

You Get What You Expect

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Parents of a high school freshman, whom I will call John, asked me to serve as a consultant for his school program. John was struggling academically. I met with his teachers and asked each to describe him. One teacher immediately responded, “John is one of the most defiant, oppositional, unmotivated, irresponsible students we have at this school!”

Another teacher looked surprised. In a manner that was respectful of her colleague’s opinion she said, “I have a different view. I think he is really struggling with learning and we should figure out the best ways to teach him.”

In a brief moment I heard two markedly contrasting descriptions of the same student from two adults who interact with him on a daily basis. It seemed as if they were talking about two different students.

After this meeting I interviewed John. I asked him to describe his teachers. I did not reveal what any had said about him. In describing the teacher who had portrayed him so negatively, John said, “She hates me, but that’s okay because I hate her. And I won’t do any work in her class.”

Before I could even ask John to elaborate about their obviously strained relationship or to question the wisdom of his refusal to meet her class requirements, he said, “And don’t tell me that I’m only hurting myself by not doing work (he must have heard that advice on numerous occasions). What you don’t understand, Dr. Brooks, is that whatever I do in her class is never going to be good enough. She doesn’t expect me to pass, so why even try?” He added that from the first day of class, he felt “angry vibes” from her.

“She just didn’t like me and soon I didn’t like her. I could tell she didn’t want me in her class just by the way she spoke with me. Right away she seemed so angry with me. I really don’t know why she felt that way. So after a while I knew there was no way I could succeed in her class so I just decided that I wouldn’t even try. It would just be a waste of time. She told me I was lazy, but if she was honest she would have to admit that she doesn’t think I could ever get a good grade in her class.”

John's face lit up as he described the teacher who thought that the primary issue that should be addressed was his struggle with learning. He said, "I love her. Well, you know what I mean. She really likes me. She actually told me that she thought I was smart and she had to figure out the best way to teach me. She's always there to help."

After hearing John's views of these two teachers, I could understand why he was a discipline problem with the first teacher but not with the second teacher. He was following what he believed to be their expectations for him.

I know that it often "takes two to tango" and most likely at some point John was responsible for adding fuel to the "angry vibes," thereby confirming the first teacher's negative perceptions of him. However, as I have written in past articles, if we wish children and adolescents to change their behavior, we must have the insight and courage as adults to change our behavior first. In so doing, we establish a cooperative climate in which youngsters are increasingly receptive to modifying and becoming accountable for their own actions.

I discuss John and his two teachers in many of my workshops to illustrate what may seem obvious but in many ways is not, namely, that we all possess different mindsets or assumptions about ourselves as well as others. These assumptions, which we may not even think about or be aware of, play a significant role in determining our expectations and our behavior. Even seemingly hidden assumptions have a way of being expressed to others. Not surprisingly, people begin to behave in accord with the expectations we have of them and when they do, we are apt to interpret this as a sign that our expectations are accurate. What we fail to appreciate is the extent to which our expectations subtly or not-so-subtly shape the behavior of others.

In this article I will examine the role of expectations, especially as they pertain to children and adolescents in school. All of the observations about school are equally applicable to the home environment. Also, the influence of expectations is not confined to youngsters but is evident in adult relationships as well. For instance, at the conclusion of one of my workshops about family relationships, a woman who appeared to be about 30 years old said, "When I visit my parents they speak to me like I'm a little kid. As I was growing up they never complimented me. Even though they might disagree, I know that they are disappointed in me and still see me as an immature person. What really

bothers me is that when I'm with them I actually begin to feel like a little, insecure kid again and I begin to act in such a dependent way. Each time I visit them I tell myself that I shouldn't fall into the same trap, but I do." In her brief statement, it was evident that this woman was indeed trapped, apparently entangled in a web generated by her parents' negative expectations.

Children and Expectations

I believe that the study of mindsets and expectations is not merely an academic exercise. The more we understand the extent to which our expectations shape children's views of themselves and determine their subsequent behaviors, the more we can monitor and modify our expectations. Let's look at some examples from the school setting.

In a frequently reported study undertaken in the 1960s, psychologist Robert Rosenthal and his colleagues provided elementary school teachers in an inner city school with a list of their students who, based on testing, were predicted to blossom academically. In fact, the names on the list were randomly selected but, of course, the teachers did not know this. At the end of the year, the students on the list did blossom compared with those not on the list. Rosenthal found that the positive effect was even greater for Latino and African-American children than Caucasian children.

The teachers in the Rosenthal study may have thought that they were responding to all children in the same way. However, if you expect children to succeed, you will behave in ways to reinforce this expectation even without being aware of doing so. For instance, if you ask students considered to be "budding superstars" to answer a question and they cannot, you are more likely to support them, help them think through the problem, and eventually arrive at the correct answer. You do so since you expect that they can learn and when they do not, you consider how best to assist them. In contrast, if you ask children who are not perceived as having great potential a question and they do not know the answer, you are apt to call immediately on another student. Also, budding superstars compared with their peers are more likely to elicit smiles and a positive tone of voice. They will respond in kind.

