

# Calling Your Child to a Commitment to Excellence

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Our entire culture seems to promote mediocrity. Instead of stressing the importance of extra effort, of going beyond mediocrity to a commitment to excellence in our lives, the message is to settle for just getting by.

As Christians we are called to reject mediocrity, and to be committed to excellence in all things. We need to be excellent because we are representing Christ. Our children need to catch a vision for being His ambassador.

Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” Although we have urged each of our children to shoot for the best, all of them have struggled with settling for less. Before we look at specific convictions, we want to mention what we believe to be four root causes for mediocrity in preteens and adolescents:

*1. Low expectations.* No matter what the task or situation, set goals that stretch (not break) your child, and insist on quality effort. Teach and re-teach the principle of learning how to be faithful in little things so that he is qualified to be trusted with bigger things. (See Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30). Setting higher expectations is often viewed as odd these days. You may have to encourage teachers, for example, to be tougher on deadlines and standards. Don’t accept the status quo, which is often average or below average.

*2. Peer pressure.* A study done among 20,000 high school teens concluded that the “kids that kids hang out with have the greatest influence on an adolescent’s classroom performance...The prevailing attitude among students is that ‘getting by’ is good enough. There is substantial pressure on students to underachieve.”(1)

The study further noted, “At least by high school, the influence of friends on school performance and drug use is more substantial than the influence of parents. Parents should know their child’s friends and steer children early in their development toward youngsters who value achievement and school.”(2)

You will have to determine if your child’s friends want to just get by or are more highly motivated. An A in math may not be cool with the peer group. If so, you have your work cut out for you.

*3. Ineffective rewards and/or motivation.* Luke 10:7 tells us, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” If your child does a good job, reward it generously. And reward progress away from mediocrity and toward excellence as well. Applaud achievement and quality effort in all areas of life, not just with grades and activities like sports. Life encompasses more than those two.

4. *Inadequate support from key individuals.* Of course you are the key person in making your child want to climb above mediocrity. Be a cheerleader, your child's number-one fan. No one ultimately can love and encourage like Mom and Dad! The world is full of discouraging situations. You need to counteract that.

At the same time, solicit help from others along the way—a teacher, coach, church youth worker. In 1960, when I was a sixth grader, I had a basketball coach who created a rally cry for our motley group of modestly talented players: “State Champs 1966!” No, we didn't ultimately win the championship, but that goal for our senior year spurred me on to do my best. And it contributed to me getting a basketball scholarship to college.

Never underestimate the power of an authority figure in your child's life to cause incredible damage. For every good one, there could be three bad ones. If your child is in a potentially harmful environment, recruit a coach, teacher, or boss at his work to help you step in to change the situation.

Following are two important convictions to shape in your child.

#### **Child's Conviction 1: I work for an unseen Boss.**

There is much imbalance in the Christian community when it comes to work: We are either driven by it or we suffer from poor work habits that result in mediocre performance. Our children need us to train them with a biblical approach to work.

We are not just working for men, but for Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote: “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Colossians 3:23-24).

Our youth need to know that sliding along and getting by with as little as possible will not fool anybody indefinitely. More important, it will not fool God—the One who ultimately is going to determine if a person can be used responsibly for His purposes.

#### **Child's Conviction 2: I need to strive for excellence in everything I do.**

Of course, when we talk of excellence, we do not mean attaining perfection or applying the same standards to every child. We *are* proposing that, within God-given capabilities, every child be challenged to rise above the crowd, to seek higher standards of achievement, and to be all that God has gifted him to be.

We believe that training a child to step above mediocrity also helps train him not to accept mediocrity in his relationship with God. Luke 16:10 tells us, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.” A child must be trained to be trustworthy, to fulfill his commitments, to do a good job even when nobody is looking.

Several important topics fall under this conviction—chores, allowances, jobs, and schoolwork.

### **A Word About Schoolwork**

The issue of grades raises one of the toughest challenges for a parent. How high should you set expectations and how hard should you push without the risk of driving a child off the cliff? We have told all of our children that we anticipated that they would go to college, and that getting into college requires good grades and taking tougher classes. At the same time, we have told them that doing an excellent job at school does not mean receiving all A's. It *does* mean maintaining an excellent attitude and making a good effort.

There's no cookie-cutter answer to how hard to press on academic performance, since every child is different. But here are some suggestions.

*Start with your own heart.* Are your motives right, or do you want your child to achieve so that you'll win applause from others? Are you pushing so the child will win a scholarship and save you money on college expenses?

Academic issues dramatically underscore your need to really know your child. What motivates him? Which areas of curriculum are easy for him, and which pose challenges? Also, is he secure in your acceptance, or does he push himself to win your approval? Asking others who know your child—such as teachers, church youth workers, employers, and other parents—will help you determine if your expectations are unreasonable. Above all, pray for God's wisdom.

*Consider incentives for grades.* Average effort should not be rewarded (unless that's the best the child can do), but above average, superior work should be.

We've learned repeatedly that children are motivated differently. We chose to aggressively motivate our son Benjamin in the area of grades, because we knew he was capable. When he was still in the eighth grade, we challenged him to be the valedictorian of his high school class. And if he did it, we promised him a big reward—a car (used). We chose this approach because he was starting to slide on his schoolwork, settling for less. Sometime between eighth and ninth grade he began to take on the goal of being valedictorian as his own.

Without this incentive, he probably would have ended up in the top 10 percent of his class—not bad, but beneath his potential. As it was, he ended up number two, salutatorian. He didn't kill himself to achieve this. He just used the talent God had given him and pursued a goal.

Depending on each one's ability, we have motivated our other children with short-term goals and rewards, from a trip, more freedom, and money, to an inexpensive CD player. Every child wants something that will motivate him to excel.

*Find out how your child learns and studies best.* Study habits have been another tension point for us. Fortunately we interviewed Cynthia Tobias, author of *The Way They Learn*, on our daily radio program. She shared how each person has a different learning style. When we applied these different styles to our children, it helped us understand why one child studies best on the floor with the radio on and why another does best in a quiet room at his desk. This relieved a lot of tension.

Your entire family will benefit from discussion on the topic of mediocrity. Work together as a family to develop an action plan to reject settling for just getting by, and encourage one another to live lives that honor God—lives committed to excellence, as He is Excellent (Psalm 8:1).

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1) Connie Leslie, “Will Johnny Get A’s” *Newsweek*, 8 July 1996, p. 72.

2) Ibid.



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