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Helping your child find a passion: One mother's story

A mother shares the lessons she learned while helping her son with a learning disability find hobbies he could put his heart into.

By Melinda Sacks

If you have a child with learning disabilities, chances are someone has given you the same advice I've been hearing since our son was first struggling to learn to read. "Just find his passion," teachers, counselors and tutors would tell me. "Once you know what he is really great at, you can use it to teach almost any skill — from memorizing math facts based on baseball scores to writing a great essay about a favorite musician."

But such advice is easy to dole out and less so to follow. Our son Alex did not clearly excel at sports or school or music. In fact, it seemed that he struggled with almost everything. He found the most popular activities of the neighborhood kids — soccer, basketball, and band — too chaotic, stressful, and competitive.

It took years for our Alex to find his own passions — golf and playing the drums. And they aren't necessarily activities that will win him scholarships or public recognition. What is much more important, we have learned, is that he has discovered the things he can be reasonably good at and that he can enjoy doing for relaxation and pleasure.

Before we came to drums and golf, though, my husband and I tried to introduce our son to numerous activities that didn't work out at all. There was the soccer team his dad coached that seemed to bring out the worst in our kid, who was an anxious, unathletic 8-year-old. Swim team, with its loud whistles and screaming coaches, was a disaster. And horseback riding, while it held his interest for a while, got too scary when the teacher wanted him to gallop and all he wanted to do was go on trail rides.

Know your child

The biggest mistake we made in searching for that "something special" for our son was that my husband and I kept looking at what everyone else was doing, rather than focusing on our own child. We found out the hard way that perhaps the most important step to zeroing in on your child's passion is matching an activity or interest to his individual personality, rather than a limited menu of what happens to be popular among other kids.

Once we realized that a big group and a lot of noise were too distracting for our child, it was easy to see that team sports were not a good choice. We did know he likes to use his hands and he needs action and movement. Even though his grandfather loved chess and tried his best to teach it, the sedentary methodical game was definitely not a winner for our son. Countless other efforts ended in frustration.

But one trip to the musical instrument store and we had an 8-year-old boy mesmerized by the kid-sized drum set. A CD of the local university marching band was all the inspiration he needed to start playing the small drum we brought home.

Last spring, five years after we bought that drum, Alex realized his life-long dream when he marched with his middle school band in the May Day parade, carrying the enormous bass drum on his heavily padded shoulders.

Think outside the box

Our experiences were not unique, according to educator and author Shirley Kurnoff, who interviewed 142 families with children who have learning problems for her book, *The Human Side of Dyslexia*.

"The normal thing is you offer kids an array of activities while they are young and they find something they love," Kurnoff says. "But I think the most important thing when it comes to children who learn differently is thinking outside the box. The parent might have to be open to activities outside the expected. Is it bird watching or crew or needlepoint or knitting? You need to get outside the box of soccer or basketball. You need to go find the activity, don't wait for it to come to you."

Finding that special something may not be easy. It may also require getting far away from school curriculum, Kurnoff and other special education experts suggest. Maybe your child loves to cook, or hike, or has an affinity for animals. Almost any interest, if encouraged, can turn into a passion, and a pastime.

Learn to dabble

For many kids with learning disabilities, finding a passion will require extra effort on the part of the parents. And it may well involve trying many different things before one of them clicks with your child. Some ideas that can lead to a new-found interest include having your child:

- Check out catalogues and course listings from local parks and recreation departments or community centers. Watch for unusual, non-academic classes such as kite making, cooking for kids or drama productions that give children a chance to build sets or learn how to operate the lights, not just act;
- Volunteer at a nonprofit organization. From soup kitchens to wildlife rescue groups, many agencies will accept kids if they come with their parents until they are teens;
- Look for activities at local shops that carry items your child loves. A fly fishing store may have names of teachers or clubs for those who share a common interest. Some sewing stores offer classes, nurseries can direct you to community gardening projects;
- Join the Boy and Girl Scouts organizations in your community, or the Boys and Girls Clubs. Many cities are home to groups and clubs that help kids develop self-esteem and share a variety of experiences in a non-competitive environment. Some offer programs for special needs kids.

Parents who are willing to dabble with their kids may be surprised to find a passion they can share with their child. It's worth the search, therapists and child development experts agree, because when children find something they love, it can foster a lifetime of creativity and satisfaction.

Avoid competition and chaos

For our son, golf turned out to be another great match. None of his friends played, nor were his dad and I golfers. But when a friend came to town and wanted to visit the local course, we took our then 9-year-old son

along. At first he was more interested in the golf carts than the game, but over time, he has developed a great swing, and today at 15, when his attention is focused, he can hit a 225-yard drive that brings a wide grin to his often solemn face. At 16 he can apply for a job on the city course and finally get behind the wheel of one of those carts.

Because it is a quiet game based on individual, not team performance, golf is ideal for kids who have trouble in a fast-paced team sport such as basketball or soccer. It is also a good way to make new friends, since foursomes are required on most golf courses, where strangers are matched up for the afternoon.

"It can definitely be harder for kids with learning difficulties," says Juliet Melamid, a Licensed Marriage, Family and Child therapist who specializes in working with families with children who struggle academically or socially. "What turns kids on is when they get strokes for something, and that's key. They have to find something that comes a little more easily and that feels comfortable before they can develop real enthusiasm for it."

Recognize success, not winning

In the end, what makes helping your child find a passion so worth pursuing is the inward joy it can bring in good times or bad. It isn't scoring a goal in the last seconds of the football game or being chosen for the solo in the school concert that matters most. It is the knowledge that when the going gets tough, as it inevitably will, your child will have something to turn to for solace.

This is what I remind myself of as I stand at the kitchen counter preparing dinner, my son in his room banging out the day's frustration on his drums. By the time we sit down for dinner, though, a sense of calm descends on the house, and I am glad that golf, at least, is a quiet passion.