The so-called "Rosenthal Effect" apparently applies to species other than humans. In his book "Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development," Rosenthal described a study that he and Lenore Jacobson conducted.

They asked graduate students to teach rats from supposedly two different litters to learn to run a maze. The rats were placed in two boxes, one marked “fast-learners,” the other marked “slow learners.” In actuality, the rats were randomly placed and from the same litter.

Incredibly, the results were in concert with the expectations held by the graduate students. Although the “fast learning” rats were identical to the “slow learning” rats, they mastered the mazes more quickly. Adding humor to the study were evaluations offered by the graduate students. The “fast learning” rats were judged to be smarter, more attractive, and more likeable. If rats could sense our expectations and respond accordingly, think about children!

In a thought-provoking article that appeared in *The Boston Globe* this summer, syndicated columnist William Raspberry addressed the issue of expectations. In the article titled “Kids Won’t Learn if We Expect Failure,” he wrote of a conversation he had with Rod Paige, the Secretary of Education. They discussed factors that contribute to student failure, especially for children from poor homes. Paige offered the following opinion:

“One difference is expectation. . . . If a teacher does not believe every child can learn, and the evidence is that some children are not learning, the world seems all right. But if the teacher believes all children can learn, and some children aren’t learning, then there is a problem that demands answers.”

Some might question if Paige is placing too much responsibility for whether students succeed or fail on the teacher. We certainly know that other factors, including a child’s home environment, play a significant role in the child’s learning. However, I interpret Paige’s observations as respecting and empowering educators. To cast his position in concepts that I use, I hear Paige saying, “Our mindsets affect how we view the capabilities of students and our expectations for them. If students are having difficulty learning, then we have the power to alter our mindsets and develop expectations for them that are both challenging and realistic. Under such conditions, students are more likely to succeed.”

An article in *The New York Times* supported this view. It described Lincoln Elementary School in southern Westchester County in New York. Neither race nor

income predicted the high test scores achieved by almost all students. Ronald Ross, the district superintendent, said that the success of the students was linked to the school climate established by George Albano, its principal. Ross noted, “Children will perform directly in proportion to whether they believe that the teacher loves and respects them. If they think you love them, they’ll walk through a wall for you.”

Albano concurred. “If you love children, if you have high expectations, it will work. I greet the children in the morning. I might tell a girl, ‘I love the way Mommy fixed your hair.’ It’s little things. You make them feel special.” In explaining the similar performance of students of different races and socioeconomic groups, Albano noted, “What it simply shows is that every youngster, no matter who they are, is treated the same.”

I should like to share one final story that I read several months ago. The article detailed the performance four years ago of a chess team from Morningside Elementary School in Brownsville, Texas, noting that the city is along the Mexican border and is overwhelmingly poor. The youngsters from Brownsville placed second out of 150 schools in a national chess contest, trailing only a school for gifted children in New York. Similar to the situation depicted in the real-life movie “Stand and Deliver,” in which a high school teacher in California taught inner city Latino youth to excel in calculus, Morningside High had a teacher who believed that his students could learn chess. The teacher, J.J. Guajardo, said that when he arrived at school in the morning, “I’d see 15, 20 kids waiting for me. They were all dressed and ready to go at 6:45 in the morning.” The story also noted that when students who formerly were classified as troublemakers became involved with chess, their behavior and learning improved.

I believe the implications of all of these stories are far-reaching. Those of us involved in raising and educating children must be alert to the assumptions we hold and how these assumptions are translated into our expectations and behavior. We must realize that negative assumptions and unrealistic expectations often reinforce in children the very behaviors upon which we frown. If we view children as lazy, they are apt to appear that way, as we witnessed with John. If we perceive children as troublemakers, we can almost guarantee they will be. If we see children as possessing limited capacity to learn chess or calculus, it is likely they will not learn. On the other side of the coin, if

we set the bar of expectations too high so that children know we will be disappointed in them when they fail to meet our unrealistic goals, we should not be surprised to witness their frustration and resignation rather than their joy. However, if we see children as ready to blossom and if we convey realistic expectations for them to succeed, then our actions will nurture and support them in a life journey filled with accomplishment and satisfaction.

Let us remind ourselves that every child (and I might add, every adult) wants to be successful. No child wants to be viewed by parents and other caregivers as inadequate or lacking in positive qualities. No child enters school wishing to fail. When children appear unmotivated or when they give up, it is often because they believe they cannot succeed. In such situations we must have the courage to examine our assumptions and expectations, to change those that need changing, and to discover ways to tap into and display our children's strengths and resources.

I am reminded of Goethe's quote, "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them become what they were capable of being."

Words well worth remembering.

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