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Tips for Parents: Learning the Inner Game of High Achievement

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There is a level of achievement at which further talent development takes more than ability and hard work. It requires psychological preparedness, mental and emotional skills that drive performance. Research tells us that there are seven mental competencies that drive performance:

- A tolerance for stress or anxiety
- A willingness to work at the edge of one's competence (risk taking)
- SMART goal setting
- Mental rehearsal
- Mood management
- A positive explanatory style, and
- An ability to resolve the need to belong with the need to achieve

These are the skills that keep our focus sharp, order our attention, and keep us engaged in the learning process. They are not innate, but can be trained. If we want to help our children realize their potential, we need to be intentional in our efforts to help them learn these mental skills for high performance.

Fear often gets in the way of high achievement. As competition intensifies and stakes rise, so does stress or anxiety. Children who have no strategies for keeping a lid on their anxiety will not be able to do their best.

It doesn't matter how much stress a child feels, or how their stress affects him or her, the steps for learning to keep a lid on anxiety and to maintain it at levels that keep you working hard are the same. It's easy to learn to manage anxiety. It just takes practice.

Children simply have to learn how

- to breathe,
- to relax, and
- to keep moving toward the things that scare them

These are easy to teach, easy to learn, and with practice, can make an enormous difference in a child's capacity to work hard toward high goals.

High achievement also requires a willingness to get out of your comfort zone and work at the edge of your competence. We know that the best learning takes place when children have to reach and have the supports in place to accomplish their goals. To improve, children must work at a level that requires them to make an effort, and they must work with others who have similar interests, ability and drive.

This requires risk.

The farther a child moves along the trajectory of achievement, the more uncertain outcomes become. It is impossible to go from good to great without taking realistic risks, without a willingness to move out of one's comfort zone toward the edge of competence.

Understanding the relationship between risk taking and achievement, and evaluating one's willingness to work at the edge of competence are the starting points for moving out of one's comfort zone onto the edge of competence.

Since we know that motivation and achievement are affected by goal setting, isn't it surprising that most of us do little more than give it lip service? Goals affect performance and motivation in three ways:

- They focus attention
- influence persistence, and
- energize people

More challenging goals tend to lead to higher performance than less challenging goals. That's one of the reasons why it's very important to keep your expectations high for your children.

The acronym SMART, stands for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. You can use this on a daily basis to

focus your children on their highest priorities. When children feel excited and empowered to take charge of their learning and their lives, they become much more engaged in the learning process. Children need frequent feedback about their performance toward specific goals in order to adjust their effort or strategy. Without feedback, they have no way of knowing how they are doing.

Terry Orlick, a well known sports psychologist, says that when your performance falls apart, it usually falls apart in your head first. Mental rehearsal means to practice in your mind. Research on mental rehearsal draws three strong conclusions:

- Mental rehearsal is better than no practice at all
- Mental rehearsal in combination with physical practice is more effective than either in isolation, and
- Mental rehearsal enhances confidence and self-control more than motor tasks

Mental rehearsal can also help with relatively simple but challenging tasks, like giving an oral presentation or having a difficult conversation. The ability to visualize a desired performance in one's head improves achievement.

Why do some talented people persevere through challenges while others give up easily? A key factor is their explanatory style, or how they interpret success and failure. Children who blame themselves for their losses, who catastrophize setbacks, and who think that the causes of disappointments will last forever achieve much less than children who attribute losses to external factors, who limit the effects of setbacks, and who view a disappointment as a challenge to be conquered.

Researchers agree that explanatory style can be shaped. It's possible to become more optimistic, to learn to bounce back more easily after failure experiences. To build optimism in our children, we must understand its three dimensions, evaluate our children's explanatory styles, and use language and exercises that coach kids toward greater optimism.

Mood directly impacts our attention and our ability to control our minds.. Consistent performance at high levels requires the ability to keep arousal within an optimal zone of functioning for the task.

Elite performers understand their mood very well. They master strategies that enable them to efficiently enter and exit their best mood states in order to give an outstanding performance every time.

The role of mood management in achievement has been especially well investigated among athletes and creative achievers. Studies find that people who are consistently highly productive over the long term are generally people who keep themselves free from troubling mood states. They keep themselves in the zone – the state of optimal functioning.

There are nearly as wide a range of tools for mood management as there are individuals. You can raise your children's awareness of their own mood patterns and how they relate to their achievement.

Conflicts often arise in talented children when their achievement values are not shared by their mainstream culture. When this happens, children struggle to reconcile conflicting messages about what goals to pursue. For instance, smart girls hear messages like,

- Be smart, but don't be too smart

Talented youth from some racial or ethnic backgrounds might hear:

- Achieve, but don't act white

And kids from working class or poor backgrounds often hear:

- Why do you have to go to college?

We know that many talented youth need pointed assistance in negotiating two or more cultures simultaneously and we know that there are supports and interventions that help. Children need to explore issues of identity and achievement, to listen to achievers older than they are talk about the psychological costs of success. They need cultural brokers, adults who understand gender, class, or racial cultures well enough to explain cultural symbols in a variety of contexts, to talk them through potential conflicts, and to build bridges across contexts. And they need direct instruction in the social skills required to negotiate a variety of contexts.

The difference between a good performance and a great performance is often mental. The highest levels of performance are reached when talented individuals have the basic psychological skills necessary to keep moving along the trajectory of achievement. We should involve ourselves in helping our children discover the mental patterns associated with their best and less than best performance.

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