

## **The Message You Send**

Thomas W. Welch, Psy.D.  
Child and Adolescent Psychologist  
Humanex Academy

Much has been written about the importance of expectations in everything from business sales to effective leadership, athletic performance, education, and, yes, parenting.

The establishment of appropriate expectations, ones that are sufficiently challenging but also realistic, is indeed critical for any venture – especially so for the parent of a Breakaway.

However, I would like to focus for a while on the philosophy behind those expectations that effectively inform all our goals and outcomes.

The expectations you set shape not only the manner in which your young adult takes on adversity and challenge, but also the internal dialogue that drives the decisions they make - especially as it relates to their dreams of possibility.

It has been my observation that the expectations we place on children and adolescents tend to fall into two broad categories; Performance-Based and Learning-Based. While the intention may be the same, the difference in the drive behind and the long-term effect of each could not be greater. Performance-Based expectations are all about outcomes; putting points on the board, ticking boxes, collecting trophies, and no matter what, keeping pace with others. It's simply the tracking of behavior and output until the appearance of success is met.

On the other hand, Learning-Based expectations are about discovering the process needed to achieve desired goals. This approach recognizes the importance of outcomes, of course, but focuses on the many small things needed for them to occur with consistency. Struggle, failure, and a slower pace are actually embraced and encouraged, as they are understood to be crucial components of sustained growth and goal achievement. The measurement of progress for example, might initially only focus on how well they tolerate the frustration of learning. This is what is taught and nurtured.

Again, the process itself is what matters.

Performance-based expectations are not inherently bad. It's just that an over-emphasis on performance inadvertently sends a message that outcomes are more important than learning. Sadly, our current academic climate of standardized testing and score-based salaries for teachers, only perpetuates this superficial approach. It has become the dominant methodology in our education system. It has no doubt impacted autistic youths as external schedules and deadlines better suited for others, are imposed on them with great regularity. Everyone involved in their lives is then driven by the pressure to keep up – or at least maintaining the perception of keeping up; conversations about how hard to push and how high to set the bar become the obsession, rather than highlighting the skills, patience and persistence needed in the face of adversity.

For a population notorious for going at their own pace and trajectory, who do not easily break down larger goals into their incremental steps, who struggle when confronted with discomfort or obstacles, this makes little sense.

It is true those on the receiving end of this approach can learn to adapt. They can be pushed to jump through the hoops placed before them. That doesn't mean that growth and development are actually being achieved. As with anyone faced with the mounting pressure of deadlines, their focus turns to getting the job done as quickly and pain free as possible.

Shortcuts are taken, corners cut, and opportunities for growth may even be avoided if they are seen as a potential threat to the external image they want (need!) to project. These developing young adults become very skilled at deflection and avoidance, the masking of deficits. In the short run this façade can be extremely convincing, but the lack of skill development takes a huge toll further down the road.

The bottom line is that Performance and Learning oriented techniques reflect two opposite belief systems.

Performance people view ability as relatively fixed and unchanging. In other words, you are what you are. Those operating under this belief system do not establish high aspirations for themselves beyond their current ability. The perceived value of their own performance is based on the direct comparison to the expectations and performance of others, and they focus more on immediate results than long-term goals. They are also less likely to see the essential and unavoidable link between hard work and success. There is an assumption that the achievement observed in their peers occurs without any discomfort, just "comes naturally".

The Learning people though, view ability as a malleable and tangible quantity that can be developed over time. Thus, hard work and persistence, while uncomfortable, have value. One's position in the world, skill level and intelligence can be "grown". Nothing is fixed. Individual effort is real and every observed success is achievable.

Most of our students, at least in the beginning, have the former world view. If they can't immediately master some material, they are not inclined to waste time trying. They cover with excuses like "That's too hard for someone with my ability...", "It's boring", or "I just don't like that subject". They have not been gifted with the expectation that it is possible to take on big challenges if they are met with equally big efforts.

Once they have that new outlook, they are more eager to take on new and challenging tasks. They remain engaged in the learning process despite the discomfort, and in spite of the fact others can see that they do not yet know what they are doing. Not surprisingly, their performance continues to improve, because...well, it's a possibility now.

Interestingly enough, when experiencing success, Learning-oriented and Performance-oriented individuals are virtually indistinguishable. They both display positive attitudes, and are both

successful at deploying different strategies to overcome challenges. However, as soon as significant adversity is introduced into the equation, these opposite profiles emerge. Learning-oriented individuals increase their efforts, continue to deploy new strategies, and are able to improve their performance. The Performance-oriented individual is not able to do this. Instead, their attitude grows increasingly negative, with an overall deterioration in performance, and limited use of problem-solving strategies.

The Learning-Oriented approach to academics, and life in general, is what we strive to build in each of our students at Humanex Academy. For it is the internal tools associated with this approach that will enable each of them to take on challenges, to navigate setbacks, and ultimately, to reach their full potential.