



PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES FOR INDEPENDENT
SCHOOL PARENTS

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Self-Discipline and Perseverance

by Willy MacMullen

I have been thinking a bit about the role of perseverance in achievement, and I want to suggest this: there are two ways of explaining high achievement, and one way will help our students in a way the other won't, and that way is needed today.

In my last years coaching varsity soccer, I had a boy named Casey, who played two years of soccer for me, and who scored a lot of goals, both in soccer and hockey, and at a rate that was staggering. Little predicted this. I cut him as a middler—clearly I had an eye for talent! I knew he would make the team as an upper mid, and be good, but I would never have predicted what was to happen.

Casey scored more than anyone—at Taft, in the league, in our history, and not just in soccer but also in hockey. He scored a goal a game as an upper mid, and by October in his senior season, it seemed as if everyone wanted to talk about what he was doing. This is where the first story of his success was heard. Teammates said, “He is ridiculous. It’s unfair.” Teachers added, “You can’t coach that; you are either born with it or not.” Coaches said, “That is the kind of God-given talent you just don’t see often.” It was a simple story: Casey had something no one else did.

But there is another story. It is still about a boy who could score goals better than anyone—it is still about a high level of achievement—but it’s a story about perseverance, practice and discipline.

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“Self-Discipline” continued

When September of his senior year arrived, I met with Casey to ask him about what he did to train over the season. I knew he was exceptionally focused, but still, his answer amazed me. Casey said, “Mr. Mac, I know that my left foot was pretty weak, and it was a liability when it came to shooting. So I tried to take about fifty shots a day, by myself.” You need to think about what he just said. Even if he exaggerated or missed a few days, he must have taken a couple of thousand shots—boring, tiring, repetitive practice. That season he obliterated the record, scoring twenty-nine goals in seventeen games. Almost half were with his left foot.

When the winter came, he led a very good varsity hockey team in scoring and was perhaps the most dangerous player in New England, even though he was not one of the biggest or fastest players on the ice. How did he do it? One day he and I were skating and shooting after a practice, and Casey told me, “My dad always said you need to be able to lift the puck on your backhand if you are going to be able to score from in close. So every day I dump a bucket of pucks on the ice and I take backhands, maybe fifty or a hundred a day. I’ve done this for a few years.” You can do the math. With that, he tipped over the bucket and started shooting. Who scored the overtime goal that sent us to the New England finals, and what kind of shot was it? You guessed it.

Perseverance, more than anything, even talent, seems to lead to and explain achievement. That this sounds obvious should not be surprising, but when we look at what perseverance is, we find that there has actually been a lot of academic study on the topic. The answers are not quite what we might expect, and the conclusions really need to be understood by this generation of students. So that is what I have been reading for the past couple of years, first with Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*, and then a lot of other works, including the research of University of Pennsylvania Professor Angela Duckworth, and Geoff Colvin’s *Talent is Overrated*. Collectively, what these writers have to say has a lot to do with the work of those who think that part of educating the whole student has something to do with teaching how to persevere when things are tough.

Gladwell’s *Outliers* is highly entertaining, as all of his works are. What he sets out to do is explain why some people get really good at something when others don’t. It turns out that there are lots of factors, and extraordinary innate ability—“God-given talent”—is not the most important one. Timing and culture matter a lot, but another reason, he posits, is that outliers have just put in more time at their activity than anyone else. They have persevered. Consider how his story of the Beatles in their early years performing as a band explains their success. They were just another band in 1960-1962, but through some luck, they ended up getting hired by a man who owned a club in Hamburg. It was a pretty gritty place, part rock and part strip club, and the Beatles did not perform the typical two-hour sets. Instead, they had to play eight-hour sets, essentially every day. That is a lot of practice. And it was hard work. They made a total of five trips to Hamburg and played 270 nights. By the time they invaded America, they had played 1,200 gigs. Biographer Phelp Norman writes, “They were no good on stage when they went there, and they were very good when they came back.... They weren’t disciplined on stage at all before that. But when they came back, they sounded like no one else. It was the making of them.”

This, Gladwell says, is the “10,000 Hour Rule,” and he gives other examples. It says that given a certain level of talent—and not necessarily a particularly high level—anyone can achieve greatness, but only if he or she works very hard and for a very long time.

