

Unlocking Your Child's “Full” Potential...The Right Way

Growing up, I always did well in school. My report cards and test scores were clear evidence of my capacity for academic success. I did so well that I was labelled a “gifted” child and placed in special classes that were supposed to help me reach my “full potential.” And that’s exactly what they got - just not in the way they expected. My guess is that the teachers who recommended me for those gifted classes never really understood the true meaning of the phrase “full potential.” Apparently nobody guessed I could achieve highs AND lows. I don’t want to get into the fine details, but I will say that they pushed my personal potential to its limits in both directions - towards numerous successes and towards a number of failures as well. Some of the successes were small and not very significant, but some of those successes are cherished memories of academic honors, trophies in the trophy case, acceptance into fine universities, and so on. And the same goes for my failures; some were small...and let’s just say that some of them required an attorney. Like I said, be careful what you wish for.

I share that personal background to give some context - and hopefully some credibility - to my perspective. I know what it is like to have adults look to you as the one that the other kids should be like, or to be the one to get the highest grade in the class, and so on. I also know what it is like to see the look on my teacher’s or parent’s face when I failed to achieve at the highest level in any way whatsoever, while other kids got a pat on the back for a B or C. It was a heavy weight to carry as a child, one that most adults will never understand unless they too were pushed towards that elusive “full potential.”

I hope this article will help those of you who do not already know what it means to be pushed towards one’s so-called “full potential.”

Understanding Potential

The key thing that must be understood is that potential can go both ways, towards success and failure. Nobody ever is born only with the capacity for success or failure; there is no “destiny” that a child is heading towards in either direction. This is why I cringe at any statement that is overly confident about a child’s future, or is overly pessimistic. There is always hope, and there is always risk, and it is never too late to change directions - for better or for worse.

JAY LAMBERT MPA MSW LCSW

<http://www.LambertCounseling.com> • jay@lambertcounseling.com • 623.363.3031

© 2009 Lambert Counseling Services PLLC

As obvious as this might seem our culture just doesn't understand this very well yet. I think this may be because so many people see potential as something you either have or that you don't. I disagree. In my opinion, the difference between children is not whether they have potential or not, but how much they have. Those with relatively low potential can fairly be called average, and those with relatively high potential can fairly be called exceptional. We must learn how these different types of children need to be nourished, or we will have very little impact on their outcomes. We will push them towards their potential, sure, but if we aren't careful, we could push them in the wrong direction.

About "Average" vs. "Exceptional" Kids

Before I go further, a word about the terms "average" and "exceptional." Many parents get all bent out of shape if any of their children are ever described as average. Frankly, I think American parents need to relax. By definition, chances are your kids are indeed average, or at least very close to it. That's because being exceptional is, well, exceptional. But that's not a bad thing; personally, I think "average" gets a bad rep. Being average means a kid has a personality that allows them to not be especially demanding of others, to not require an unusual amount of attention, to be satisfied with a much lower level of stimulation, to not always have to win, be first, or be "king of the mountain," and so on. These are "go-with-the-flow" kids. They are not revolutionaries; they are not natural leaders. They are not, well, exceptional. But all the same, these kids are a God-send.

I know some of us think and act as if we want all kids to go to Harvard and be doctors or lawyers or President of the United States, but I say we need to embrace a whole different paradigm. We need to not only accept average kids' lower desires to achieve, but we also need to see that they enrich us all with their stability, predictability, and low-maintenance personalities. If we all were Type-A, "gotta be first, gotta win" kinds of people, this world would NOT be a better place. So please, let go of thinking of average as such a bad thing; embrace it as just a different type of greatness. To me, average kids are some of my favorites. They help stabilize the boat for the rest of us who just can't seem to shut up and sit still. They are our anchors in many ways. We owe them a lot, and I say it's about time we gave them the credit they deserve for keeping the rest of us high-need, intense, over-achievers in balance. Without these average kids, things would be a real mess.

Unlocking Positive Potential

JAY LAMBERT MPA MSW LCSW

<http://www.LambertCounseling.com> • jay@lambertcounseling.com • 623.363.3031

So with all this in mind, it may seem like we should just let kids be kids, and sort of step back and take a laissez-faire approach. I don't recommend that. Potential left to it's own devices is not the answer. All kids still need our love, support, guidance, and the occasional nudge in the right direction. What they don't need is to be pigeonholed and have definitions of success forced on them like labels on food. In that spirit I recommend letting go of the idea of "full" potential, and instead focusing on positive potential. To do that, we need to truly understand their needs and wants, and to see that there are many different ways to be a success.

What this means to me is doing our best to live up to a few simple but profoundly important parenting principles. Please keep in mind that the application of these general principles is more of an art than a science. Every situation is unique, and nobody can claim to have a one size fits all approach to helping children achieve their potential. You must be in touch with your child to know how to best apply these principles. This is not a formula for success...think of it more like an outline for success.

