

'Intelligence' doesn't make one better than another

My son isn't smart. I'm OK saying this.

To many people, that statement might sound ugly or disloyal. Unloving, perhaps. Most parents would be unwilling to say those words even if, perhaps, they happen to be true. And here's my question: why? No, really, is it because smart people are better? Because people who aren't as smart aren't as valuable? Because people who are not smart are worthless? Or even worse, worthless?

Sadly, our society believes many of those things. We place a real value judgment on intelligence, and we cheer our children often and enthusiastically for being "smart." The

same people who would recoil at the thought of praising a child for her beauty will lavish attention on that child for intelligence.

"Aren't you smart!"

"Good for you! You're so smart!"

But here's the thing-- so what if you're smart? It's nothing you did, or didn't do, to get that way. Smart just...is. Much like having blond ringlets and an adorable dimple, people might admire those things about you, but they're not particularly redeeming qualities in themselves. They're just the luck of the draw.

My almost-5-year-old daughter, she's a pretty bright kid. Smarter than her older brother, who has a cognitive disabil-



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ity. This isn't something I point out often or ever, or something I would ever say to my children, but it's a simple fact. And so what if she's smart? Smart doesn't mean much to me, not anymore. But show me how hard she worked to achieve a new skill, and

I'll show you a proud mama. Show me how she pushed herself to do something she couldn't do before, and I will lay on the praise. Because, to me, those are the things that matter.

Same with my son with special needs. He can be diligent. He can be conscientious. He can be a hard worker. And I will cheer when he shows those qualities, harder and louder than anyone you know.

But I will not praise my children for being smart. Just like I won't praise them for being tall. (Because, really, how ridiculous.) And if my son isn't smart, it's OK. It doesn't make him less valuable or his life less meaningful. And

yet, that is the judgment our society makes all the time. I see it even among parents of kids with disabilities, insisting to one another that their child with a cognitive disability really is "smart." Why? Why insist on something that isn't true, if, in fact, it isn't? Why place that value judgment on intelligence? And yes, of course, there are all different types of intelligence--emotional and social and whatnot. But let's be honest with one another; we all know what people are referring to when they use the word "smart." And should it really matter if he's not?

Here's what I can tell you about my son. Today I watched him try,

and try again, to carefully balance the plastic Little Tykes baseball on the tee. When he finally got the ball in place, he picked up the bat and whacked at it clumsily, knocking the entire tee to the ground, and sending the ball bouncing about a foot away from him. I cheered and clapped as if he'd hit a home run. And when he reached down to grab the ball and start the entire process again, I nearly cried with pride. He's trying. Again and again, he's trying.

I'm so proud of my boy.

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