

DON'T PUSH

I HAD A LITTLE patient who at three did not talk—or so it seemed.

One day her mother—plagued by relatives with such queries as, "How's the talking department coming?"—visited me in tears. "Doctor Hill," she said, "I want the truth. If there's anything wrong, tell me."

I assured her there was no evidence of anything being wrong. And not long after, the little girl began to talk. It was then the family realized that the little girl's gibberish had actually been talk, although obscure. Actually, the girl had been using long sentences and a large vocabulary for her age. Today she is a college graduate, engaged in magazine work, and planning to be a writer.

I use this case to point out an important fact. No child should be expected to perform like the child next door. He is what no other child in this world has ever been or ever will be—he is himself. Just as he has his own features and personality, so does he have his own rate of growth and development.

There is, of course, a timetable which establishes an average time for the different stages of development. But you will note I say "average"—not normal. What is normal for one child is not normal for another.

After many years in pediatrics, I consider the rate at which infants and toddlers develop to be unimportant, provided regular physical examinations uncover no problem. Should there be any disability, the sooner it is discovered the better.

A little boy of two, for example, could not walk and was brought to me. I discovered he had flat feet and prescribed that lifts be put in his shoes. Six months later, his body mechanism no longer askew, he was walking normally.

But in most instances development is simply an individual thing; rushing it is pointless—changing it, potentially dangerous.

I recently attended a Little League game and, while leaving the ball field, I heard one father harangue his son all the way to the car. "I hope you're good and ashamed," he growled. "I certainly am. Of all the stupid plays I've ever seen in my life . . ." I doubt if such viciousness helps an immature athlete improve: I am quite certain, though, it can develop traits no parent wants—rebelliousness and resentment.

It is not only fathers who push their children. A mother expects Suzy to get the lead in the



YOUR CHILD!

He isn't talking at three? She isn't poised at 13? Maybe some encouragement is needed—but not nagging and prodding

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school play and be invited to the most desirable parties. Or she expects Dickie to stand at the head of his class and be the most decorated scout.

Our children must, of course, be encouraged to use their potentials. But in this process they never should be made to feel clumsy or in any way inferior. Most important of all, they never should be allowed to think that they are a disappointment. Boys and girls who are constantly nagged or prodded toward better performances often come to believe themselves unloved and, as a result, become seriously insecure.

The resentment our children may harbor if pushed too far and too often was illustrated at a dinner party the other evening. Someone suggested to a father that his son might make his school's varsity team if he put a little more effort into it. The father's face darkened. "If he makes it, he makes it," he said sharply. "But no kid of mine is going to be pushed, pushed!"

LATER he was apologetic about his outburst. "I must resent my father more than I realize," he said. "He was a great guy in many ways. But, academically and athletically, he expected me to deliver top performances. Once I brought home a 95 average, I was stuck with always getting a 95 average—or better. Any time I came off a football field pleased with some play, I was sure to hear how I should have followed it with another play—and won the game. I got to be a pretty nervous and unhappy kid."

"But you kept trying," I said.

"Yes, and sometimes, remembering how I used to feel, I wonder why. I realize now that my father, subconsciously at least, was disappointed in himself—with no need to be, really—and wanted to show off through me. Let's hope he got what he wanted. The resentment I just exhibited makes it pretty clear it came at a very high price."

He shrugged and grinned: "Well, Doctor, maybe some good will finally come of it. Like I said, nobody's going to push my boy!"

Parents love their children and will—as a rule—make any sacrifice for their happiness. Yet, unwittingly, they subtract from this happiness by pushing their boys and girls toward performances far beyond normal, unstrained capabilities. It is wise to let children enjoy their young world according to their individuality—with no more interference than a friendly assist now and then.

COVER:

In the cool of autumn, families sometimes turn to raiding the pumpkin patch—their own, of course—remembering that Halloween is not far off. Photograph by Jim Pond.

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