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Parental beliefs: Why these matter to your child's education



What do we know about goals, values and expectations?

We know that being engaged in your child's education and spending time helping with their learning matters. But, it isn't just about what you do. Your child also takes in your beliefs: that is, the goals, values and expectations that you hold and communicate. Even if these are subtle, children pick up on these and determine their own attitudes, goals and expectations of themselves and their competence from your beliefs, as well as the value they place on education.¹ Not only that, parental expectations and aspirations have been linked to improving children's academic performance and social and emotional skills, as well as their motivation for learning.²

If these expectations and goals are high, children will want to strive to do their best, value the opportunities they have at school and enjoy learning. Being confident in your child and pointing out their strengths is so important. Conversely, if you do not communicate that you believe in your child's potential and that you expect them to work hard, they feel doubt in their abilities and may not want to try to succeed. Children quite literally live up to what their parents expect, be it aspirational or not. So, by quite simply changing their mindset, parents can influence how their children feel about schooling and their ambitions.³

Helping children set their own goals and realistic expectations for themselves is important, too. By including them in goal setting, they are more likely to be motivated to achieve what they have set out to do. Helping them to plan how to achieve their goals and meet their expectations will assist them in becoming self-directed, independent and responsible learners.

1 Fox, S., & Olsen, A. (2014). Defining parental engagement. Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from http://www.det.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/687476/52828-DET-Defining-Parental-Engagement-A4-Report_AccPDF_01.pdf

2 Duckworth, K., Akerman, R., Morrison Gutman, L., & Vorhaus, J. (2009). Influences and leverages on low levels of attainment: A review of literature and policy initiatives. Institute of Education: University of London. Retrieved from <http://www.learningbenefits.net/Publications/ResRepIntros/ResRep31intro.htm>

3 Nauert, R. (2015). For some parents, kids are college-bound from day one. Psych Central. Retrieved from <http://psychcentral.com/news/2015/01/26/parental-expectations-influence-childrens-academic-success/80420.html>

Your role modelling matters, too. Parents can show their children that they are open to lifelong learning, through trying new things and sharing their own experiences of school in positive ways. Communicating to your child that school is an exciting place to be, and your belief that learning matters and is enjoyable is crucial to shaping your child's perception of education. This is harder if you did not have a positive experience with schooling yourself, but it really does matter.

A point of caution. While it is important to hold high expectations and positive aspirations for a child's learning, it is important that these be realistic. Parents who want to make 'super-achievers' of their children and feel competitive and anxious, often set unrealistic goals and expectations that are unattainable. Expecting a child to do something they are not yet capable of can be defeating, and in fact counterproductive. To be effective, your expectations must be high but reasonable, and match your child's actual abilities. Children will have more interest and confidence in tackling a task if it is just beyond their current level of ability.

Children need support to reach their goals, and some need more support than others so we must help them along in this process.⁴ Engaging in a process of self-assessment is motivating to children and helps them to recognise that they can improve through their own efforts. This empowers them to direct their own learning, especially when we help them to self-reflect on what happened, what helped them achieve (or not achieve) their goal and how they felt about it. Expectations and goals should not be static and should shift regularly in line with how children grow and change.

