

My Kid Is Not a Winner

Written by Stuart Sheldon, BT Contributor
August 2015

So stop with the trophies, please

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My little brother strode the stage in his cap and gown, gave his med school dean an emphatic handshake, and transitioned from Mister to Doctor for the rest of his life. “Now *that* is really something,” I said to my mom through misty eyes.

That decades-old moment still resonates in my heart.

A few months ago, my five-year-old, in a \$15 lemon-yellow cap and gown we were obliged to buy, was handed his “diploma” at his PreK4 “graduation.” I love my son’s school, but this is nonsense.

When my wife called the principal to share our opinions against PreK “graduation,” she was told this was an expectation of American parents.

I’m not a hater -- let the children sing “We Are the World,” and I’m front row, lip-quivering like a granny. But let’s call that a *year-end celebration* and skip the pomp and circumstance -- especially when my boy couldn’t care less about his “diploma.”

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By fabricating a false sense of achievement, we diminish the sanctity of a graduation and do more harm than good.

We fail as parents and teachers when we “try to make each child feel like a winner or in some way outstanding, even if the student has done little to warrant such attention,” says Jeffrey Kanov, Ph.D., the former district psychologist for Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Kids come to expect that by doing the bare minimum -- in this case, merely showing up -- lavish praise is warranted.

“The sad truth is that bestowing a sense of feeling special or exceptional or outstanding on a child who hasn’t actually earned these labels only serves to enhance that child’s sense of entitlement,” adds Kanov. “It stokes narcissism, which leads people to not only demand special treatment from others but to believe it is their right. Narcissists don’t do well with criticism and tend to blame others for the mistakes and failures.”

Do you want your kids easily demoralized by failure and willing to cheat or avoid applying themselves to avoid it?

Making the Little League All-Star team was one of the biggest moments of my young life. And I wore that patch on my arm with immense pride. Not making the elite team the following year made me hungry to work that much harder to get back on top, and I eventually did. Trophies were once rare and powerful motivators.

The same week my five-year-old “graduated,” my wife received an e-mail from the Miami Shores Recreation Center, asking her to come retrieve our seven-year-old’s baseball trophy. Flashing back to our boy absentmindedly doing cartwheels in right field, my wife asked, “Did everyone receive trophies?” Of course everyone did. Did our son deserve a reward? Absolutely not.

The experience is the prize.

In a wonderful *New York Times* opinion piece titled “Losing Is Good For You,” author Ashley

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Merryman writes, “The science is clear.... Nonstop recognition does not inspire children to succeed. Instead, it can cause them to underachieve.”

Merryman nails it. “If I were a baseball coach,” she writes, “I would announce at the first meeting that there would be only three awards: Best Overall, Most Improved, and Best Sportsmanship. Then I’d hand the kids a list of things they’d have to do to earn one of those trophies. They would know from the get-go that excellence, improvement, character, and persistence were valued.”

We don’t get trophies for showing up in the real world, so why program our kids to think that’s how the game is played? Merryman has great advice for us all: “Parents should keep one question in mind. Whether your kid loves Little League or gymnastics, ask the program organizers this: ‘Which kids get awards?’ If the answer is, ‘Everybody gets a trophy,’ find another program.”

As we prepare for the new school year, let’s tell our teachers and extracurricular leaders: No more meaningless rewards and praise unless the kids truly earn it.

We inadvertently breed self-righteous little monsters by overpraising and trying to keep our kids happy all the time, and “protecting” them from life. As we know, when they never grasp the concept of having to do something in order to get a reward or praise, they can get downright belligerent. This unmotivated and perverted lack of ownership can continue into adulthood. At which point, *we*, the parents, should get a trophy for *most clueless*.

Again, Merryman nails it: “Our job is not to reframe our children’s mistakes as victories, but to help them overcome setbacks by seeing that progress over time is more important than a particular win or loss..., and to help them graciously congratulate the child who succeeded when they failed.”

Let your children lose and fail, and suffer the consequences of their inaction and mistakes. *That* is how they truly win.

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