I remember thinking a lot about this book after I read it. Even as I had no illusions that a Taft student would in his or her time here put in 10,000 hours on, let’s say, English, I was sure that there was a lesson for teachers who devote their days to trying to find ways to help students work, think, write, figure, paint, sing, perform and play at a high level. And there was a lesson for our students, many of whom find that the habits that have brought them success in the past are not sufficient to succeed at a very challenging school. What Gladwell was saying was very important: that achievement is available to all, at least all who are willing to work really hard. Casey seemed to know this.

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“Self-Discipline” continued

Saying that working hard on tough tasks is more important than being smart is a pretty powerful claim, so we have to probe the hypothesis, and that is what Professor Angela Duckworth has done in her research.

In 2005, she and Martin Seligman published the findings of a longitudinal, multi-method, multi-source study in *Psychological Science* in an article entitled “Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance in Adolescents.” The title alone had me hooked. Their study was conducted with 140 eighth graders, and it examined self-discipline, measured by self-report and parent and teacher report. It is an important study.

The article begins with three questions we have all asked: “What distinguishes top students from others? Are they simply smarter? If so, what explains the wide range of performance among children of equal IQ?”

What they found out is pretty interesting:

Self-discipline measured in the fall, they discovered, “predicted academic performance more robustly than did IQ. Self-discipline also predicted which students would improve their grades over the course of the school year, whereas IQ did not.” I know; you are thinking, “Duh.” But it’s not actually that obvious: a lot of us would have begun by saying, “Ability, primarily shown through testing, will predict performance.”

But ability did not predict well, and this conclusion cut up across gender, ethnic and economic lines, and not by slim margins: Duckworth and Seligman found “correlation coefficients between self-discipline and most achievement indicators significantly higher than and at least twice the size of correlations between IQ and the same outcomes.” In other words, it was not even close. Seligman and Duckworth write, quietly but with understandable satisfaction, “These results suggest that, indeed, self-discipline has a bigger effect on academic performance than intellectual talent.” That sentence should interest all parents who see academic performance as a priority for their children.

Put very simply, in September, if you were going to place a bet on who would be most successful come June, you had better put your chips down not on the boy or girl with the highest IQ, but on the one who was the most disciplined and persevering.

This may seem obvious, but it is not; and it is counter to what lots of people have thought. I think it is actually a powerful and perhaps emancipating truth for our students, because it changes everything. It changes how teachers and parents talk about achievement; it changes what we look for, value and praise; and it changes how students see themselves. It places an emphasis on what can be controlled—attitude, effort, perseverance—rather than on what cannot be controlled: i.e. what you were born with.

I love how Duckworth and Seligman close:

Underachievement among American youth is often blamed on inadequate teachers, boring textbooks, and large class sizes. We suggest another reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential: their failure to exercise self-discipline.... We believe that many of America’s children have trouble making choices that require them to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain, and that programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement.

If you have read enough of these articles, you are struck by these lines; they are unusually editorial and even poetic. When was the last time you read an article in a major

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“Self-Discipline” continued

science publication that spoke of a “royal road” to achievement? It is a terrific and compelling study. It helps explain Casey’s achievement. It says, “Effort trumps ability.”

Let’s turn to a final author, Geoff Colvin, Sr. Editor of *Fortune* magazine, and author of *Talent is Overrated*. It’s a very good book, and it adds to the ideas Gladwell, Duckworth and Seligman explore. The most important idea in the book is not that working hard and persevering matters, though that is part of it. Instead, it is that working in a particular way—“deliberately”—that matters.

Colvin says that it is very hard to prove that specific natural gifts lead to great performance. Really successful people often show no preternatural abilities. Indeed, he writes that compelling evidence for a link between achievement and a “natural gift” in, let’s say, violin playing or chess, is hard to find.

“ ... what explains high performance is “deliberate practice” ”

More importantly, he also says that what explains high performance is “deliberate practice. [And] exactly what this is and is not turns out to be extremely important.... Deliberate practice is hard. It hurts. But it works. More of it equals better performance. Tons of it equals great performance.”

Here’s how Colvin ends his chapter “How Smart Do You Have to Be?”:

What’s surprising is that when it comes to innate, unalterable limits on what healthy adults can achieve, anything beyond those [physical] constraints is in dispute. Clear evidence that non-physical constraints has not been found so far. That fact is profoundly opposed to what most of us believe. We tend to think we are forever barred from all manner of successes

because of what we were or were not born with. The range of cases in which that belief is true turns out to be a great deal narrower than most of us think.

