Helping your Child Succeed in Reading, Math, Sports and Writing

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I have a doctorate in computer science - but I was not always a very good student. I got D’s in English in fourth grade because my interest was catching lizards in the school woods. I did not really learn to read books until I spent a year in London in 1960 and, in winter there, it gets dark by 4pm and there was not much else to do but read (and collect stamps and coins). I did not really learn to write well until I was in my thirties and writing was an important part of my job.

Fast forward to raising my two daughters …

From the time my daughters were six months old to the time they were eleven or twelve, I read to them almost every night or told them stories - moving from animal sounds to Richard Scarry’s Bedtime Stories and Mother Goose to Wizard of Oz to Ann of Green Gables as they grew older. This bedtime routine made them interested in books and reading and both could read books like Little House on the Prairie or Bobbsey Twins by the first grade.

Going back in time again … when I was in fourth and fifth grade, we were set to learn math facts -- especially addition and multiplication tables. We were given timed tests - who can be first to complete this page of additions? At first, I was not very good. A girl named Sani always beat the rest of the class - she was faster and more accurate. My scientist father, hearing about this, made me pages and pages of simple math problems and my mother quizzed me and I became a hotshot, top dog, the kid to beat. Well, the confidence of learning math facts stayed with me for years and after that, math was easier, a topic I enjoyed enough to major in it at Stanford.

Fast forward again to when my kids were in grammar school. Myself, having learned the math facts lesson, I repeated it with success with my daughters and both continued into technology careers. Of course, I also reviewed their English and History papers and suggested improvements so their writing skills improved well beyond mine at the same ages.

But, having not been a sports guy growing up, I missed translating the same lesson to my first daughter and when she tried playing sports, it was not a great success, so she became a flautist. It finally dawned on me that if I worked with my second daughter early in each season an hour a day, she'd outperform her peers, enjoy sports more, and have more confidence - which was the case. More than that, it was a rewarding way to spend time together. Interestingly, even T-ball parents are super competitive and will yell at umpires mercilessly - but the same parents never work one-on-one with their kids to help them to perform better. I continued working with my daughter through high school and can report she was all district before she went off to college on an academic scholarship.

Confidence and being good at something encourages a child to like that endeavor. But the way to build confidence is by steadily improving performance and that requires considerable practice.

One more related story about labels and glass ceilings. Putting the gifted label on a child can be a curse. The gifted child plays chess with a non-gifted friend. The gifted child wins and says to herself - of course, I am gifted. The non-gifted child goes home, is interested in chess, plays with her family, gets better, and then the rematch - and the gifted child who did not practice now loses, not only the match but also any interest in chess because, while that child assumes it was a fluke, she does not want to be beaten by a non-gifted child. The label creates a glass ceiling. The real moral is, the more you work at something, the better you will get. On our tournament ball team (which played ball every weekend), the worst players were better than the best natural athletes in recreational ball. Hard work pays off.

One other ingredient is a parent’s pride - children naturally are satisfied when they see how pleased the parent is - so spend time with them, encourage them, enjoy their successes. Another quick lesson is to enjoy and encourage the successes of everyone around you, not just your own children - so cheer for the other kids too. A last lesson is to encourage independence so children can do it on their own without constant feedback from you.