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Achievement Demands

Regularly communicating or enforcing excessive or inappropriate expectations for children can cause serious behavior disruptions, anxiety, depression, or any of a wide assortment of other problems. In our culture there currently is a common tendency or trend toward misguided behavior and achievement expectations both at home and in school, which easily creates overwhelming demands or places harmful pressure on our children. This is usually based on misconceptions regarding healthy child development or misunderstanding of the individualized strengths and limitations of each child. One critical need for both teachers and parents of all socioeconomic levels in their work to support the healthy development, learning, behavior, and mental health of their children is to gain a functional understanding of child development, developmental needs, and appropriate expectations for their children at the different stages of development. The second need is to acknowledge, appreciate, and support both the strengths and limitations of each child, in turn tailoring emphases, encouraging skill development in areas of interest and strength, and helping the child find ways to use strengths in compensating for limitations.

School is second only to family in influencing a child's development, health, and quality of life. Educational expectations in our school system in many ways have become developmentally inappropriate, especially at the younger age and grade levels. Children of all ability levels are affected. For some reason the idea of "the earlier the better" has become very popular in our approach to education, even among education professionals and policymakers who should know better. Human development roughly follows a progression of qualitatively different stages covering certain age ranges. The nature or quality of developmental attainment and ability at each stage is different, while growth within each stage maintains the more continuously progressive course. The basic stages and their general age ranges of child development are similar for all children regardless of intellectual ability levels, and no child can effectively engage in behaviors or learn skills that are beyond his developmental level. This has nothing to do with how intelligent the child is, it is just the nature and reality of child development since development is as much stepwise as continuous in its progressive trajectory. Children's abilities or skills within each developmental stage can be enhanced through education, positive support, and enrichment, but child development is not solely a gradual progression that can be sped up by increasing learning demands at earlier ages. Trying to do so generally does not actually accomplish anything even if the child seems responsive, and it can be very harmful for many.

Child development, including the ability to learn increasingly complex or abstract concepts and procedures, is not solely a gradual progression that can be sped up by increasing exposure and learning demands at earlier ages. Trying to do so generally does not actually accomplish anything even if the child seems responsive, and it can be very

harmful for many. Trying to teach a child to do something that by nature is only appropriate for an older developmental stage is unhealthy for the child, generally unproductive, and easily destructive. In our drive to do this, our curricula at the earlier grade levels have become focused on memorizing facts and procedures without exploring and developing understanding and purpose of the concepts. Trying to memorize information without conceptual understanding is difficult, meaningless, and counterproductive for any child. Within current grade-level standards, the concepts underlying the facts and procedures are often beyond the development stages and grasps of the students, creating unnecessary and excessive frustration.

Educational practices of this sort easily create frustration and anxiety in students, without engaging true learning and understanding, curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. This becomes a hindrance to growth and progress for many, and can be a source of anxiety. Even for those who seem to master the procedures, it can engender disinterest, reduce motivation and engagement in learning and achievement, and create a bad taste for school. To facilitate the growth and success of each child, all learning must be within the child's instructional range (both accessible and challenging, not too easy and not too hard), with emphases on concept formation, understanding, and meaningful applications rather than just drilling for memorization. When a student acquires a foundation understanding of the concepts from the start, ongoing skill development with increasing complexity is attainable, and remembering the information and procedures become more manageable. Absent understanding, the procedures become confusing and overwhelming as the complexity or abstractness of the processes and demands increase.

Very unfortunate concomitants to excessive achievement expectations are inappropriate behavior expectations combined with punitive discipline practices. For some reason we want to not only believe that young children can learn concepts and procedures that are inappropriate for their developmental level, we also seem to want to demand that younger children act like older children. Younger children are expected to sit and attend to academic instruction (often in lecture style) for extended periods of time, staying still and quiet the entire time; maintain unquestioning, immediate compliance with all directions; sit for twenty minutes or more at a time focused entirely on worksheets or other inappropriate academic tasks without getting distracted, making noises or calling out, talking with their neighbors, reaching for much more engaging items around them, playing with their pencils, and so on. When they are unable to do such things, responses from caregivers, other authority figures, and even peers can be punitive or demeaning even though the children are behaving normally. My response to many of the behavioral expectations placed on young children is that when I actually see a child behaving entirely as expected I become scared for the child.

A third serious error in our education trends that can create anxiety-related problems is our push for all students to achieve in narrow ranges and limited areas of study, ignoring the tremendous individual variability in strengths and weaknesses. Every child has different learning strengths and weaknesses, as well as different interests and needs. Many children do well in STEM subjects, while the learning strengths of many other

children are in different skill areas that are just as important. When a child's educational experience focuses almost entirely on material in areas of weakness, or even disinterest, without also including skill development in areas of strength and interest, all kinds of achievement, behavior, adjustment, and developmental problems can result, including anxiety. In the end, if everyone in our society were techies, engineers, scientists, or mathematicians, we would be in huge trouble. As a young person starts out in life, introducing the multifaceted and diverse richness and opportunities of his world through exposure and introduction to a wide array of skills, understandings, societal conditions, and cultural phenomena and allowing him to delve more deeply into areas of personal interest without pressure or judgment from others, facilitates the creation of an individualized path towards self-confidence, life satisfaction, health, and wellbeing.