

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - Australia's leading parenting educator

Parenting the family underdog

As a parent it is important to be realistic about what each child can achieve

One of the unwritten laws of family-life is that talent and ability is unevenly distributed between siblings.

In most families there is one child who seems to have more than his or her fair share of ability. Everything some kids turn their hands to—whether schoolwork, sport and socialising – is done successfully and effortlessly.

If you have such a child then there is a fair bet that you will also have a child who struggles in the same areas. For these children achieving success takes more effort and concentration than it does for their sibling.

Just as it is easy for parents to marvel at the talented child, it's frustrating and, at times, heart-breaking to watch your child struggle to attain even mediocre levels of success at school, in their sport or leisure activities.

It's harder still when you know that no matter how hard your child tries they just can't be as successful as their sibling who gets all the glory and accolades from relatives and friends.

As a parent it is important to be realistic about what each child can achieve so keep your expectations relative to their ability and maturity and avoid making comparisons between siblings.

Here are some ideas to keep in mind if you are parenting a child where success, at school, sport and other common childhood activities, just doesn't come naturally.

1. Be your child's cheerleader.

Kids who have to work really hard to achieve need someone in their lives who is able to boost their self-confidence, particularly when they are struggling. **Make a fuss over small successes so they can puff up their chests every now and then.**

2. Focus your comments on contribution, improvement and effort.

It's difficult praising kids when the results aren't there but you can always focus your comments on the processes of their activities such as their contribution to the team rather than kicking the winning goal; improvements shown in reading or the effort they are making at art.

3. Remember that persistence pays.

Children who persist to succeed are learning an important life lesson – that is, success in most endeavours takes effort. **Those kids who sail through their childhoods without raising a sweat can struggle when eventually they do have to work long and hard to succeed.**

4. Help kids identify their strengths.

Kids are like niche marketers – they need to define themselves by their strengths. "I am a good reader," "I'm sporty," "I'm really good at art" are some of the labels kids will use. As they move into adolescence the number of options for success open up quite dramatically, so help them find one or two areas that they enjoy and can achieve success easily, even if it is not in areas that you value highly.

5. Don't put kids on pedestals for individual performance.

It is difficult living in the shadow of a superstar so avoid making a huge fuss over the achievements of a particular child – it can be hell for those who follow and know they can't achieve similar levels. **Recognise results of any endeavour but balance that by focusing equally on their efforts as well.**

Raising kids who find life a breeze is easy. However parenting kids who take longer to mature, or kids that must put in 110% effort to achieve is challenging for any parent.

Raising the family underdog requires parents to focus on kids' strengths, be liberal with encouragement and have realistic but positive expectations for success.

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