Are your expectations harmful or healthy?

There is no doubt that many parents underestimate the impact of their expectations on kids. It’s quite natural to want your kids to do and perform at their best, however not every child will respond positively to parent expectations.

If they are too high, or at least higher than their capability, then many kids just give up. It’s better than trying and failing, which can seem like letting down their parents. Alternatively, they may make excuses for not taking part in an activity, game or sport.

Some children will try to meet abnormally high parent expectations, but their efforts may well come at the cost of anxiety and, in some cases, depression due to excessive pressure. It’s hard to always perform at your absolute best all the time. In fact, high achievers in most fields of endeavour know when to coast and when they really need to apply themselves.

Birth order also plays a part in parental expectations. As adult approval is a high driver for eldests, they are more highly influenced by parent expectations than children in any other position. They are also more likely to be perfectionists, which makes them more prone to suffer when parental expectations are excessive. Many first borns become risk-averse sticking to the safe and achievable, which is a great stress-reduction strategy.

Expectations are most helpful when they are realistic and in line with children’s age, abilities and their interests. Sometimes we can expect just too much from our kids, for all the right reasons.

Better to have positive, yet achievable expectations rather than expectations that are too high or too low. Getting the balance right will hopefully motivate kids to achieve without them feeling overwhelmed, worried or overly-anxious.

Ideally, all kids will be self-motivated, not needing adults to lead the way. As human nature suggests many kids need a push to reach a little higher. We just need to make sure that the push is not excessive, and the end result is worth pursuing.

How do you use expectations?

So how do your expectations of kids’ behaviour and achievement rate? Are they too low, too high or just about right? Do they reflect your own ambitions, or your children’s interests and abilities?

Want a simple answer? Ask yourself how your kids would answer these questions. I suspect it will be different for each child, but then again worry, stress and anxiety is different for every child. And it’s what your child thinks and feels that’s paramount here.