

Parents and Professionals as Partners: A Psychologist's View

by NANCY M. ROBINSON, Ph.D.

As a psychologist who works with families of gifted children (in my state, known officially as *highly capable children*) I'm witness to a great many battles between home and school that could and should have been avoided. In my view, a very high priority needs to be given to establishing a working partnership among parents and all the other adults—from bus drivers and Little League coaches to teachers and principals—who share responsibility for children. Whether or not these adults are doing a good job, whether or not they are able and/or willing to be flexible in meeting children's needs, whether they are personally suited to do what should be done—in terms of ability, knowledge, energy, creativity, or leadership—affects how *hard* your task may be but doesn't affect its *importance*. Parents' priority is in promoting their children's welfare, and the only way to assist rather than to detract from that process is to set up a positive partnership, with the stress on *positive*.

I was saddened recently by a letter I received from the father of a child I had seen in my clinic. He happened to have been a high-school teacher of two of my own children. He wasn't the best teacher they ever had, but he was far from the worst. He recalled an incident, at least 20 years before, in which my husband and I had, in casual conversation, thanked him for his efforts on behalf of our children. He said that such "strokes" didn't come very often. This good and honest man deserved more strokes, more parents acting in partnership. He isn't a teacher any longer; I can guess why.

For the sake of simplifying matters and because teachers spend so much time on the front line, let's talk about partnerships with teachers. Everything else here holds true for your relationships with other adults as well—in schools, in clinics, in scout troops, in Little League, in music lessons or gymnastics, whatever.

First, you need a mantra, something to repeat over and over to yourself. It might go like this:

This person sincerely wants to help my child.

This person is doing his/her best.

This person sees the world—and my precious offspring—from a different perspective than I do.

This person and I can negotiate.

This person is my PARTNER!

The first two parts of this mantra are givens. They don't say that this person is doing a superb job, only that the person is trying. And this is very likely to be the case. People don't go into teaching for the money, to be sure, nor do pediatricians, child psychologists, or scoutmasters. There's not a lot of prestige connected with these positions and there aren't many perks. People choose these careers because they like children (and maybe even like parents), because they see the formative years as being significant, because they want to make a contribution to the lives of others.

And then they do try. But of course there are barriers to their accomplishing everything they hope for. They may not have a natural talent for teaching; in any case, all teachers have to work at it. They may be discouraged by how drained they feel at the end of the day. They may have so many troubled children to deal with, and children who have trouble learning, that they can hardly attend to anyone else. They may have troubles at home and their own children to care for. It's a reasonable assumption that most people do their best, most of the time, teachers included.

Different Perspectives on Children's Behavior

There are a number of reasons why your child's teacher may have a different perspective of the situation than you do, aside from the stressful factors above. Children sometimes act very differently at home and at school. The child who is lively and interesting in a child-centered home may have trouble being a follower in a large group; conversely, the child who chats away comfortably at home may be shy or withdrawn in a busy classroom. Your "angel" may become bored, inattentive, and irritated, clown around, refuse to do work that seems babyish, and even miss out on work that is more challenging. One four-year-old was brought to my clinic because her preschool teachers feared she was autistic; she sat, speechless, doing the same four-piece fruit puzzle day after day. What was wrong with this highly gifted child was the lack of fit with the preschool environment and her subsequent deep discouragement. Once placed appropriately, she

became the sunny, enthusiastic, creative, and curious little girl in school that she had been at home.

The high-energy, actively curious child can be trying indeed in a group, leading the teacher to suspect *hyperactivity*. And, furthermore, the bright child—even a sedentary bright child—uses up regular class assignments and special projects, anything the teacher introduces, at an amazing rate. More advanced resources may not be readily available, especially as the child approaches the upper grades of the school. Pretty soon, your child begins to be seen as a burden, and things go from bad to worse.

