

Imagining a Real Child

As I talk with parents around Arlington, I'm struck by what seems to be this growing pressure parents are experiencing to not only have kids who are better than average in everything- and preferably at a very early age - but to have kids who are excelling in everything. I'm wondering what this pressure is all about – where is this coming from? Could it be how we imagine our children is affecting our expectations?

In her book, The Six Stages of Parenthood, Ellen Galinsky talks about the different developmental stages of parenting. Unlike child and adolescent development which is firmly based in biological development, parent growth and development is an interactive process; the development of the child influences the development of the parent.

We all begin our parenting journey at the very beginning with the pregnancy. Whether it's your first child or your fifth child, the journey begins again with each child. Galinsky calls this first stage the “image-making” stage. This is where we prepare for the future by imagining what this child will be like. Our images and expectations are personal. They're formed by our own experiences as children, our parents' expectations, our spouse's expectations and our friends' expectations. Our images and expectations are also cultural. How we imagined boys and how we imagined girls has changed dramatically in the American culture in the last 30 years.

Think back to your first pregnancy and how you imagined this child to be. I remember imagining my first child running around, loving to be outdoors, wanting to learn to read. Interestingly enough those are all things I like to do - funny how that works! When we imagine this child we are more apt to imagine the child like ourselves – that's only natural. Of course, since you and your spouse are two different people, you each may be imagining this child in two totally different ways.

Then very abruptly, the image-making stage ends. A very real and very individual little person is born and like all babies, this one comes with his own unique characteristics and his own unique temperament. The remaining stages of parenting are about carefully nurturing the development of this unique child so that she can reach her highest potential and become a caring, healthy, successful adult. In order to nurture this **real** child, we may have to reconcile what we imagined this child to be with the real child living in our house.

This is not an easy task. If you've imagined a child who will sit on your lap and listen to stories and take long walks and talk quietly and we have instead, a boisterous, active child who loves being with lots of kids and running as fast as she can, there's a disconnect between reality and our image. If you imagined a child who loves sports and you have a child who loves to sit and draw for hours you have a disconnect. If you imagined a child who loves school and have a child who hates school, you have a disconnect. There is real disappointment when what we imagined doesn't happen and we have to recognize that disappointment and mourn what is a real loss.

The tricky part is recognizing and being able to name the disconnects between what we imagined and the reality of this child and then owning our responsibility as parents to learn and grow as we reconcile these differences. We have to be clear that the clash between what we imagined and what is real is our issue. It is never our child's issue.

The Assets Model is built around a very clear belief that all our children are to be valued for who they are, not what they do. Children are not responsible for fulfilling our fantasies. It is grossly unfair to ask our children to become something other than whom and what they are. The greatest power we have as parents is to reflect back to our children our unconditional love and acceptance of them as individuals. If we reflect back to our children our disappointment in their identity as people, we're pulling our love and support right out from under them. We make it so much harder for them to reach their potential.

Our imaginings and expectations continue all through our child's development and affect everything we do with our children. Accepting our children for who they are is a tremendous gift to them. But it's not easy. In the daily pressure of living in this very competitive society, it is an enormous task to be a parent who intentionally focuses on building on the positive potential of this very real child – no matter how that plays out.

Take a minute and think about your “imagined child” and all your expectations and then think about this wonderful unique real child you have. Think about all you're doing to nurture this real child's growth. Then give yourselves some credit. Take some of the pressure off yourselves and celebrate all you're doing and will continue to do for this unique child.