That’s a stunning paragraph and a really important one for our sons and daughters.

Perhaps there is some cheerleading in Colvin, but his research is very good. He’s hardly fluffy. Not everyone is going to reach the highest levels, but he does say that if they do not, it will not be because they did not have the ability:

We’re wrong in thinking...that the exceptional nature of great performers is some kind of eternal mystery or preordained outcome. It is, rather, the result of a process the general elements of which are clear.... There is in fact a path leading from the state of our abilities to those of the greats.... It is extremely long and demanding, and only a few will follow it all the way to its end. No matter how far one goes, however, the journey is always beneficial.

He speaks of a “path” or “journey,” and it’s the same “royal road” Duckworth and Seligman described. It’s available to every student, but there are conditions.

Let me pull this together. Gladwell tells us that outliers got where they did by putting in lots of time; Duckworth and Seligman tell us that high levels of achievement are more closely correlated to self-discipline and perseverance than intelligence; and Colvin argues that a particular kind of practice—carefully designed, feedback-rich, and considerably difficult—can lead to average performers achieving excellence.

I think their collective thinking is needed today. In an age when too many students have been told they were gifted and talented and assumed achievement followed the designation, when most received a trophy for simply showing up at the soccer tournament, when many struggled to work deliberately as they were inefficient and too easily distracted by Facebook and the cell phone—this is the time they need to hear and understand the research.

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“Self-Discipline” continued

The distinction I am making about perseverance and intelligence in high achievement is not merely an abstract one, some intellectual slight of hand. It has everything to do with how an adolescent views himself and faces future challenges. I don't want a Taft graduate entering the global market believing that what she achieves will be determined by what she was born with. If that happens, we have failed. It may not be too much to say that for an adolescent to truly know and believe this truth about effort is to bend the bars of genetics: it is to grant some measure of control over one's life. It is to put a hot and shining light on character. It is to say talent is not destiny; character is destiny. ■

Willy MacMullen comes from a teaching family: his parents are retired college professors and his siblings are private school educators. A graduate of Taft School with a bachelors in American Studies from Yale University and a masters from Middlebury College, Willy began teaching English at Taft in 1983. He served as a dorm head, varsity soccer coach, college counselor, class dean, dean of faculty, and dean of academic affairs. He was appointed the school's fifth headmaster in 2001 and is committed to seeking ways in which schools can intellectually and ethically shape global leaders. Taft was founded in 1890 and is a co-educational boarding school of 560 students from over thirty countries and thirty different states. The school is located in Watertown, Connecticut, with the mission of "the education of the whole student."

How to Help Kids Live Up to Their Potential: A response to Amy Chua, *The Tiger Mother*

Amy Chua's article, "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior," appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* as this issue of *Parenting for Moral Growth* was being finalized. The article coincided with the release of Chua's book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Penguin, 2011) and the glimpse into the larger work it provided appears to have been the publisher's successful attempt to stoke controversy, judging by the outpouring of responses from op-ed columnists and bloggers. Still, Chua's account of raising her daughters to excel crystallizes a central parenting dilemma, one that this issue explores: How to best help our kids practice, persevere, and live up to their potential?

Chua states, "Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America." Her approach suggests that hard work is more essential to superlative performance than raw talent. This is the premise of Taft School Head Willy MacMullen in his piece featuring an exceptionally diligent high school soccer

player. But this young man's success is the result of self-discipline and personal commitment, not a regimen imposed by a parental taskmaster. In Chua's worldview, "children on their own never want to work." Even when their kids balk at completing a necessary task, most parents would reject her extreme outlook.

Balance is important. So is the way we talk and think about striving for the "win," as Chris Funk and David Light Shields of TrueCompetition.org point out. To promote ethical growth, our kids need to see those against whom they compete as deserving of their respect- not adversaries, but allies in bringing out everyone's best game. While Chua stops short of saying so directly, one suspects that the Tiger Mother exhorts her cub to produce the A+ essay or the virtuoso piano recital because doing so leaves classmates or fellow performers vanquished in the face of such superiority. This is the sort of parenting that keeps score.

