

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator

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Are your expectations harmful or healthy?

There is no doubt that many parents underestimate the impact of their expectations on kids. It's quite natural to want your kids to do and perform at their best, however not every child will respond positively to parent expectations.



After a recent parenting talk a doctor approached me for a chat. She wanted to know what was happening with kids today. She told me that she sees many teenagers in her practice who are stressed out and worried about things that didn't necessarily concern young people ten years ago.

There's no doubt that many kids today live with pressure.

One recent Australian study found that 59% of teenagers feel the need to reduce stress. This is in line with the University of California study released earlier this year confirming that many American teens feel overwhelmed 'with all they had to do and contend with'.

It's not just teenagers who are feeling a little anxious. Teachers tell me that stress is a constant companion for many primary schooled-aged children too.

There are many possible causes for increased feelings of stress, but I suspect some of it comes from pressure that young people and children put on themselves. This obviously reflects the pressure that can come from others such as parents and teachers for them to perform well in school.

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Getting expectations right

Parental expectations on kids' academic, sporting and other achievements can be tricky to get right.

If they are too high, or at least higher than their capability, then many kids just give up. It's better than trying and failing, which can seem like letting down their parents. Alternatively, they may make excuses for not taking part in an activity, game or sport.

Some children will try to meet abnormally high parent expectations, but their efforts may well come at the cost of anxiety and, in some cases, depression due to excessive pressure. It's hard to always perform at your absolute best all the time. In fact, high achievers in most fields of endeavour know when to coast and when they really need to apply themselves.

Birth order also plays a part in parental expectations. As adult approval is a high driver for eldests, they are more highly influenced by parent expectations than children in any other position. They are also more likely to be perfectionists, which makes them more prone to suffer when parental expectations are excessive. Many first borns become risk-averse sticking to the safe and achievable, which is a great stress-reduction strategy.

Expectations are most helpful when they are realistic and in line with children's age, abilities and their interests. Sometimes we can expect just too much from our kids, for all the right reasons.

Better to have positive, yet achievable expectations rather than expectations that are too high or too low. Getting the balance right will hopefully motivate kids to achieve without them feeling overwhelmed, worried or overly-anxious.

Ideally, all kids will be self-motivated, not needing adults to lead the way. As human nature suggests many kids need a push to reach a little higher. We just need to make sure that the push is not excessive, and the end result is worth pursuing.

How do you use expectations?

So how do your expectations of kids' behaviour and achievement rate? Are they too low, too high or just about right? Do they reflect your own ambitions, or your children's interests and abilities?

Want a simple answer? Ask yourself how your kids would answer these questions. I suspect it will be different for each child, but then again worry, stress and anxiety is different for every child. And it's what your child thinks and feels that's paramount here.

Michael Grose Presentations
PO Box 167 Balmarrig Vic 3926
p + 61 3 5983 1798
f (03) 5983 1722
e office@parentingideas.com.au

parentingideas.com.au
 parentingideas.co.uk
 parentingideas.co.nz
 facebook.com/michaelgroseparenting
 twitter.com/michaelgrose



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