

KNOW YOUR CHILD

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Do you really *know* your child?

It doesn't take most parents very long—perhaps as soon as the second child comes along—to realize that children are not all alike. Even those reared in the same environment and under the same circumstances, being taught the same values and in the same way, manifest fundamental differences.

EACH CHILD IS DIFFERENT

Individuals *are* fundamentally different. They have different interests, different strengths and weaknesses, different ways of doing things, and different approaches to and outlooks on life. Is it any wonder, then, that children also have different ways of learning?

Education is not an “industrial process” that is alike for everyone, producing identical products. Students must be taught as individuals. What works for one might not work for everyone.

EACH CHILD HAS STRENGTHS

All children are smart but in different ways or combinations of ways. Some are smart in vocabulary, others in logic, and still others in visualization, art or music, physical ability, or social skills. The parents' task is to discover *how* their children are smart, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and then to work to encourage their children to do their best, learning in the context of that learning style.

A child's strong areas won't be fully developed, of course, but he or she will exhibit clear indications of what those areas are, and they can be improved upon and developed. Where our children are weak, we can help them work to improve, making them less weak. The parents' job, then, is two-fold: to discern the child's strengths and to convince the child that he or she can develop them. We should *inspire* our children by showing them that they *are* smart and where.

Harvard's Dr. Howard Gardner believed that children are born with all intelligences but must be "awakened" to the fact of their strengths. (Koch, *How Am I Smart?*, 18–19) Their strengths are God given abilities; He "wires" each child uniquely. It is your responsibility to help your child *discover* that pattern and to *develop* it to his or her full potential. Moreover, Christian parents have a duty to help the child not only *devote* the use of that intelligence and ability to God and His purposes but also to *deliver*, or follow through, on that pledge.

PARENTS MUST NURTURE THOSE STRENGTHS

In short, parents must nurture what is natural in the child. Too often, however, we probably do more to hinder or even paralyze the development of the child's natural bent than to develop it. Our tendency, when we see a child becoming deeply immersed in something he enjoys, is to fear that the interest is unnatural or too intense. We then try to temper or stifle that interest. Rather, if it is a legitimate subject, we should try to direct, shape, and mold the interest into a positive, constructive, and balanced pursuit.

For example, during a beginning-of-the-year open house at the school where my wife teaches second grade, a new first-grader expressed great interest in her second-grade trains theme, and he obviously already knew a lot about trains. But his parents had to redirect his focus to his own first-grade classroom and its theme. There is a proper time and place for everything. Sometimes, we must delay or postpone a child's natural interest in something, but we shouldn't seek to cancel it altogether.

We also do damage to our child's learning by unnecessary criticism, punishment of strengths, perfectionism, or teasing. Be careful what you say about your child's interests. Don't ignore or forbid them, but rather encourage them within the context of their current responsibilities.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

It's never too late to begin this nurturing process, but the earlier you start it, the better. Also remember that it's a long-term process. It won't happen overnight—maybe not within a whole school year. But we definitely must not give up. If we are consistent and persistent, we *will* see results in time.

The key to this whole process is for the parents to *get to know their child!* And how does one do that?

1. **Observe**—Look for patterns of behavior, areas in which the child shows interest. As Yogi Berra famously said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.” Know what they are doing and who their friends are.
2. **Listen**—Really listen to what your child says and how he or she says it (including nonverbal signals). Ask questions to get them talking about what they enjoy doing or are studying or reading. Good listening will help you know how to talk to your children about their interests, problems, and strengths and weaknesses and then help them develop in those areas.
3. **Experiment**—Provide them with numerous opportunities to engage in many different kinds of activities. Discover what they enjoy and want to pursue on their own. Keep what works and set aside (but don’t discard) what doesn’t. They might later develop an interest in some of the things you set aside. Your goal, of course, is to encourage them to use their interests and strengths in the pursuit of self-directed, independent learning, which is the most permanent form of learning.
4. **Learn**—That is, learn *how* your child learns. Some people are verbal learners. Others are visual, tactile, or kinesthetic learners. Knowing how your child learns will help you direct your child’s learning opportunities and interests.

Beware, however, of limiting your child to one learning style. There is no one “right” or “best” learning style. The key is to discover and then direct your child’s *natural* style. Perhaps this was what Solomon meant when he wrote, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (KJV).

The phrase “in the way he should go,” literally rendered, is “according to his way.” This means “suitable to the needs of the child.” (Stevenson, *Commentary on Proverbs*, 300) Who better to know and act upon these things than you, the parent?