

MY CHILD MUST PASS

Have we ever come across a parent who insists that his child must be six foot three inches tall? Do we live in a world where every person is over six foot three inches tall? Does any parent set out, once their child is born, to do everything possible, taking special extra sessions, to make sure his child grows to be more than six foot three inches tall? Being tall may have some advantages in life (seeing things in a crowd) but also some disadvantages (standing out in a crowd!) but do we have to be tall to get on in life? Should we give prizes at school for the tallest pupil?

The answer to those questions is easy and indeed logical. However, it is astonishing how many parents insist, demand even, that in academic terms their child will be six feet three inches, in other words, gain all As. "My child must pass," they cry. However, by such logic, we are also saying that every child must be a brilliant sportsman, a fantastic musician, a gifted actor, a sparkling debater, a cunning chess player, a prolific public speaker. Everyone must be capable of everything!

Every parent now seems to think that his child must pass. There is a popular cartoon showing the difference between schools thirty years ago and schools today. In the first picture, depicting thirty years ago, the mother and father stand beside the teacher, holding their child's exercise book with an F symbol, and turn to their child to ask the question: "What's the meaning of this grade?" In the second picture, depicting modern day, the mother and father stand beside their child, holding their child's exercise book with an F symbol, and turn to the teacher to ask the question: "What's the meaning of this grade?" In both scenarios, it is implied that every child must achieve an A grade.

Grudgingly, eventually, we may concede that not every child will pass their examination, no matter how much time they were given to learn. But we still claim that *my* child must pass and so we expect the teachers to make it happen. While it is fully understandable that every parent wants their child to pass, we have to ask, however, why, exactly, our child must pass. Does our child have a legal right to pass examinations? Is he expected, entitled even, to pass, simply because he is our child? From where does such an argument come? Perhaps it comes from a parent's fear of what his friends and colleagues at work might think if his child does not shine as much as theirs. The child's need to pass then has nothing to do with academics or career but purely a parent's lack of self-esteem. Perhaps it stems from the experience that the parent had at school! Is he demanding the child does well because he did not do well and has suffered ever since or is he doing so because he did well so his child must do as well as him also? There is sadly no logic in such thinking; genes do play a part but a family of three children can include one very intelligent child, one hard-working determined child and one with severe learning difficulties – how can they all be like their brilliant (or maybe not so brilliant) father or mother?

Having reflected on from where such an argument might come, we need also to reflect on where such an argument might lead. The drive for a child to pass examinations often stems from the fact that the parent wants his child to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer (presumably so they can look after the parents in old age). That implies that every child can be a lawyer, doctor or engineer. Do we want the world to be full of lawyers, doctors or engineers? In order for our child to pass, we may be tempted also to go to inordinate lengths to achieve such a goal but such a blinkered pursuit only reveals a lack of understanding of the immense importance of all the other equally vital aspects of a school's curriculum. Our child passing at the expense of physical, social, cultural and spiritual development is like a horse deciding to stand on one leg.

Why is it that we are so obsessed with our children passing when we are not so obsessed with our child being small? Our heights vary and we have no problem with that. We all grow in different ways, at different times; in a similar way, we all develop intellectually in different ways, at different times. We start with what we have naturally and take appropriate action to ensure that we do develop naturally – eating more food does not necessarily mean we will grow taller (wider, yes, but not higher). So to the parent who demands that his child must pass, we have just two simple words of advice (offered with the greatest of respect): grow up!