Children's natural temperament and sensitivities can also look very different in a group setting than at home. The best-hearted of bright children is likely to have to cope with incessant irritation at the slow pace of things and see their slower-learning classmates as "unwilling to listen" as the teacher goes over and over the same point until they get it. Some children are used to criticism and not getting things right the first time; bright children unused even to temporary defeats may be crushed by a remark that another child would take in stride, or may be outraged by a teacher's remark to a classmate.

A teacher may be well pleased by a performance that leaves you and your child lukewarm, accusing your child of being "perfectionistic." High standards—both yours and your child's—are absolutely essential to getting anywhere significant in life; a child deserves a chance to celebrate a fine performance that results from really hard work. Since a teacher is likely to see "perfectionism" as neurotic and conscientiously to try to discourage it, your child may well be caught in the middle, maybe seen as uppity, demanding, and unwilling to be a child. Perfectionism can be a trap, in fact, when children avoid opportunities that fall outside their areas of "instant expertise," but high standards alone are not neurotic!

Bright children's social relationships may also look different to a teacher than to the children themselves. For example, because they realistically see

themselves as different and because everyone is "supposed to" be the same, bright children may conclude that there is something wrong with them and try desperately to be just like everyone else. Or, despite getting along well with classmates, they may feel lonely and isolated because they long for more mature friendships (more intimacy, more loyalty, more long-term stability) than their agemates are able to give.

Finally, because bright children are likely to be teased as "nerds" or worse, too many of them do learn to be what I think of as "professional victims." This situation can be exacerbated if parents fall into the trap as well, blaming other children and teachers rather than teaching coping skills. At all costs, parents need to teach their children not to fall into the victim role, to develop calluses, to respond with strength and dignity, and to keep an independent view of themselves as strong problem-solvers.

Different Perspectives on You!

Unbelievably, a teacher may see you, the dedicated, selfless, and supportive advocate, as "pushy!" You, your spouse, and your children know that you aren't pushing; you are running to keep up! Some of the responsibility for your child's advanced development is yours, of course—take credit for it—but at the same time, remember to be the partner!

Different Perspectives on Children's Development

Teachers and principals want the best for your children, but they may view development from a different perspective. They may sincerely believe, for example, that "age is everything," and that it is inevitably socially and emotionally harmful to children to be placed with older students. They may expect gifted children to be perfect and see any problem (even short stature) as enough to scuttle accelerative solutions. They may believe that early giftedness is only transient, not a predictor of things to come. And, with today's school reforms, they may mistakenly see both ends of the normal

curve as mirror images, concluding that if inclusion is good for slower children it must also be good for the brightest. I would disagree with all these assumptions, but I respect the honest and generous conviction with which they are held.

What You Can Do at Home

As a partner with the school, there is much you can do at home to help your child to adopt habits and expectations that make for excellence in school achievement. You can (and should) play an authoritative parenting role—don't be a dictator, but don't be a laissez-faire parent. Establish rules and keep them; don't get into endless battles about issues. You can always negotiate rule changes—for next time. Help your child not only to respect but to trust adults, to assume that rules matter, to hold high standards for themselves, to do their homework promptly and well, to plan ahead, to seek further goals above and beyond those assigned in class. Try to find an area in which your child shows talent and encourage him or her to reach for excellence through long-term commitment and practice. Children who come from families with high expectations but simultaneous warm support tend to realize their talents to a degree that other children do not.¹

And, above all, do *not* criticize teachers at home. Let your children know that you are willing and happy to try to improve the situation and that every teacher has many competing agendas to balance—but don't criticize teachers' skills or good will in front of children! I tested a seven-year-old recently who told me, "The school system is not meeting my needs, and neither is my teacher." I wonder where he heard that!

You may need to do a good deal of interpreting to your children of the situation they're facing. It may seem obvious to you, for example, that some youngsters (yours) are ready to move ahead faster than the others because they have the school-wise ability, not just the will, but even bright children don't always understand this. Your pre-

teen or adolescent may be feeling that being different is being wrong, and need your perspective and support. It is especially important, when children move into more challenging situations than they are used to, such as special classes, that their parents let them know that being top of the class is not necessary to their mental health and that, indeed, the disorientation they are feeling is a natural response to being—at last—with “real peers.”

