

Kids are special regardless of strengths, weaknesses

As parents, many of us have been sold a line by psychologists and other children's experts. We have been taught that however uncoordinated, untalented or disinterested a child may be, there is something out there that he or she excels at, and we need to find it in order for that child to be a whole person who will be able to function normally in life.

Many of us have swallowed this philosophy and have embarked upon a desperate quest to find our child's niche. From a young age we may push our children into sports, art, dance, music lessons and other activities in frenzied pursuit of this evasive yet magical key to success.

I think we're making a big mistake.

At 9 years old, Jasmine has experienced varying degrees of success in such areas as ballet, piano, tap, basketball, ice skating and taekwondo. However, she hasn't excelled in anything. In addition, she has attention deficit disorder and has struggled academically.

"I was at my wit's end," her mom, Sandy, told me. "We tried it all. I found things she loves and she does well, but she's not at the top."



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CLOSE TO HOME

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When Jasmine was 7, Sandy enrolled her in a ballet class that she loved. After a month and a half, she had made several new friends and was doing well in class. However, her instructors decided that she hadn't progressed enough and kicked her out of class.

"She didn't understand," Sandy said. "She still wanted to do ballet. She loved it and felt successful. She was confused and thought she had done something wrong."

Sandy felt better after talking with Jasmine's godfather, who said that academic and extracurricular success were overrated.

He told Sandy that it really doesn't matter as long as Jasmine grows up to be a caring person.

Of course there is nothing wrong with exposing our chil-

dren to worthwhile interests and activities and encouraging them to do their best and excel whenever possible. However, we need to be careful about the messages we are sending them, and even the messages we are believing ourselves.

If we're not careful, our children may come to believe that they are not acceptable, lovable or worthy people until they find something that they can do better than most other people. Subconsciously, we may begin to believe this philosophy ourselves and react to our children based on their performance. We may be approving, positive and demonstrative of our love when they win or achieve, and become disapproving, negative and distant when they lose or fail.

We live in a highly competitive society. We may say that we don't want to push our kids too much or that we don't value competition and winning.

"They don't have to be star athletes, straight-A students or award-winning artists," we may say. But aren't those the kinds of achievements we strive for and celebrate?

I remember when my oldest daughter began playing soc-

cer. At the time, I thought I was a fairly nonchalant parent, especially concerning sports. But I really surprised myself. Once the game began, there I was, along with my husband, cheering her up and down the field, yelling: "Go, Teresa! Get the ball! Kick it! Go!"

Teresa couldn't have cared less. She didn't seem to know who was winning the game most of the time. Meanwhile, my husband and I, along with the rest of the parents, were acutely aware of the score at all times.

Some parents have their kids so busy with activities that the kids don't have time to play in the grass, gaze at the sky or just be kids. Often these children are expected to perform up to their parents' high expectations, and often they do. They may be straight-A students, soccer stars or accomplished pianists. But, so what? Does that make them better and more valuable people? Does that make them kinder, more loving, generous and honest?

On the contrary, successful children sometimes develop arrogance, self-centeredness and feelings of superiority. Since society rewards their achievements, their parents may take on similar attitudes

and believe that they are better parents or that they are responsible for their children's natural talents.

While parents can take credit for helping children develop their gifts, they need to remember that they did not bestow specific talents upon them.

Yes, we live in a competitive society. But when our kids are adults, no one is ever going to want to see their elementary school transcripts, probably not their high school transcripts and maybe not even their college transcripts, much less their trophy collections.

Maybe we should start rewarding acts of kindness, generosity and character traits that will actually make our children better people and more useful citizens. Perhaps we need to encourage our children to go against the grain and be less focused on themselves and their achievements and more focused on others.

As a parent, I have learned that if you are waiting for your child to find that niche of excellence, you probably have not fully accepted your child and maybe you aren't loving him or her unconditionally.

Let's give our kids a break.

Let's love them for who they are and not for what they achieve. In fact, let's love them before they find their niche or even if they never find it. If we are more loving toward our children, consciously or subconsciously, when they do well, they are going to see right through us and question our love and acceptance of them. They may even underachieve or rebel in order to test our love.

I'm not denouncing academic excellence or extracurricular success. But, I do disapprove of society's overemphasis on them, and I believe we need to be careful not to equate a child's self-worth with achievement.

Maybe our children will never succeed academically, athletically or artistically. Maybe they will excel at being a good friend, being honest, kind, compassionate or forgiving. And then again, maybe they won't. Nevertheless, they are still our children and they are special people who should be loved regardless of their talents, strengths, weaknesses or failures.

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