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“Tiger Mother” continued

Moreover, the hours of monotonous drilling in which a Tiger Mother might engage could be the easy part of parenting to produce a prodigy. As was pointed out by David Brooks (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/18/opinion/18brooks.html?_r=1&emc=eta1), the true challenge is faced when confronting interpersonal settings such as the pre-adolescent girls’ sleepover. This is treacherous terrain that Chua’s daughters weren’t even allowed to traverse, because purely social activities would take time away from “serious” pursuits. Brooks, however, makes the case for honing essential relationship skills. He observes, “Managing status rivalries, negotiating group dynamics, understanding social norms, navigating the distinction between self and group – these and other social tests impose cognitive demands that blow away any intense tutoring session...Participating in a well-functioning group is really hard. It requires the ability to trust people outside your kinship circle, read intonations and moods, understand how the psychological pieces each person

brings to room can and cannot fit together. This skill set is not taught formally, but it is imparted through arduous experiences.” Such as sleepovers.

Finally, one must agree with Chua that delight and self-confidence are the valuable by-products accruing to the child who perseveres with the tricky equation or abstruse text. The *Wall Street Journal* article ends with Chua and her daughter celebrating such a moment of mastery of a demanding piano piece. Parent/child dynamics are as unique as the individuals involved. Ultimately, if Chua’s daughters feel loved and supported, that is an important measure of her success. But the question lingers: Does Tiger Mothering create the optimum context in which mastery can occur? Perhaps not, if the goal is to raise independent, well-adjusted, compassionate high achievers. ■

Julie Stevens is a former school psychologist, teacher and editor of Parenting for Moral Growth.

Excellence, Ethics, and Enjoyment

By Christopher D. Funk & David Light Shields, Ph.D.

As parents, we all want to equip our children for success in life. We hope to provide them with access to a quality education, and instill in them the values necessary to achieve excellence in their academic endeavors. With much justification, we believe that academic excellence is a necessary precursor to quality opportunities later in life. But we also want our children to be good people: caring, charitable, respectful, and responsible. We don’t want them to lie, cheat, or steal, rather to act with honesty and integrity.

Yet all too often we see examples of the tension between these two goals. Politicians may pursue laudable policy goals with non-laudable campaign tactics. Businesses may seek legitimate profit through illegitimate means. Athletes may pursue victory and excellence through illicit performance-enhancing substances. Scholars may seek to raise public awareness about valid concerns through publishing invalid research. We ourselves may even invoke this tension when we repeat a common lament, “Nice guys (or girls) finish last.”

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“Excellence” continued

Certainly, part of the challenge we face as parents is to help our children successfully navigate these treacherous waters. But how can we teach them to value excellence, while maintaining their moral compass? Of course, contests and other competitive achievement settings don't always devolve into problematic behaviors, but how, when, and why do they become ethical, enjoyable quests for excellence?

“ ... one's understanding of the nature and purpose of the competition profoundly influences one's behavior in the contest. ”

At TrueCompetition.Org we believe the answer lies in changing the unconscious lens that we use to think about competition – whether athletic, academic, or economic – and in understanding the precise ways in which our mental framing of competition exerts pressure on us to misbehave. In other words, we believe that one's understanding of the nature and purpose of competition profoundly influences one's behavior in the contest. Part of the difficulty, however, is that “mental framing” occurs outside of conscious awareness. Typically, we are unaware of how our initial, preconscious understanding of competition subtly shapes our subsequent emotions and behaviors.

Ultimately, excellence doesn't come at the expense of ethics and enjoyment. Rather, ethics and enjoyment pave the way for true excellence. To tap into this truth, however, requires that we correctly frame what competition is all about.

“ When we conceptualize opponents [as enemies] it subtly reduces our sense of ethical obligation to them. ”

Two Views, Two Metaphors

Everyone understands competition in subtly different ways. In their book, *True Competition: A Guide to the Pursuit of Excellence in Sport and Society*, co-authors David Shields and Brenda Bredemeier – child development, education and psychology educators – have identified the two predominant organizing principles, or “deep metaphors,” that people use to understand competition. As we shall see, one metaphor is far more common – and more problematic – than the other.

Contest-as-War

One way to think about a contest is to frame it as a battle or war. It is me against you, or us against them. The emphasis in this metaphor is on who will triumph, on who will gain the spoils of victory. This organizing metaphor underlies many familiar expressions: “The two teams battled for supremacy,” “The players are dueling out there,” or “The coach exhorted the team to fight harder.” In fact, this mental frame is so common that we are often unaware that we are understanding competition through use of a metaphor. It just seems natural. How often do we even notice or remark on the war-inspired turns of phrases used by sports announcers?

