

Grades do not define our worth

I still remember the first grade I received on a German test in high school. It's been more than 16 years, but I still remember my heart sinking when I saw that I had only scored 50%. I can't remember the vocabulary I was being tested on. In fact, I can only remember a handful of German words at all now. But I still remember the feelings that I had that day, the thoughts that I would never be able to learn that language.

Reflecting back now, I can understand that my disappointment wasn't that I had only remembered 50% of the words I was being tested on. It was true, I had only remembered half of the words, and understanding that helped me realise that I needed to study more if I ever wanted to be able to speak German. My disappointment stemmed from what I felt the grade said about me. It was the first time I had scored poorly in a test, and I was suddenly feeling like I wasn't as smart as those around me.

See, there's a disconnect between what grades are actually for, and what students often think about them.

What grades are actually for: showing our children what they know and what they still need to work on.

What many students think about grades: Where do I rank among my peers? Am I a high achiever? Or am I not as smart as everyone else?

Unfortunately, for many students, this type of thinking causes increasing stress and anxiety in their final years of high school, where an over-fixation on ATAR scores results in many students feeling as though their self-worth can be summed up in a single number.

Our task: to teach our kids that their grade isn't who they are. This is important for students who are struggling, but just as important for those who get perfect marks on almost every test. Yet before we leap into trying to teach this to our kids, the first person who needs to believe it is you.

You probably grew up believing that your life prospects depended on the outcome of each test and exam you did. But look around you. Can you pick the ATAR score of your co-worker? Which of the parents in the school pick-up line was the dux of their school? Which of the people at your church or gym or pottery class failed their Geography exam in high school? Can't tell? Of course not! Our grades are part of our story. But they do NOT define our story.

In fact, our grades impact our lives much less than our attitude to our grades do. For example, there are many pathways to most careers. You could be a high school drop out and go on to be a doctor or a lawyer or a particle physicist if you're patient and determined enough (and I know several who were dropouts and still managed to have these types of jobs). You just need to believe that it's possible and believe that you can get

there. But if you allow yourself to believe that your low grade prohibits you from achieving your goal, you're limiting yourself.

Now that you've reminded yourself that grades don't define your child, you're prepared for when they come to you with the inevitable bad grade. When that happens, remember these 3 things:

1. Remind yourself that grades are much less important than your attitude about grades. To model that, you need to focus less on the grade, and more on the attitude.

2. Here's what it sounds like when we focus on the grade:

"60% hey? Looks like there's room for improvement."

Here's what it sounds like when we focus on the attitude:

"How do you feel about your mark?"

Don't even mention the number (or the letter, depending on how grading works at your school)! Instead, ask them how they feel about how they did.

Remind them that grades reflect where they are in their learning journey. They are not the final destination. Work with them as they reflect on what they understand well, what they could work on further, and then make a plan for how they can do that. Maybe they will ask their teacher for extra maths problems. Or maybe you can listen to them practice their next oral presentation.

3. Cultivate a growth mindset. If your child comes to you saying *"I can't do fractions"...* or *"I'm no good at breaststroke"...* or *"I don't understand titration"...* just add the word *"yet"*.

"I can't do fractions...yet" reminds them that while they can't do it now, they can learn them one day.

"I'm no good at breaststroke...yet" encourages them that with practice, they can get better.

"I don't understand titration... yet" reassures them that they might understand it tomorrow.

Being able to accomplish great things doesn't depend on high test scores. It just depends on an inner conviction that greatness can be accomplished. Believe in your child. Believe in their ability to accomplish greatness. And believe that they can accomplish great things even with a low grade on whatever test they had today.



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