



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

What's Wrong With My Child?

Joel's parents were extremely concerned about their 8-year-old son. While well behaved at home, Joel's school performance was a source of tension within the family. His grades were typically "Bs" or "Cs," but his parents knew Joel could do much better.

Both parents attended Joel's first evaluation session. They characterized their son as outgoing, funny, and a friend to everyone. Joel enjoyed life. When not at school, he would play sports, build Lego structures, or work with his dad on various carpentry projects.

School was a problem. Joel's grades were mediocre, and the parents made it clear that anything less than an "A" was unacceptable. Joel was tutored twice a week. The parents met every two weeks with Joel's teacher. Homework was particularly frustrating for Joel and his parents. His third grade teacher assigned about 20 minutes of work, but it would take Joel much longer. After homework, he had to work on his enrichment Spanish class that he took every Saturday. The parents wondered if Joel had an Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyslexia, or perhaps a Sensory Motor Integration problem.

As the academic pressures increased, Joel's personality gradually changed. He dreaded doing homework with his mom, and challenged why he had to take tutoring and Spanish enrichment classes.

I spent about six hours evaluating Joel, and referred him to two other specialists. I spoke with his classroom teacher, and had her complete several background forms. I wanted to be absolutely certain that my diagnosis was correct.

A difficult message

I met with the parents at the end of this long process. I had to deliver what I knew was going to be a very difficult message for them to hear.

I've found it best in reviewing test results to begin the session with a clear statement of my findings. "Joel is completely normal," I said. Both parents had incredulous looks on their faces.

“His intelligence level is within the average range, and his achievement is consistent with expectations. He doesn’t have any learning problems, language disorder, or any other deficit that interferes with his learning. He attends a very academically challenging school, and his grades are what you can expect throughout his school career.”

The parents were upset, so I tried to explain the results in a different way. “Joel is a delightful little boy with lots of wonderful traits, but he is not academically gifted. He is an average student. The best way you can help him is to lighten up on the pressure about homework, enrichment classes, and academic achievement.”

I tried to engage the parents in a discussion about my findings, but I knew I had lost them. They asked a few questions, but then ended our session. They asked for a copy of my report, and mentioned the need for a second opinion.

We all want to think of our children as special, and they are. However, not every child is academically gifted. An IQ score measures a child’s academic potential, not their value as person. There are lots of very important traits that are not captured on a school report card or an IQ test.

There’s nothing wrong with being normal.

The key is in how parents respond to their children with average learning ability.

Keep school in perspective. Grades are important, but it generally won’t work to pressure an academically average child to try to become an “A” student.

Find other non-academic activities for your child. Average kids know that school subjects do not come as easily to them as they do to some of their classmates. It’s important to help them achieve in other areas, such as sports, hobbies, or crafts. The key is for your child to feel good about their sense of achievement, even if that isn’t within an academic arena.

Avoid endless evaluations. Parents are legitimately concerned that their children may have some type of subtle learning disability or other issues that account for their school problems. School psychologists generally do an excellent job in evaluating such problems. If you bring your child to enough specialists, you may eventually find someone who identifies a problem. However, be careful of alleged “disabilities” that really don’t have a well-respected professional acceptance.

School performance matters, but please accept the reality that not everyone will achieve academic excellence. I haven’t seen Joel since his parents left my office, and I wonder how that delightful, friendly, and engaging little boy turned out.

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