

What a Child DOESN'T Learn . . .

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Sometimes simple questions provoke profound answers. These questions solicit your immediate responses, and those responses multiply when several people are involved in the discussion, expanding on each other's thoughts. Some of these questions will also stick with you, and you will find yourself coming up with additional answers hours, even days, after the discussion. This one will:

If during the first 5 or 6 years of school, a child earns good grades and high praise without having to make much effort, what are all the things he doesn't learn that most children learn by third grade?

This question has been discussed with groups of parents, in gatherings of educators, with students in summer programming, in meetings of superintendents and administrators, and in statewide symposia with key decision makers. The immediate answers are almost always the same. Those responses develop throughout the discussion, and participants leave a bit overwhelmed by the ramifications of the answers. It turns out that what a student doesn't learn can adversely affect his entire life!

Take a moment to answer this question yourself, or have your child's educators and administrators answer it. What isn't learned? As you skim over your answers, you may be surprised at the sheer volume. But look closer and you may be astounded by the depth and weight of those answers—and the impact they make on a child's life.

What Isn't learned?

Work Ethic

Books such as *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back* (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2012) remind us how readily Asian countries are bypassing us technologically, educationally, and economically. One main reason for this, according to Friedman and Mandelbaum, is their work ethic. They know that

education and sacrifice are the paths for reaching a middle-class lifestyle. They look at education as a privilege—and it is.

Everyone in America has the right to an education. Sometimes it seems, though, that our young people would argue that everyone has the right to a PlayStation®4 with unlimited playing time, a cell phone by fifth grade, and a car by 16. They may also argue they are entitled to an allowance and that days off from school are for relaxation and play and not chores. Experts argue that this will be the first generation whose standard of living will not surpass (or even match) their parents' socio-economic level. This is an entitled generation—or so they think.

How a person thinks about his talent and ability has an impact on his actions. Cognitive psychologist Carol Dweck (2007) argues that there are two types of mindset: fixed and growth. Unfortunately many mistakenly believe they are born with a fixed mindset, a certain level of talent and ability that cannot be altered. Rather, people should embrace the growth mindset, a belief that ability, talent, and intelligence are malleable—that they can change through hard work and effort. "Without effort, a student's achievement suffers, if not sooner than later. Thus, it is important for student to value and believe in effort as a vehicle for academic success" (Dweck, 2012, p. 11). Our children must understand that without effort, success is fleeting.

Ben Franklin once said, "Genius without education is like silver in the mine." We could alter that a bit for the 21st-century American young person: "Genius without work ethic is like silver in the mine." No matter how bright, our children will not succeed personally or professionally without a strong work ethic. Working hard at intellectually stimulating tasks early in their lives helps to develop that ethic. This first response is definitely lengthier than the others. That is because work ethic is the cornerstone to success.

Responsibility

Responsibility is conscience driven. We make the choices we do because they are the right things to do. Dishes must be washed in order to be ready for the next meal. The research paper must be done well and on time if we want that top grade. Punctuality helps us keep our jobs, so even though we choose to stay up until 3:00 am to finish a novel, when the alarm sounds a very short 2 hours later, we're up. Each day's responsibilities must be met to be a productive family member, employee, and citizen.

Early in life, we should learn the orchestrating role responsibility plays in our lives. And we also should realistically learn the outcomes when responsibilities are not met. It's all about cause and effect. If children do not live up to their responsibilities and if natural consequences are not enforced, we are not equipping children with this vital virtue.

Coping With Failure

To be perfectly frank, failure for a gifted child is neither an F nor a D. Sometimes it is a B—and sometimes even a mid-A! For gifted children (and for most of us), failure is not meeting the self-imposed expectations. Realistically, though, our greatest lessons in life often stem from falling flat on our faces. Through failure, we learn how to pick ourselves up and continue. We learn perseverance and resilience. We learn that we're not always right and that we don't need to be—that we may discover more through our failures than we ever imagined we could through our accomplishments! Dweck (2007) remarked: "Success is about being your best self, not about being better than others; failure is an opportunity, not a condemnation; effort is the key to success" (p. 44).

When we face obstacles early on, we discover how to separate our identities from the task itself—that means the failure of meeting the goal or accomplishing the task does not equal failure of us as people. Young people, especially those who are

gifted and talented, must learn to take academic risks. They must learn to celebrate the outcome and be able to learn from the failure!

