

“My Child Has Achieved More than Your Child”

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Several weeks ago I was drawn to a piece written by Beth Teitell in *The Boston Globe* titled “Parents get competitive on college.” When I finished reading the article I thought that perhaps a more fitting title might be: “My child has achieved more than your child” or “Boasting parents, an increasing phenomenon.” Teitell focused on the number of parents who brag about the colleges at which their children have been accepted, a practice that involves a much larger audience than ever before due in great part to the outreach afforded through social media such as Facebook.

The article began by describing the reaction of one mother scrolling through Facebook and reading a comment, “We’re deciding between Northwestern and Georgetown” (the we’re is a revealing pronoun to use in place of “My son/daughter is deciding”). The mother reading the Facebook posting observed, “It’s so annoying. It’s like, ‘My kid just got into such-and such a school and he’s so great.’ Blah, blah, blah.”

Teitell wrote of another parent in the Boston area who received a less than enthusiastic reception when she said her son might attend Pitzer College in Southern California, his first choice. This parent said, “They’re like, ‘Oh, I’ve never heard of it’ and the conversation stops.”

In most instances the practice of parental boasting does not appear suddenly at college acceptance time. Its precursors are typically present much earlier in a child’s life. Boasting may even center on a child’s admission to a particular preschool (I am told that in some cities the admission process for entrance to a preschool program is more arduous than that involved when applying for college, and the rejection rate equals that of an Ivy League School!) or performance in a Little League or soccer game or at a dance recital or any other activity in which one’s young child is involved.

The Rise of Parental Boasting

Teitell noted that statistics on boasting are not readily available, but Karen Arnold, an associate professor of higher education at Boston College, stated, “It’s reasonable to assume that this behavior has escalated. Parents’ bragging or sour grapes

comes out of being over-identified with their kids' success' and that can have a negative effect. Students feel pressure that their success is reflecting on their parents.”

This observation reminds me of a visit I made to a private school in which I had time to chat with several middle school students. We spoke about stress that kids in today's world experience, and they openly expressed anxiety about getting into particular colleges. They talked about how disappointed their parents would be, having spent thousands of dollars for private school, if they were not admitted to a prestigious university. They also acknowledged that they themselves would feel very upset and that they had not lived up to expectations if they were not accepted at a top tier university. These were youngsters who would not be applying for college admission for another five years, yet they were already preoccupied with the possibility of letting themselves and their parents down should they only get into their “safety” school.

Teitell observed that the apparent rise of parental boasting may be much more prevalent with certain groups than others. “The boasting bump in some circles comes at a time when many parents and students do not have the luxury to stress about prestige schools. With competition intense, financial aid limited, lower and middle-income families are scrambling to find a school that is affordable and a good fit—not one that wows on Facebook.”

Boston College's Arnold said, “Financially strapped parents—unable to fly around the country on college tours, or pay for pricey college coaches or exotic volunteer opportunities—have the opposite problem of the status seekers: They have not been aiming high enough.” Teitell cited a recent study indicating that “high-achieving students from poorer families are much less likely to apply to top colleges, even though they would have a very good shot at getting in and qualifying for financial aid.”

Announcing Your Child's Success to the World

It does not seem very long ago, although most likely it has been quite a number of years, since I first spotted bumper stickers with the words, “My child is an honor student at” followed by the name of the school. I recognize there is a generation gap or two involved in my perspective, but when I grew up in Brooklyn in the 1950s, I'm not certain that bumper stickers existed, but if they did, they were not used to advertise the accomplishments of one's child. And even when my sons Rich and Doug were growing

up in the 1970s and 80s, I don't think they would have been thrilled (perhaps *mortified* would be a better description) if I placed such a bumper sticker on my car or my wife's.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not against parents informing family or close friends about a child's accomplishments or parents acknowledging to their child their understanding of the time and effort that their child has expended to reach certain goals. However, similar to what Karen Arnold observed, advertising these accomplishments to many others may increase pressure on children rather than being experienced as a positive gesture. It often says more about the needs of the parents than the wishes of the child.

