wish we could take them back.

We must value children for who they are as individuals. Each has their own particular learning style, talents and interests. It is sad to see the youngster whose childhood is stolen because they are living a charade to gain approval from parents. This may occur when a child takes on the dreams of a parent to become an Olympic gymnast or a doctor when it is not really the child's dream at all. It may not be until his/her adult years that such a child painfully discovers his true identity and desires in life.

So, how can we as concerned, loving parents assess our expectations, review our remarks to our children and ultimately learn to relax and enjoy our children for who they are?

Here are a few general guidelines:

- **When you see your child misbehaving, tell them what they can do, not what they cannot do.** “You can roll the ball on the floor inside the house.” This automatically keeps you in a more positive mode and helps your child know what is expected without criticizing or shaming.
- **Remember to comment on your child’s behavior when it is good.** Encourage all the naturally appropriate behavior and kind actions you observe. You may discover that when you change your focus to look for appropriate behavior you will be pleasantly surprised by noticing all the skills your child has learned and how independent he/she has become compared to a few months ago. Recognizing progress that has been made will encourage your child and make both of you feel good.
- **Try to notice something appealing even in the negative behavior** that is irritating you at the moment. A parent shared that she is often amazed at her son’s persistence as he pesters her to obtain something he wants. Even while saying no, she can compliment him on his persistence. After all, that trait will help him to accomplish what he wants in life.
- **When situations change, let your child know directly.** For example, you might say, “Today I have a headache and that whistling bothers me.” This lets the child know specifically what he/she can do to please you without placing blame.
- **Try to be easier on yourself.** If we are self-critical, we are likely to be critical of others, including our children. Awareness of this trait in ourselves can help us hold back from getting overly involved in the outcomes of our child’s endeavors. This brings to mind a father at a soccer game who shared that he had been asked to coach soccer several times, but knew that he was not “easy-going” enough to do the job without putting undue pressure on his own child. Winning was too important to him and if he was the coach, it would have been impossible to separate out the goal of winning the game from that of watching his daughter practice her skills and learn about being part of a team. He had decided it was more important to watch from the sidelines and support his daughter’s efforts.
- **Show by example.** Let your child know that you make mistakes sometimes, too. When you are willing to admit your mistakes or laugh at yourself a little, you and your child will both relax and enjoy your relationship a little more.

Your awareness of what your child needs will help you to avoid the long-lasting negative effects of harsh words. Now you are on your way to supporting your children to grow and learn at their own pace while protecting their sense of self. This is the path of self-discovery that will lead them to become all they were born to be.

ChildBuilders (formerly known as HAMIC), founded in 1974, is a non-profit organization that provides innovative programs to educate parents, children, teachers and the community about the emotional well-being of children and their families. www.childbuilders.org ChildBuilders Community Education.

For further information & referral
call your child's school counselor

DePelchin Children's Center	713-730-2335
ESCAPE Family Resource Center	713-942-9500
Harris County Psychiatric Center	713-741-5000
Jewish Family Service	713-667-9336
Mental Health Association	713-522-5161
MHMRA of Harris County	713-970-7070
NAMI Metro Houston	281-579-3750
United Way of Texas Gulf Coast	211 or 713-957-4357

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