

EDUCATION: ON BEING “BEHIND”

By Carlynn McCormick

Susie is six and can't count to thirty without missing a few numbers. Johnny has almost finished eighth grade but hasn't started pre-algebra. ***“Oh dear, oh dear, my child is falling behind.”***

Just as one child can be given the label “Attention Deficit Disorder” because some adults cannot tolerate his activity level, so can another child be given the label “behind” because he does not match up with some adults' scholastic expectations.



The definition of “behind” that applies from the unabridged *Random House Dictionary* is: *In the state of making less progress than.* The question parents and teachers must ask themselves is, “making less progress than whom?” When we think this through, we see it is no different than asking “being more active than whom?”

The adults in a child's life should be careful not to put their own expectations or worries about academic progress on their child. The truth is a child is uniquely himself; activity level, scholastic aptitude, cleverness, imagination and every other attribute must be gauged against the individual. When this is understood, labeling a child is no longer appropriate.

Perhaps you understand this concept perfectly and prohibit anyone from labeling your child – but your child labels himself? What can you do?

When a child considers that he is behind, it is because he is comparing himself against someone else or others, rather than against his own potential. This situation must be addressed: you don't want your child feeling unhappy or embarrassed or to lose self-respect because he thinks he's "behind."

Talk with him. Let him know that we all have strengths and weaknesses. Don't evaluate for him. Listen and find out what he considers his strengths and weaknesses to be. You may, of course, guide him to ensure he does not dwell only on weak points.

Then let him know that he need not compare himself to anyone else. Discuss that when one is "behind" in something, it is because *he considers* that he could have done more than he did, or *he planned* to do more and didn't get it all done. What is important here is his consideration about himself and his actions.

Give him the example that if one considers he is behind in his chores it is because he didn't get them all done. In the case of chores, he can simply complete them right away or devise a step-by-step plan to complete them in the near future.

The same is true of learning. If one wishes to know the capital of California, he can simply look it up in an atlas right now; if he wishes to know the capital city of each state in the union, he can devise a plan to research them over a period of time. Have your child give you examples of setting goals and working toward them until they are accomplished. Have him give you examples of how he can apply this to his education. Help him to see that although others can guide him, he is ultimately responsible for being "ahead" or "behind" where he wants to be.

The bottom line – a student should only be in competition with himself. Your child will probably be relieved to know education is not a competitive sport and that he need not judge himself by the accomplishments of others.

At this point, you can show your child how easy it is to use one's strengths to overcome areas of difficulty. He simply needs to find a strong purpose (a good reason) to conquer the difficulty, a decision (intention) to actually conquer it, and the willingness to work at it (practice or drill) until he succeeds. Discuss this with your child and listen to his ideas. Such discussions should increase your child's confidence and help him to be more at home with himself.

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