I remember a nine-year-old girl I was seeing in therapy. She was burdened by feelings of perfectionism reflected in an unrealistic need to be at the top of the ladder in any activity. She was very perceptive when she observed, "It makes my parents feel they are good parents when I get a good grades." When I inquired what she thought would happen if she didn't get good grades, her eyes moistened and she replied, "I try not to let that happen because it would make them upset. One time I didn't get a good grade on a test and when they saw the test I know they felt like they weren't good parents."

In my interviews with this girl's parents it was evident that their daughter's interpretation of the ways in which they assessed their effectiveness as parents was impressively accurate, that, in fact, her achievements in school played a significant role in her parents' feelings of happiness or success.

An important issue was highlighted in my work with this family, namely, that too many mothers and fathers judge their parenting skills by the accomplishments of their children, especially in the areas of academics and athletics. There are pitfalls when using such criteria to assess one's parenting abilities. One pitfall is that while parents definitely play a major role in their child's development, I have frequently asserted that parents may take too much credit for their children's successes and too much blame for their children's shortcomings than is warranted. I have called this "the myth of the perfect parent" in a number of my seminars. We must keep in mind that many other factors in addition to parental interaction influence the course of children's lives, including their inborn temperament and factors outside the home environment.

A second pitfall is that the activities upon which success is being judged may be too limited or narrow in the case of many children. I have worked with parents whose children possess obvious interests and “islands of competence,” but they involve activities that truly are not respected by parents. A vignette I often share in my presentations is of a young teenager whose mother and father were disappointed in him because he did not excel in school, sports, or the social domain given his learning problems. However, he loved gardening and taking care of plants. But how many bumper stickers have you seen that read, “My son is an expert at gardening”?

It was disheartening for this boy to realize that the activity that brought him joy and a feeling of confidence was minimized by his parents. The reality is that our children know when we do not support or honor their strengths because these strengths are not in accord with the parents’ perception of “true accomplishments.” One does not have to boast that “my son’s garden is like an artist’s masterpiece,” but one can say both to the child and others what a wonderful effort the child has demonstrated in creating a lovely landscape.

Guidelines for “Acceptable Chest-Thumping”

Bruce Feiler, author of *The Secrets of Happy Families*, offered some guidelines for parents for what he called “acceptable chest-thumping” in a *New York Times* article titled “A Truce in the Bragging Wars.” Included in his advice were the following points:

1. Brag about how good a child you have, not how good a parent you are. He cited author Adriana Trigiani who observed, “I’ve noticed when parents brag, it’s usually a reflection of their wonderful parenting skills and not their child’s natural abilities. When I see people taking full credit for how their children turned out, that’s the kind of bragging that gets under people’s skin.” Recall my comment about people taking too much credit for their children’s success and too much blame for their children’s shortcomings.

2. Brag about effort, not accomplishment. Brad Meltzer, an author of nonfiction books about children, said he “doesn’t mind if parents talk about their children’s passions. If you say ‘my kid loves reading,’ that’s O.K., but if you say ‘my kid is the best reader in his grade,’ I start the hate machine.” After a while we tire of hearing parents tell of their daughter winning every tennis match in which she played or their son

never getting less than 100% on any spelling test he took or their daughter speaking full sentences at the age of 18 months.

3. Don't brag about something everyone else struggles with. In my clinical practice I have worked with many wonderful parents whose children struggle with learning and/or behavioral problems. I have often stated at my workshops that we must be careful not to judge another person's parenting unless we have walked in their shoes. I emphasize that some of the most caring, loving parents I have ever met would not be judged positively if one simply used as criteria the behavior or achievements of their children. As research about temperament reveals, some children from birth are much more challenging to raise than others, some are born with what researchers have labeled "difficult" temperaments—they are more difficult to satisfy or please, are often hypersensitive to touch, smell, sounds, are more rigid in their thinking, and have a more difficult time paying attention and learning in school.

If you are fortunate to have a child with a so-called "easy" temperament who as the label implies has an easier time reaching developmental milestones, succeeding in school, having many friends, or being a star athlete, you must be particularly sensitive to what it means to boast about your child's achievements with parents whose children struggle on a daily basis to keep up with their peers. Many parents of children with special needs have told me of the pain they have experienced at social gatherings as other parents extol for a lengthy amount of time the accomplishments of their children.

