

# Parenting *without* PUSHING

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THEY'RE AMONG THE MOST VEXING QUESTIONS PARENTS FACE: HOW HARD DO YOU PUSH YOUR CHILD? HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? WHEN DO YOU BACK OFF?

Say your child is a gifted scholar, athlete, musician or artist. In fact, in your mind your boy has enough raw talent to become the next Stephen Hawking, Yo-Yo Ma or Tiger Woods. If only she worked harder, you think, your daughter could be the next Kerri Strugg, Meryl Streep or Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

But right now your child seems less than motivated. What do you do? Do you push him to practice, even when he balks? Do you push her to compete, figuring she'll thank you later? And what if the issue is not great talent? All you really want is for your daughter to live up to her potential, for your son to do his best. But can it be achieved without pressure? Put simply, in this era of latchkey kids, time-strapped parents and single-family homes, is there such a thing as perfect parenting without pushing?

The short answer, according to four MU experts, is a qualified yes, and the best approach is to start on the right foot.

## TO PUSH OR NOT TO PUSH

To Jim Koller, the question of how much or little parents should push isn't even an issue. As a professor in the educational and counseling psychology department, Koller sees an increasing number of children treated for everything from academic difficulties to depression. Koller believes that parental pressure may be a significant cause of such problems.

Which is why, he says, "I think pushing, generally, is wrong. Encouraging would be a much better approach. If that doesn't work, back off and re-evaluate."

Of course Koller knows that most parents ache for their children to succeed in this competitive world. Pushy parents most often shove out of love. They want to provide for their kids as best they can.

But the key, he says, is to spend that same love and encouragement on rewarding both effort and performance. "It's old and trite," he says, "but I think it's true. It gets back to parents offering love and approba-



tion, and making their kids feel good about themselves."

When parents feel like pushing, Koller says, they should first try to understand their children's needs, wants and desires. Second, they should look at their own motivation for pushing. Many busy parents push because they haven't the time to do differently. Others push out of a misguided sense of how to promote excellence or because they, themselves, were pushed.

But just because Dad was a big basketball star, Koller says, doesn't mean Junior has to be. He may not have the ability or desire. He may be scared. For every pushy parent attempting to create a Tiger Woods, there are multitudes of others whose kids, in contempt, turn to blocks of wood. "What you don't want to do is push someone so much that they either stop trying or they fail," Koller says. "The first thing parents need to recognize is the individual strengths and weaknesses of their child."

Those strengths and weaknesses then need to be measured against family and societal values, parental expectations and exactly how those expectations have been communicated. By example? With kindness? By yelling? Let's say your child comes home with a bad grade. "You want to communicate that, although you may not like the grade, that does not mean you

do not like the child as a person," Koller says. "It is not a matter of pushing. It is a matter of encouraging and being realistic."

#### MY PROMISING PROGENY

But what if your child is talented? Won't pushing encourage that? Maybe. But Doug Abrams doubts it. Law Professor Abrams is a former All-East college hockey player who, for 30 years, has coached youth hockey, including a national championship team in 1988. He is president of the Jefferson City Youth Hockey Program.

Abrams' experience with kids, sports and pushy parents tells him this: There's only one Wayne Gretzky. One Michael Jordan. One Joe Montana. One Rebecca Lobo. Bonnie Blair and Jackie Joyner-Kersey. Says Abrams: "You almost have a better chance of winning the lottery than of getting your kid into the NBA."

Back in the 1970s, Abrams coached kids. "In the '90s, I also have to coach the parents." The lesson he impresses upon them: Stop. Stop forcing your kids to compete. Stop pressing your kids to win. And stop pushing, because you're taking the fun out of sports.

And that's not just Abrams talking, it's research. A 1980s Michigan State University sports survey of 26,000 kids did find at least some good news: More than half of American youngsters partici-

pated in an organized sport—anything from archery to soccer to gymnastics. "But the bad news," Abrams says, "was that half quit by age 12 and three-quarters quit by age 15." Why? Reasons ranged from finding sweethearts to getting driver's licenses. But most often, kids said their parents and coaches were spoiling the fun.

Abrams says that some youth-league coaches suffer from what he has dubbed the "Vince Lombardi syndrome," after the legendary Green Bay Packers coach. "They sit behind a desk all week, put a whistle around their necks on the weekend and expect the kids to be miniature pros," Abrams says.

Some parents promote this excess. With equipment, travel, food and registration fees, youth sports these days can cost big bucks, as much as \$800 a season. "A lot of parents are saying, 'If we're putting money into that, we want a return,'" Abrams says. "This attitude only puts unhealthy pressure on the kids." Pressure to compete. Pressure to win. Instead, says Abrams: "The ultimate return should be the child's fun and fulfillment—lifelong memories that money can't buy."

About 10 years ago, Abrams says, "I had a player who missed a couple of practices. And this was a kid who never missed a practice ever. When he came back, I said, 'What happened? Did you have the flu?' He said, 'I just didn't think I wanted to play anymore. My father makes me feel stupid every time I play.'"

