

Floors and Ceilings

The image of floors and ceilings is a handy one. The floor can represent a minimum acceptable and the ceiling can be the best possible. We live much of our lives between ceilings and floors. Parenting is enjoyable when our children are at the ceiling, well-behaved and obtaining perfect grades. But in truth, childhood is an ongoing work-in-progress and our children's behavior and accomplishments will often fall below the perfection represented by the ceiling.

Think for a moment about a typical day. When you are at work, does everything you do, every project, every phone call, hit the standard represented by the ceiling? Probably not. In your committee or volunteer work, there is probably a range. Some days we excel and other days we squeak by. And this is acceptable and not cause for alarm. Employees have work-related goals and individuals have personal goals and time to meet them. We don't expect "ceiling" behavior from adults every minute of every day.

But what would it be like to be a child in a family with floors and ceilings mixed up? If a child was expected to be perfectly well-behaved every minute of every day, parents would be frequently frustrated and angry. There would be constant discipline, harsh tones and a general sense of tension. Children would be unable to meet the standard set by such misguided parents and would often feel as if they were letting their parents down. Not a healthy way to grow up.

And it is the same with academics. It is not realistic to expect a higher standard for a child than we set for ourselves. We don't do "A" work every minute of every day and we shouldn't expect children to get all "A" grades. Even bright, hard-working children need to be allowed the same humanity we grant ourselves. Children are more talented in some subjects than others. They will have on weeks and off weeks, just like us. They will be more energized by some challenges than others.

This was never clearer to me than when I asked myself these questions. Is every article I write my best work? Does every parent presentation qualify as an “A” presentation? Do I hit a homerun every time I meet with a parent or a child? Believe me, the answer to these questions is no.

There are families who raise their children *as if the highest possible grade is the lowest acceptable grade*. This does not work for their children. When I work with this type of situation, the children seem more anxious than children should be. And the parents seem more anxious, too. They will talk about the college admissions process even if their children are not yet in Middle School. And they seem confused about the ramification of an A- or a B+ now and then. When parents are confused about ceilings and floors, children are stressed and more likely to have difficulty as adolescents. The teenage years can be a challenging time, but the difficulties produced by unrealistic expectations are unnecessary and avoidable.

Good behavior is important and high achievement is important, but good behavior isn't perfect behavior and high achievement doesn't mean all A grades. How can parents encourage good behavior and high achievement without doing unnecessary damage to their children?

Healthy, high achieving teenagers have parents who emphasized character and effort instead of grades. And when character and effort are taught and rewarded, children achieve to their own highest level. Parents who keep their focus on the skills needed for high achievement are giving their children a great gift. Instead of setting unrealistic goals and then getting upset when they are not met, these parents allow their children to practice staying organized and recognize and reward hard work and caring about their studies. And when a disappointing grade comes along, a few minutes review and a consequence is sometimes all a child needs to make the needed correction. No stress, no anxiety, no worries about eating disorders, perfectionism, depression during adolescence. A childhood that includes “ceiling” moments, “floor” moments and everything in between.