While contests do share some similarities with wars, we court danger when we focus exclusively – or even predominantly – on those similarities. Thinking through the war metaphor will encourage us to equate opponents with enemies. When we conceptualize opponents in this fashion it subtly reduces our sense of ethical obligation to

them: enemies simply do not rate equal moral consideration. The war analogy also encourages us to exaggerate the importance of

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winning the contest. In wars, the consequences of defeat are so dire that we may accept compromised methods to obtain victory. If we assign this kind of significance to victory in sport or other achievement settings, we risk rationalizing unethical acts.

Although the forces which drive unethical behavior in achievement settings are complex, framing contests as miniature wars help to set the stage for misconduct. Unfortunately, this is by far the most common way to conceptualize contests in our culture. Fortunately, it is not the only way.

Contest-as-Partnership

Another way to conceptualize contests is through the lens of a partnership or collaboration. Phrases such as, “They brought out the best in each other,” “Her opponent made her better,” or “He played up to the level of his opponent,” all highlight the way in which contests are partnerships between contestants. They emphasize our opponent’s importance in our own development, and hint at the mutually-beneficial nature of contests: i.e. both contestants can improve and perform well, even though only one can ostensibly ‘win’.

Again, our use of this metaphor for understanding competition often goes unnoticed, but it too has far-reaching implications for the way we behave. A mental equation very similar to the one above occurs – opponents are conceptualized as partners or collaborators – but with far different results. Partners do rate equal consideration. This time the transference humanizes our opponents, increasing (or at least maintaining) our ethical obligation to them. This frame of reference also places greater emphasis on personal and developmental goals, such as skill mastery, self-improvement, and performing to the best of our capability. In focusing on process rather than outcome we achieve a double-goal: we mitigate our incentive to engage in problem behaviors and we improve our performance (more on this in a moment).

When and how do competitive contests become ethical, enjoyable quests for excellence? Many factors are involved, but we believe conceptualizing opponents as partners, and broadening our understanding of ‘winning’ to include developmental goals is an essential component of this process. While this conceptualization of opponents and contesting is certainly less common in our culture, it is very much present, and is something we can all access and build upon.

Performance Implications

One of the most common justifications for the ‘contest-as-war’ metaphor is that it improves performance. True, conceptualizing opponents as enemies can activate powerful negative emotions which can be channeled into performance motivation. It is common in sport to believe, “you have to be bad to be good.”

While this belief system isn’t entirely inaccurate, it misrepresents and distorts what we know about motivation and performance. A great deal of research has been done

on maximizing performance, and one common finding is that we perform best when we are focused entirely on performing. While that may seem obvious, it has important implications. Negative emotions, rather than concentrating our focus on performing, tend to distract competitors by calling their attention to interpersonal

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dynamics with opponents. How often do we see an athlete overcome with anger at an opponent lose focus, and begin to play poorly? Similarly, the war metaphor heightens focus on outcomes, again taking attention away from the immediate performance situation.

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“But isn’t winning important?” people often say when we talk about the importance of reframing competition as a partnership rather than a war. Indeed, winning is the goal of the contest. But the reason to have a contest is even more important than winning the contest. The reason for having contests in the first place is to provide an opportunity for everyone to develop, to test their limits, to expand their capabilities, to find enjoyment in the strenuous pursuit of worthy goals. Moreover, winning itself is most likely when winning is not perceived as the ultimate goal.

Conceptualizing opponents as partners helps to free us from the tyranny of negative emotions. It frees us from obsession with outcomes. True competitors, whether in sports, school, or business, focus on mastering their craft, not defeating enemies. The two may sound similar, but they are profoundly different. Only when competition is viewed as a partnership will excellence and ethics walk hand-in-hand.

Where do we go from here?

By necessity, this article barely scratches the surface of the complexity involved in how we understand and respond to competitive situations. Many key differences between the two frameworks under discussion (and other developmental details) have been glossed over. For a much more comprehensive treatment, we recommend reading

True Competition. Beyond merely providing a more detailed representation of each framework, Shields and Bredemeier offer invaluable practical advice on what we can do as adults to ensure that our children can ultimately compete – and achieve – without compromising their values. ■

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David Light Shields, Ph.D., founder and executive director of TrueCompetition.org, is also an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Previously, he was codirector of the Mendelson Center for Sport, Character, and Community at the University of Notre Dame. In 2007, he was named a Sport Ethics Fellow by the Institute for International Sport in conjunction with National Sportsmanship Day. Together with his wife, Brenda, he is the author of True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society. They also co-authored Character Development and Physical Activity (Human Kinetics, 1995). In high school and college, David was a track and field athlete.