What You Can Do at School

Aside from the real contributions you can make by volunteering your time and skills at your children's schools, you need to develop a full set of negotiating skills to help the school achieve an optimal match between your children's readiness to learn and what is offered and expected. Take the position that you are not asking for a *better* education for your children (and don't ask for smaller classes, better trained teachers, or more expensive resources than other classes have) but the *most appropriate* match from among the resources available in the system.

Let me recommend a slim volume about negotiating skills in which you are bound to find something helpful: Roger Fisher and William Ury's *Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*.² Most people, as these authors point out, think they must be “hard bargainers” in order not to be taken for softies or pushovers. As a consequence, they tend to force others into taking and defending positions rather than agreeing upon a common goal and moving toward it. These authors suggest a number of steps in the negotiating process that focus on the objectives, help people to understand one another's assumptions and problem-solve rather than taking intractable positions, and fine-tune matters as they go along. They suggest that the effective negotiator is a “principled negotiator.”

It may be helpful to ask for a conference with a teacher early in the school year, to establish goals and to brainstorm about possibilities that may be both feasible and helpful. Before

the conference, sit down with a pencil and paper and list several possibilities, such as compacting³ the year's curriculum so that a child needn't spend time with material already mastered; more advanced computer work or special programs offered by satellite; independent assignments that call for greater depth than the ordinary curriculum; (for older students) completing a correspondence course; spending part of the day with a more advanced class; even skipping a grade. Teachers will probably have other possibilities you haven't thought of. You can also help children avert boredom by assuring that they always have with them an interesting and relatively challenging nonfiction book to read when they have finished their seat work correctly.

If you do have an idea you'd like to see the school try, especially if it is a significant change like grade-skipping, it is often wise to ask for a trial for, say, six weeks or to Halloween, followed by a telephone or in-person conference. Such experimentation won't back into a corner or ask a long-term commitment of teachers who see the move as risky; indeed, if it doesn't work, you'll have gained good information. And, furthermore, your child will understand that the step is an experiment to be learned from, and that they themselves are not committed for the rest of their lives to a move about which they may have some misgivings, too. (Most self-respecting children are convinced that they are supremely lucky to have been born in just the place and time to have the friends they do, and are scared silly to contemplate making new ones.)

If glitches do occur in the ordinary course of things, or in the course of one of your experiments, again, ask for a conference. Try to find things to praise about your child's experience with the teacher. Describe, non-critically, what you've been hearing at home and ask for the teacher's perceptions and, most especially, for feedback and advice. Maybe there's something you can do at home to help. Maybe another experiment is in order. Then do what you can to make the plan work.

For example, a child moving ahead

a grade may need some coaching in social skills and expectations. And you may need to adjust your own expectations about your child's behavior—increase privileges, decrease restrictions—to match his or her older classmates. And all children need the social skills of self-advocacy. Teachers listen much more readily to unhappy children than to “pushy” parents! But remind your child to say please and thank you!

Compromises

One of the cruel realities of life is that there is no perfect world for the child who does not fit the norm. Some solutions have more advantages than others, but it is impossible to have it all. For example, one cannot match a bright child with mental age and community-representative age peers simultaneously (unless that community is very restricted). Each family has its own priorities, and no one solution is best for everyone.

Parents need to know that whatever their choices, none will meet *all* the needs of the children. Sometimes combinations will work (e.g., a special class for gifted children supplemented by a scout troops and a soccer league), but they will not be perfect. To be frank, most children don't have perfect parents either. The best one can do is try, and for a parent just as for a child, pretty much the best one can do is quite enough.

Footnotes

¹Csikszentmihalyi, M., Rathunde, K., & Whalen, S. (1993). *Talented teenagers: The roots of success and failure*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

²Fisher, R., & Ury, W. (1981). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. New York: Penguin.

³Reis, S.M., Burns, D.F., & Renzulli, J.S. (1992). *Curriculum compacting: The complete guide to modifying the regular curriculum for high ability students*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.

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