One mother said, "As I hear about other children doing well in school, having many friends, winning awards, I can't help but feel that somehow I've failed with my own son. I wish I didn't feel that way, but sometimes I just do. It gets even worse when people who really don't know me or my son offer unsolicited advice about what I should or shouldn't be doing as a parent. I may be overly sensitive, but it's as if they're criticizing my parenting skills, that they're basically saying that if I were a better mother my son would be doing better. Sometimes I feel like screaming at them, 'Not everyone can be fortunate to give birth to the perfect child.' I wish other parents could be more understanding."

I recognize there is a fine line between letting others know we are proud of our children's accomplishments and boasting about them. When parents get together it is

very natural to talk about one's children. I feel it's okay to let friends know that our son or daughter was accepted at and will be attending a well-known college, but that doesn't mean we should provide a list of 10 other prestigious schools at which he or she was accepted. As I have emphasized throughout this article, we must be careful not to judge our own or other people's parenting skills on the basis of the academic or athletic achievement of our children—many other factors play a part.

Unpredictable Paths in Life and the Importance of Unconditional Love

In reflecting upon concepts such as achievement and accomplishment, we must remember that there are many individuals who struggle as children but turn out to be very successful adults in all spheres of their personal and professional lives. Conversely, there are children who ring up accomplishment after accomplishment but whose adult lives are punctuated with disappointment and failed dreams. This dynamic was highlighted in conversations I had with two parents.

A middle-age man I was seeing in therapy told me about his son who had excelled in sports and academics from elementary through high school. He then attended an Ivy League college from which he dropped out after a freshman year filled with failing grades. Three years later the son was still “finding himself.” With much insight and honesty, this man said, “I used to love talking with others about my son and all of his accomplishments. I guess it made me feel what a good job my wife and I had done as parents. Now, I try to avoid any discussion with friends about him. If they ask, I simply say, ‘He is trying to figure out what he would like to do and that he took time off from school.’”

He continued, “What makes the situation even worse is that when I told my son after he flunked out of college that he must do something with his life, he shouted at me that all I ever cared about were his grades. Things are so strained between us now.”

The sadness etched on this father's face as he discussed his relationship with his son was undeniable.

In marked contrast, a mother informed me about her son who struggled throughout his school years. “He was somewhat of a loner and my husband and I were not only concerned about his not having friends, but also that he might not graduate from high school. He seemed to barely pass so many of his classes. Somehow he managed to

graduate. After high school he worked for a couple of years in low-paying jobs, but then decided to attend a community college part-time where he became very interested in computer programming. He went on to a four-year state college, graduated from there, and now has a good job and is in a serious relationship with a lovely woman. And he seems so happy.”

She smiled and added, “I’m tempted to send out an e-mail blast to all of the other parents who year after year told me about their kids’ accomplishments. I would like them to know how my son is doing. I know some of the other parents would really be surprised.” With obvious emotion she recalled a time years earlier when other parents were boasting about their children’s achievements and she wanted to say something about her son. “I told them that he was a really caring and compassionate kid. When I said this, they nodded briefly and moved on to talk about their kids. It was as if what I said about my son wasn’t important.”

She paused before saying, “But what happened last year on Mother’s Day was so affirming for me. My son sent me a Mother’s Day card and when I opened it I saw that he had written a lengthy note inside. I was very touched by what he wrote. He said that with all the worries and problems he may have caused me and my husband, the one thing that he always knew was that we loved him.”

Her son’s comment vividly captured what is often lost in parental bragging rights, namely, that one of the most important goals in parenting is to convey unconditional love towards our children, to genuinely accept them for who they are and not what we want them to be, and to honor their interests and strengths. Achieving such a goal is far more significant than announcing on Facebook the grades our children obtained or the colleges to which they were accepted.

We should be proud of our children’s accomplishments in whatever domains they occur, and it is certainly acceptable to inform others of these accomplishments as long as it is done in a sensible, non-boasting manner. But let us never forget that both accomplishments and setbacks arise in many different forms and at different points in a person’s life. Unconditional love and acceptance should be the constant behaviors for which we strive as parents. These are the behaviors that our children will most prize and that will have the most beneficial impact on their life’s journey.

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