#1: Accept your child's core personality as-is. Period.

There are obviously some things about your child that you can help them improve on, or talents you can support them in developing, and so on, but never forget at their core is a personality that is never going to change dramatically. Be very careful not to push them to change their core personality on accident. It's OK to enforce behavioral boundaries, but asking them to change their personality sends the message that who they are, at their core, is flawed. Few things cause more long-term harm than the belief that one is a flawed person with no hope of change. And few things will get in the way of "full potential" more effectively than this.

#2: Always give them your guidance and input, but ultimately let your child pick their own "success targets" as they get older.

One of the struggles every parent deals with is knowing when to back off and let kids start making their own choices. There is no easy answer. However, one area that we really can focus on that I have seen work wonders is allowing kids to begin making choices about what they want for themselves - especially the exceptional kids. The fact is that a child's "full potential" is an ideal. No matter how good they do, there will always be room for more, and some parents seem to think that pushing them towards perfection or something close to it is the way to go. Talk about a formula for frustration! Instead of setting the bar at 100%

JAY LAMBERT MPA MSW LCSW

<http://www.LambertCounseling.com> • jay@lambertcounseling.com • 623.363.3031

perfection in the hopes that it will spur them to jump as high as they can, try instead hearing what they want to achieve, and ask them how you can help them achieve their goals. Let them start deciding what “success” really means for them and support it.

Now, I know that some of you might have a problem with this. I admit, this one is tricky. What if the kid is OK with D’s? What if they want to stop playing the piano even though they are so good at it? What if they want to do something that limits their future options? What if they want to give up? Each situation is unique, but the bottom line is I would never support failure. I’m just saying we need to be more open to letting the child decide what success means for them.

#3: Use your parental authority to set boundaries, not to micro-manage.

Many parents of exceptional children can become overbearing. They try to direct nearly everything their child does, thinking they need to seek out every advantage they can for their child. And sometimes, it seems to be working because the kid is keeping up with everything that is being thrown at them. But this often backfires. Many high-achievers in high school achieve less than expected in college because their parents never stopped being their coach, day planner, nurse, tutor, and so on - and once the parent isn’t right there, facilitating their every move, things start to fall apart. You are setting your kid up for more problems than they would otherwise have to deal with if you do not give them some wiggle room. An example might be that when your child comes to you with a choice, only get directly involved if the choice is between an option that violates one of your family’s values and one that does not. If it is between two options that are both reasonable - like whether to study for a test or to accept an invitation to a church activity that you know is wholesome - tell them they need to decide. If they ask for advice, weigh the pros and cons, but don’t pick sides - even if you have a preference. Let them work it out in their own mind and come to their own conclusion. Unless there is some danger or the stakes are simply too high, support but do not direct. They need to make some of these choices. Believe me, letting them make a few minor mistakes this way - like not doing quite as well on that test as they wanted to - will teach them a lot more than you forcing them to make the “right” choice every time.

#4: Teach your children through their success, and help them teach themselves through their mistakes.

JAY LAMBERT MPA MSW LCSW

<http://www.LambertCounseling.com> • jay@lambertcounseling.com • 623.363.3031

© 2009 Lambert Counseling Services PLLC

Children learn by being a success, plain and simple. When they fail, they get into self-defense mode (just like the rest of us do) and are not truly open to hearing our enlightened wisdom when they are in trouble. So if they make a mistake, help them walk through the process of understanding it and learning from it for themselves. But when they are successful, this is the time to wax poetic and “lecture.” Talk up their successes and praise them as much as you feel comfortable. Want them to learn about kindness? Teach them about this value when they are being kind. What them to learn about being fair? Teach them when they are being fair. Timing is key when choosing your teaching methods and approaches.

Conclusion

I realize this list is not as specific as some may wish. As I said, these are general principles that you will need to figure out how to apply on your own. In the end, my hope is simply that parents will find themselves considering the concept of potential and how they push their children in trying to fulfill theirs. So often, in seeking to maximize a child’s outcome, they throw away the relationship, their child’s confidence, and more. In the end, the goal of parenting is not to make your children leap as high as they possibly can - it is to help them achieve their greatest happiness and joy in life. If we try to make them into what we think will make them happy, we are probably going to fall short. But if we show them our love and support and help them find what will give them their greatest happiness, we will find our kids turn into what they most want to be. Frankly, I don’t much care about exceptional vs. average, if I know my children know how to set their own goals, work hard to achieve them, and not let others get in the way. What more could I want for them than that?

JAY LAMBERT MPA MSW LCSW

<http://www.LambertCounseling.com> • jay@lambertcounseling.com • 623.363.3031