

FAMILY FORUM:

Pressure for Grades

By Margie Ryerson

In Lamorinda, where as Garrison Keillor might phrase it, “all the children are above average,” expectations of ourselves and our children can be quite high. There are many successful high-achievers in our community and naturally the hope is that our children will follow suit. Expectations can be a two-edged sword. They motivate us to aim high, but they can also create too much pressure.

A frequent scenario involves worried parents with an underachieving child. It is very frustrating to know your child is extremely capable, but that he is not utilizing his potential. Janet and Larry came to see me, accompanied reluctantly by their 14 year-old son, Sean. Sean was in ninth grade and getting low B’s and C’s, despite having qualified for the gifted program when he was in elementary school.

Janet and Larry lectured Sean often about the importance of good grades for his future, and became frustrated and then angry when they saw how little effort he put into his studies. Sean interpreted his parents’ concern as nagging and controlling. This family was locked in a power struggle with no end in sight.

In their sessions, each family member was able to express what lay beneath their behavior. Sean learned that what he experienced as pressure was really a reflection of his parents’ worry and love. Janet and Larry saw how their words and actions came across as strong-willed and angry. Sean admitted that he was actually concerned about his grades and getting into college. Once the family felt more united, they were able to formulate a plan for Sean to get additional help. And they agreed on a different approach, with Sean taking charge of school and grades, and requesting advice from his

parents when needed.

For a positive approach to grades, start in the early elementary school years by asking your child what he would like to achieve. Most children at this age want to do well in school. If your child has a learning disability or medical diagnosis that may impede him from doing as well as he would like, help him set realistic goals that he can attain.

If your child succeeds in meeting his goals, celebrate with him in a small way – with praise and a special meal, or doing a special activity together. Giving your child money makes grades more parent-centered, as if they are so important to you that you will pay for them. Help him learn to work for his own intrinsic satisfaction, and not just for external praise and rewards.

If your child does not accomplish his goal, share his disappointment with him and provide encouragement. He may need to adjust his own expectations and get some assistance. Some children work cooperatively with their parents, but others will benefit from an outside tutor or program.

If your child resists getting help, try to stay neutral and encouraging. Timing is important, and some children are not ready to succeed until later. Let him know that your love and respect for him are not contingent upon his academic record. As we all know, there are many definitions of success in our society, and having a loving, supportive family is one of them.

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