



## Unleashing Our Kids' Potential

A Family Centre Parent Tip Sheet by guest contributor, Pete Saunders

My son, despite having cerebral palsy, wants to do and learn so much that it actually excites and worries me at the same time. My concern is that I am not always capable of understanding how to help him unleash his full potential. I have seen enough to be convinced that most other children are like this as well. They are driven to learn, explore, and do well regardless of the obstacles.

I know a 10 year-old girl through the children's chess club that I offer at my son's primary school. She was an advanced player for her age but she decided to stop coming because she was frustrated by the pace of her peers. When I realized this, we made a new agreement. She and I now play chess during the times when her peers play each other. She is a valuable member of our group but we almost lost her. By adapting to meet her need for a challenge, we have kept her in the club and allowed her peers time to catch up.

I believe that all of our children, disabled or not, were made for something special. They each have a unique calling and purpose in life. Our purpose, as parents, is to help our children discover their purpose and prepare them to fulfill it. Sometimes that requires adjustments. It always requires relationship and attention to their uniqueness. The following five ideas offer thoughts about how to support your child as they take on challenges:

- 1. Listen to them:** Children have a natural curiosity, which explains their unending stream of questions. You know the questions that start with the logical but sometimes trying word, "why"? They are hungry for knowledge and that is great because we know that knowledge is power. Recently, my 5 year-old son asked me if birds were good or bad. After I told him they were neither good nor bad, he wanted to know why birds poop on people's heads. In addition to the humor his question provided, I was happy to learn about some of his thoughts and reasoning abilities. The things we learn from listening to our child, or any child, can be amazing. They require plenty of opportunity to speak in order to form those questions and learn what they are trying to understand. We may not always feel like listening but it pays off to never be too busy to listen to our children.
- 2. Observe them:** As a child, C. S. Lewis loved animals, both natural and fictional. His family and nurse (nanny) realized this and provided him with opportunities to explore his passion. He read Beatrix Potter's tales of Peter Rabbit. He made up stories about talking animals. He and his brother Warnie invented a make-believe world they called Boxen, which was run by animals. If that sounds familiar, it should. Lewis is the author of many popular stories for children, including a famous and well-loved story known as The Chronicles of Narnia.  
  
As parents, we can come to understand our children better through observation. Make the effort to notice their choice of toys/games, activities, interests and tendencies. See who, or what, they pretend to be and what stories and activities they engage in most often. Observing your children has many benefits. Many parents have been able to get crucial early support for children because they observed signs of developmental issues (social, physical, mental, etc). It is also a way of learning to speak their language. The early bond that you form by joining their play in preschool and primary school will pay off later when they are young adults and have trust in your input. So, watch them and learn.
- 3. Engage them:** Talk with your children often. Ask them plenty of questions and allow them the time they need to answer. Expose them to the larger world around us. Include them in things like grocery shopping. Take them to art galleries and the aquarium and wonder together about the mysteries you see. Bring your children to your workplace if you can. Complete special projects together. Make puzzles and artwork and travel to interesting places and sites together. The joy comes from showing them how smart and intelligent they are rather than how smart you are.

- 4. Encourage them:** Modern psychology places the need to belong and be accepted just above the need for physical safety. According to famous Christian author, Dr. Gary Chapman, all of us, including children, have a need to be affirmed. Some people need more support than others and children require encouragement the most as they find their place and identity in the world. Speaking positively and using encouraging words with our children lets them know that we are proud of them and that their innate potential to accomplish great things. Children first learn to be resilient and overcome setbacks and failures on the way to success when they realize that they are safe in the approval of their parents. As children get older, they will remember our words, both good and bad. Don't forget that positive communication is vital to the establishment of a strong, trusting relationship with your children.
- 5. Love them:** The famous Beatles song, "All You Need is Love," claims that anything can be accomplished, if we have love. It's true that showering your children with love rather than things is probably the best thing we can do to help them reach their full potential. Children require plenty of hugs and kisses. They need to hear, "I love you," everyday. Most importantly, they need to see, feel, and experience their parent's love. Love is something that looks and feels even better than it sounds. The sooner a child knows that he or she securely has love, the sooner they will develop the confidence to take chances and achieve things.

Parents are very powerful. I believe that power is meant to be used for the loving guidance of children so they can discover their own power and potential. The next time you see or speak to your child, imagine seeing them for the first time. See who they might become if they had all the support they could use and then help them to be that person. Use every opportunity in your own potential to help them unleash their full potential.

**PETE SAUNDERS** is married to Annesa Saunders, and together, they are the proud parents of Dakari, a happy and loving 6 year-old with cerebral palsy. Pete is the founder of Razors & Diapers, an organization committed to strengthening families by empowering fathers. He runs a fatherhood blog at <http://blog.razorsanddiapers.com>, and is also a blogger for the American Counseling Association. He writes a fatherhood column for B3: Bump, Baby, and Beyond, a Caribbean parenting magazine. He enjoys bowling, reading, and martial arts movies. Pete is currently pursuing a master's in Social and Community Services at Capella University.

If you would like more information on this topic you can contact Family Centre and ask to speak with the Community Support Worker at 232-1116.