Abrams says parents should watch for symptoms that the fun has gone out of sport: listlessness on the playing field; feigned illnesses or other excuses to avoid attending practices; misleading or failing to inform parents about upcoming competitions. "Many children resist telling their parents, 'I don't want to play,'" Abrams says. "The parents should be smart enough to know."

Youngsters thrive on positive reinforcement, Abrams says: "Parents have to learn to leave the game at the ball field. If the

#### PARENTING QUIZ

**Q: What's the biggest reason kids quit sports?**

**A:** Pushy parents and coaches take the fun out. Solution: Give young athletes pats on the back whether they're experiencing the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat.

**Q: Do you expect your son or daughter to win soccer games in return for your investment in equipment and travel?**

**A:** If the answer is yes, you're being hyper-competitive. Chill out.

**Q: How can parents help kids bounce back after a trauma?**

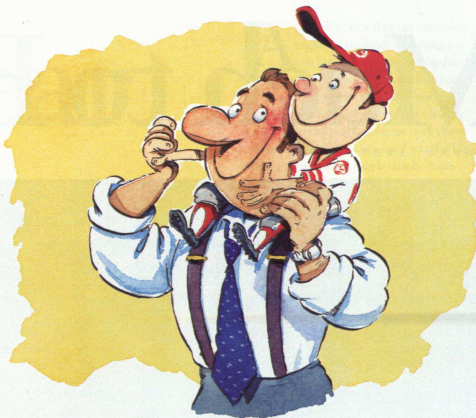
**A:** Slow and steady wins the race. Don't expect them to recover in a few weeks, though they might. Children thrive on family routines.

**Q: When working parents spend less time than they'd like with the kids, Mom and Dad sometimes feel which emotion?**

**A:** Guilt. That can lead to coddling. Give yourself a break; somebody's got to bring home the pizza.

**Q: Which behavior should parents reward: earnest effort or good performance?**

**A:** Both.



team wins, pat the kid on the back. If they lose, still pat the kid on the back."

#### PLEASE GET WELL—NOW!

When parents push, it's not always toward perfection. Sometimes it's away from pain. Although kids truly are resilient, parents occasionally misjudge, urging them to get better too fast.

The ways in which children's lives can overflow are familiar to Associate Professor Larry Kreuger of the School of Social Work. Two of his studies examine the emotional aftermath of more than 13,000 children in 16 Missouri counties affected by the Midwestern flood of 1993.

"In a nutshell," Kreuger says, "up to a year later, 90 percent of the children were doing just fine. That is one important message. But 10 percent had not fully recovered." On psychological tests, they scored above normal for anxiety and depression. "In a lot of ways, parents underestimate the traumas their children may have gone through."

That error may stem from the some-

times misleading symptoms of long-term trauma in children. Instead of being shaken or scared, traumatized kids may end up acting overly sweet and angelic. They may hide—for Mom and Dad's sake—the fact that everything is awful. "If I act happy," they think, "perhaps Mom and Dad will get over their sadness." But behavior is never that simple.

Other children couldn't sleep; wouldn't eat; cleaned excessively; cried in fear when their mothers or fathers left the room; worried excessively about rain, even in normal weather; had memory problems; were restless; or withdrew emotionally.

"The flood was particularly problematic because it was particularly long-lasting," Kreuger says. "It wasn't like a fire that flashed through where people could see things regenerate. Lives were disrupted for an extremely long time."

Kreuger's advice: Whatever the trauma, parents should take care not to underestimate hidden psychological and emotional effects. When in doubt, seek professional counseling. Rather than pushing

a child to feel better fast—"Don't worry, Kiddo, you're fine."—Kreuger prefers a more patterned approach. He says children benefit greatly from routine during stressful times: wake-up times, bedtimes, shared meals. Also, Kreuger says, include children in making plans. Set family time aside where everyone can be together. "Allow them [children] to get control of their own destinies."

#### YOU SAY PUSH, I SAY POLISH

To be sure, this isn't to suggest that all pushing is prohibited. Or that parents be namby-pamby. Far from it. Setting expectations and exacting discipline, says Kathy Thornburg, are parental responsibilities.

If parents err regarding pushing, says the professor of human development and family studies, it's in either pushing too much or not at all. While some parents create boundaries so tight as to be suffocating and goals so high as to be out of reach, others establish no goals, boundaries and expectations whatsoever.

Extremes on both ends bother Thornburg. In one scenario, the little Buster takes over.

"We've all seen something as simple as the parent in the grocery store dealing with a child fussing over a candy bar," Thornburg says. "It becomes easier to give in to the child's demands rather than to teach the child what 'no' means. I see that coming from guilt—parents not spending as much time with the child as they want to."

It's difficult, Thornburg says, because teaching takes time. But teaching, not pushing, is a parental obligation. It's part of what parenting is all about.

The flip side, Thornburg says, is that it's often easier for parents to push too hard, "to make demands on children in a forceful way, rather than take time to teach children self-control.

But that, too, is a parent's job. "It's not about pushing," Thornburg says. "It comes under the rubric of discipline and guidance." ❁