Self-Worth Stemming From the Accomplishment of a Challenging Task

We have all faced obstacles that seemed overwhelming, tasks that seemed too challenging. Giving up was never an option, so we worked and struggled and toiled until finally we overcame that obstacle or completed the task. The intrinsic rewards far outweighed the praise or even the pay earned at the end. We felt good about ourselves, our work ethic, our management skills, our persistence, and our ability. And even if the tangible outcome wasn't the promotion or "A" we wanted, that was secondary to the inner sense of accomplishment and pride we felt.

When students never work hard at challenging tasks, they can't experience those intrinsic rewards. Naturally, then, they focus on the extrinsic rewards. Unfortunately, being in an age of high stakes accountability only reinforces extrinsic motivation for students as they earn pizza parties for improved scores and best effort on statewide testing in the spring. Likewise, by giving them good grades for little effort that merits no intrinsic value, we're depriving them of this life-driving tool.

Time-Management Skills

Adults constantly juggle roles: parent, spouse, child, person, employee/employer, volunteer, neighbor, friend, etc. With each role come demands on our time and energy. Often these demands conflict with each, other requiring us to budget our time carefully. Through experience, we have gained time-management skills by keeping track of the responsibilities of each role, estimating the time needed to meet that responsibility, and then following through. We adjust and readjust based on our experiences.

We know how difficult we make our lives when we procrastinate; likewise we know the sweetness of free time that comes from managing our time well. Young people who don't have to put effort into their work to earn high grades won't understand the time needed in order to develop a high-quality product necessary in more demanding classes, much less the time needed to do a job that would be acceptable in the work environment. Instead of gradually learning these lessons in schools,

they may very well have crash (and burn) courses in the real world.

Goal Setting

We can't reach goals if we never set them, nor can we reach goals if they are unrealistic. We also can't reach goals if we don't have a strategy in place that incrementally encourages us to meet that end goal. Students must have practice in goal setting and goal achievement. Those skills will impact their personal lives, their professional lives, their social lives, and even their spiritual lives.

Study Skills

Time management, goal setting, self-discipline—all of these are embedded in study skills. When children don't need to study (because they already know the information or they have the ability to absorb it as they listen in class), they never learn vital study skills. So when they are presented with challenging material, whether that be in their first honors class or, even worse, in college, they simply don't know how to study! How do you attack a lengthy reading assignment? How do you take notes in an organized fashion? How do you prepare for an exam that covers the entire semester's material? Yes, study skills can be learned, but like most things in life, the earlier we acquire those skills, the better.

Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Skills

Weighing pros and cons. Predicting outcomes of possible choices. Systematically breaking down issues according to importance. Ranking possibilities and importance of criteria. All of these skills come into play when making a decision. All of these skills come into play when problem solving. If children don't ever have experience with this early on in their learning, then when it is time to make decisions about learning and life, when it is time to solve professional and personal problems, they are ill-equipped to do so.

Sacrifice

Yes, I would rather curl up with a wonderful read than dig into my taxes. But if my taxes aren't complete by April 15, I am in trouble. Period. I would rather catch the latest Academy Award-winning film than bulldoze the dirty clothes into the laundry room and lose myself for the rest of the day. But wrinkled, dirty clothes don't go very well with a professional image nor do they encourage lunch mates. As responsible adults, we well understand

sacrifice. Sometimes we sacrifice our free time for our responsibilities. Sometimes we sacrifice what we want to do because others wish to do something else. We fully understand that we must "pay our dues" in life.

But if young people procrastinate on assignments because they really want to finish the Xbox One game or text their friends and their shoddy work earns A's, they're not learning about real life. Excellence requires sacrifice. The IRS won't care that the reason your taxes were late (and incorrect in a couple of places) was because you'd rather spend time reading a novel. Your potential employer doesn't even want to hear the excuse of choosing to watch a movie over preparing your clothing for the interview. Life's not always about fun or about what you want and when you want it. It's about sacrifice and work ethic. It's about working your hardest at challenging tasks.

These answers to the question What does a child not learn? is only partial, and yours may well include values that this one didn't. What's particularly frightening with this one is that these are some of the most important concepts for a successful life. So what does a child not learn when he earns good grades and high praise without having to make much effort? Simply put, he doesn't learn the values and skills needed in order to be a productive, caring person who contributes positively to our world.

Note. This article is a revision of What a Child Doesn't Learn originally published in *The Challenge* (Winter, 2007), pp. 17–19.

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