

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My grandson's school gives every kid a ribbon on Field Day just for participating. The same is true for his club basketball team. Every kid got a little trophy just for showing up (They had a terrible season.). When I was young, we had to actually earn a ribbon or trophy. Awards were for the best. We didn't get a reward for doing what we were supposed to do. How can I challenge my grandson when his parents and his world seem to want to equalize and reward everyone for not doing much of anything?

ANSWER: Now-a-days, in an effort to protect self-esteem, we often drift into the ridiculous. For a time, self-esteem was thought by many in the academic and psychological community to be the panacea for all behavioral ills. It was hypothesized that all we need do is lavish praise, build up a child's self-esteem, and performance, motivation and acceptable behavior would follow. How has that formula worked for our society?

I do believe there is a place for rewarding participation, but it should generally go extinct after about age 6. (This is of course a generalization. Are there kids who would need a participation self-esteem boost who are older than 6? Sure. Are there kids who are so defeated that they need every and any opportunity to improve their self-esteem? No doubt!)

For most kids*, however, I believe healthy self-esteem comes through genuine accomplishment. Kids figure this out pretty early. Parents should work hard to find **specific areas** of true accomplishment for their particular child, so the child can experience the joy that comes from accomplishment and reap the fruit of earned self-esteem**. Most kids after age 6 recognize hollow rewards and empty accomplishments. I have watched kids literally "trash" their participation awards. They understand at an early age who is really the best, the fastest, the strongest and the smartest...and who has accomplished something truly measurable and valuable. All they have to do is watch the Olympics and see there are only three people on the podium, and one is conspicuously higher.

When mediocrity is consistently praised, excellence is never attained. Kids get confused about what constitutes excellence. Why do more when mediocrity is not only enough, but is actually praised and rewarded?

Certainly, when a child is very young, parents need to praise and encourage kids often. However, as the child grows, praise for mediocrity should decrease directly as praise for true accomplishment (real challenges) takes over. Praise should come less frequently, but with passion and intensity when the accomplishment is truly laudable. The goal is to equip kids for the adult world. Praising mediocrity produces emotionally fragile and lazy young adults with entitlement attitudes. (Transforming the mundane into something laudable and noteworthy is what Facebook is for...pardon the sarcasm.)

How fast this transitional change happens is a function of each child's abilities, gifts, opportunities and experiences. (Know your child well!) But, this change in praise should not be seen as optional. Parents are not loving their kids in the best of ways if they remain stuck in the "praise because you show up" mode. The real working world is not like that mode (At least not yet.). As a parent, I want to equip my kids for life, not cloister them or give them a false sense of accomplishment that will be dashed by reality sometime in the near future. I want them to find a measure of excellence unique to them. **Parents should watch for and even create opportunities for their kids to genuinely shine.** Then parents' praise is real, and kids' self-esteem is genuine. As grandpa, you will have to watch and create such opportunities for your grandson too! Then, your sincere praise to him will be a powerful character shaper and motivator. He will actually value your praise more, because he will understand it is connected to real accomplishment and is not so easily granted. Every grandson longs for such praise.

That said, for mature believers in Christ, the desire for self-esteem is just not very important. Knowing how much we are loved and valued by God, that He would send His Son to save us, is enough—overwhelmingly enough--transformationally enough. Self-esteem is a "given," that is not much thought about, because we now want to esteem Christ! (e.g. "Of course I have great self-esteem...now I want to talk about Jesus!")

*This article addresses kids without special needs or special circumstances that require rewards, praise and acknowledgements in greater quantities.

**One could argue that positionally, self-esteem is given to us by God through His Son, Jesus. On the one hand, we are very valuable "fellow heirs" with Christ, sons and daughters of the King! We should have great self-esteem. That said, the mature Christian no longer obsesses so much about himself; he is satisfied and content with all he is in Christ. On the other hand, in the day-to-day living out of this positional self-esteem granted to us by God's grace, we work hard ("as if serving the Lord" EP 6:7) and strive for excellence, thereby reaping the benefits of practical and measurable accomplishments here on earth. God allows us the double benefit of both bestowing self-esteem and experiencing accomplishment as we live life for Him.

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