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Tips for Parents: Learning the Inner Game of High Achievement

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Source: Davidson Institute for Talent Development/Young Scholars Seminar 2007

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

