



# Lessons Learned After 20 Years of Testing

Traveling recently, I was reflecting on one of the professional activities I have done for over 20 years — testing students of various ages for possible learning difficulties (ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, learning disabilities). I realized I have learned a lot of lessons from the process — interviewing parents; testing students from 5 years old through elementary school, high school, college students and adults; following up with the students and their families years later.

It is not an exhaustive list but here are some of my observations:

**Each of us has a unique combination of strengths, abilities, personal history, education and training, personality, family background and values.**

It would seem this should go without saying, but most of us compare ourselves to those around us — and come up “short”. There is almost always somebody better than we are — even in our strength areas. And this is true in families as well. Children need to find their own unique *combination* of strengths and talents (one of their siblings may be better in a specific area). And this is *especially* true for individuals whose skills differ significantly from the rest of the family (e.g. artists in a family of entrepreneurs).

**How we reach a certain goal or approach tasks is often more informative than whether we succeed or fail.**

One of the fascinating aspects of my job while testing is to observe *how* an individual completes a task (or tries to). There are lots of ways to correctly solve a problem — and there are lots of different ways to make errors. How we approach a task, and what we do in response to barriers or confusion ultimately says a lot about a person — and how they will deal with challenges in daily life (persevere, give up quickly, ask for help, use trial & error, use logic to problem solve).

**Culture emphasizes different skills and abilities over different time periods.**

Part of “success” in life has to do with the match between an individual’s unique skill set and what the culture is currently emphasizing. I often tell parents (usually of students who do not have good reading or writing skills) that I am thankful I wasn’t born on a farm in the 1800’s — because I would have been relegated to a ditch digger or to slopping the hogs (feeding them, to you urbanites). I have virtually NO mechanical skills or problem-solving ability — and that is what was needed to be successful in that setting.

## Parents who have successful children strive to understand their children, provide support and resources to build their strengths (and overcome their deficits).

One of the more frustrating experiences is to interact with a parent who has a very narrow definition of what “success” is (e.g. good grades in school; being athletic) and their child doesn’t have the natural abilities to do well in the desired area. Wise parents observe and discover the strength areas of their children and help those skills develop — even if it is not a strength (or area of interest) of the parent. These are the youth who struggle in reading and writing who go on to become successful in business, the military, or just great all around people — excellent husbands, wives and parents.

## Early, easy success in life often hinders more sustainable long-term success later in life.

A pattern I have seen repeatedly is a highly talented child — bright, athletic, good-looking, socially skilled, musical — they seem to have it all. And they are “stars” early in life — especially grade school, possibly all the way through high school (sometimes, college). But at some point, “the wheels fall off”. The student hits challenges they do not have the habits, disciplines and emotional chutzpa to overcome. Extremely bright and talented students often do not have the opportunity to learn good study skills, perseverance or handling failure during the early stages of their lives. Conversely, individuals who grow into self-responsible and contributing members of their community: a) understand and accept their weaknesses; b) respond to (and do not resent) the demands of daily life, and c) find ways to gradually move forward in their life and career paths. Most successful individuals aren’t “stars” or people who “hit it big” — they are individuals who consistently and repeatedly try to make good choices.

## Successful parents (and individuals) focus on behaviors and habits that lead to success (daily discipline, perseverance, practice, learning building block skills, doing a job well done, learning how to problem-solve).

Wise parents understand that there are behaviors, choices and attitudes that lead to positive results. Although they may use grades or achievement as measuring sticks of progress, they do not emphasize the symbols of success as much as the behaviors which lead to success. Conversely, parents whose children struggle later in life (high school, college and beyond) are overly concerned with “looking successful” — good grades, high test scores, winning in sports. Often this leads to patterns of excessive help by the parents, and cheating by the students. Ultimately, their lack of skill or knowledge becomes apparent.

If you are a parent, remember that parenting is a marathon. Keep the long-term goal in mind. Don’t settle for the easy, short symbols of success. Let your child struggle — how else will they become stronger?

If you are a grandparent, teacher, or principal — or you just know someone who may benefit from these observations, consider sharing them with someone you know.

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