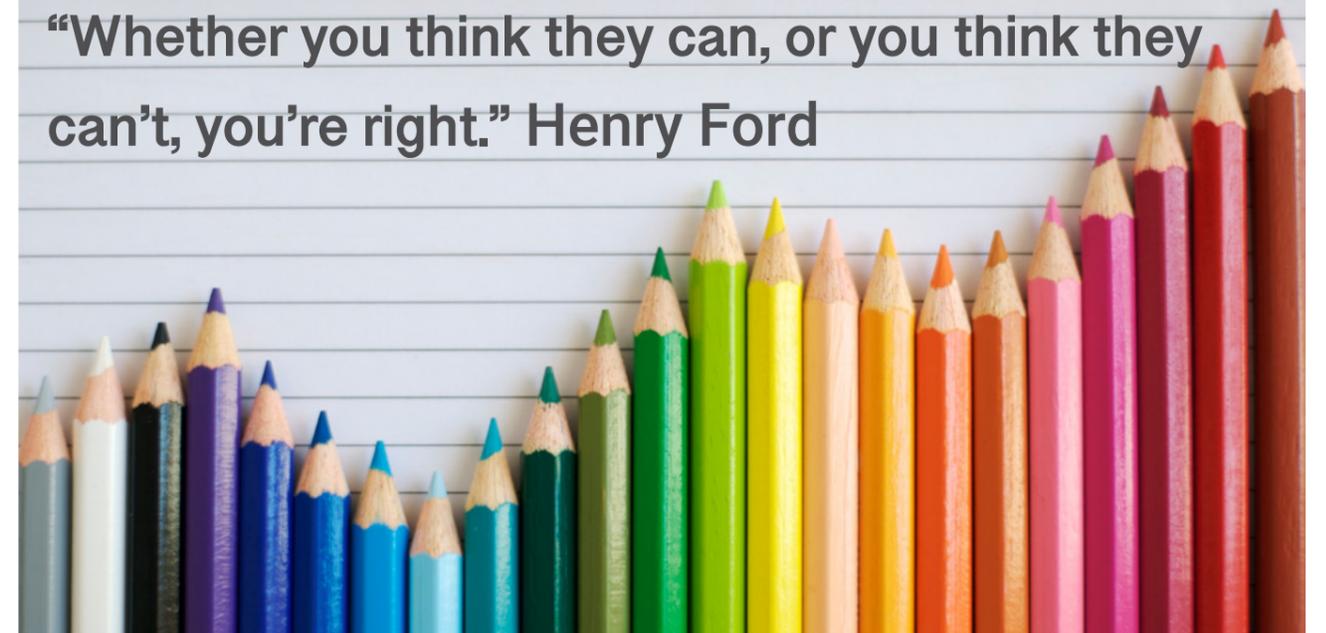
4 Raising Independent Kids (n.d.). The most successful kids have parents who do this one thing. Retrieved from <https://raising-independent-kids.com/the-most-successful-kids-have-parents-who-do-this-one-thing/>

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS YOU CAN BUILD MEANINGFUL EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS INTO YOUR HOME?

No matter what the age of your child, the following tips might help:

- ✓ Show an interest in your child's learning, and try to find ways to engage with what they are learning about. For example, you might cook a meal together from the country your child is learning about at school.
- ✓ Use positive language and avoid labelling your child in negative ways.
- ✓ Use specific praise and only say it when you really mean it. For example, replace "Good job" with "I am really proud of the way you showed your sister how to ride her bike".
- ✓ Do not be afraid of constructive criticism. Children usually understand when they have not met an expectation, and can only improve if we help them. For example, you could say "I think you could have done better. How could you improve for next time?".
- ✓ Help children see past challenges and use a growth mindset. Adding 'yet' is helpful. For example, "I can see you are disappointed that you can't solve that maths problem yet, but you will get there with some more practice".
- ✓ Scaffold your child for success. Break difficult tasks into steps and set them up with activities that are just beyond their current abilities. For example, if your child is reading picture books and short stories fluently, introduce graphic novels (and not move straight to long texts).
- ✓ Promote your child's independence where you can. Children are often far more capable than we realise, until we give them the confidence to be independent.
- ✓ Keep shifting the goalposts in line with your child's abilities and encourage your child to aim high.
- ✓ Communicate with your child's school teacher regularly, and never undermine them or put them down in front of your child.
- ✓ Don't compare your child to others. Encourage them to achieve their own personal best. Encourage your child to take personal responsibility for learning, and trust your child to do this. They will make mistakes along the way, but that is where the learning happens.

"Whether you think they can, or you think they can't, you're right." Henry Ford



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