Self-Efficacy, Motivation, and Resilience

by David Streight

Self-efficacy is a relatively new term in the child-rearing and education lexicon, yet few concepts should be dearer to our hearts. It is important because it affects both motivation and the ability to bounce back (resilience) after setbacks. In essence, self-efficacy refers to a child’s belief about his or her abilities to carry out a task. Some children are confident in their abilities, others are not. Whether we are confident or not affects the amount of time we are willing to put into a project—or whether we even start the project in the first place.

Happily, there are ways that parents can help children develop self-efficacy, so let me pass along four suggestions from the experts.

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“Self-Efficacy” continued

Help your child combat negative beliefs

There is substantial detail about how to do this—and why it is important—in Martin Seligman’s *The Optimistic Child*, which I highly recommend. It entails listening closely to our children’s talk that suggests they have negative beliefs about themselves, the world, and or their ability to change. When you hear your child say things like “I’m dumb,” “I’ll never be any good at anything,” “Everyone’s out to get me,” of similar utterances, listen carefully. To what extent is this statement reflecting current feelings because of something that just happened, and to what extent is it reflecting an enduring belief (psychologists call them “core beliefs” because they come from deep inside, where we are often unaware of them)? If you suspect the latter, help your child bring that belief to the surface, and then teach him or her to look for evidence to combat the belief. Even adults suffer from irrational core beliefs, and they sap both energy and joy from life.

Help your child set realistic goals and strategies for achieving them

Children learn self-efficacy through experience. The more they accomplish the more confident they feel about their ability to succeed in their undertakings. The more they fail..., well, the opposite happens. If your child is lacking in either self confidence or motivation, it can be bolstered by additional experience in success. And parents can improve levels of success by helping make sure that goals are realistic. Perhaps even more importantly, parents can be of service in helping their children devise strategies for success when they set their realistic goals. Ask your child what the hardest thing about this project might be. What kinds of obstacles might be encountered? Questions like “So what’s a good thing to do if you run into an obstacle?” can be helpful. Let the child come up with ideas first, then add one or two that you might think of. This adds to the child’s repertory of strategies.

Help analyze successes

Children who are low in self-efficacy too often feel like their failures are due to their own incompetence or stupidity (the negative core beliefs you should help them challenge, per the first suggestion above). On the other hand, when they meet with success, these children too often attribute the success to the task (“It was easy”) rather than to their own competence. We need to help them see the disconnect between “I failed because I’m

stupid” and “I succeeded because the teacher graded easy this time.” Overcoming this disconnect will not come immediately, but we can assist by helping children analyze the success: you studied a lot, you got a good night’s sleep, you told me you thought you knew that pretty well, you had a plan for succeeding this time, and so forth. Some experts suggest that children keep a journal of successes, including how they happened, or make a list that they can use to remind themselves that success does often come. Parents can help with all of these strategies.

Praise the process, not the product

Self-efficacy can be greatly enhanced by focusing on process, not product. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck addresses “fixed mindsets” versus “growth mindsets,” closely related to this suggestion. We do our children a far greater service when we say “Congratulations! You got an A on that paper because all that hard work paid off.” Praise the planning, the strategizing, the work that went into the project, the discussing that preceded. What not to praise: intelligence. Why? Because the latter suggests that the child was born with it, and it will not change. The former suggests that regardless of whatever abilities we might have been born with, most of our intellectual and academic skills are the result of our learning, our practice, in short, our growth. And when we know we can grow through our efforts, then we have more incentive to keep working. ■

David Streight is Executive Director of the Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education

For more about self-efficacy, see:

Karen Reivich, “Promoting Self-Efficacy in Youth,” *NASP Communiqué*, Vol. 39, #3
November 2010

Seligman, Martin et al., *The Optimistic Child: A Revolutionary Program that Safeguards Children against Depression & Builds Lifelong Resistance* (Houghton Mifflin, 1995)

Carol Dweck *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House, 2006)