

Why I'm passing on competitive parenting before it starts: Multitasking Moms and Dads



Toddlers line up at the starting line during the Marine Corps Community Services' Diaper Derby at Camp Pendleton's Mainside shopping center, Aug. 13. During the Diaper Derby, infants between the ages of 6 months and 1 year competed in a 10-foot race to the finish for the chance to win a free box of diapers and a Marine Corps Exchange gift card. (Cpl. Damien Gutierrez)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Parental small talk generally takes a predictable form: first you talk about your kids' names and ages, maybe some things they like, and from there things quickly turn competitive.

Is he talking yet? When did she start walking? Can he feed himself with a spoon? Does she prepare her own omelettes yet? Do you know what college he's going to?

Okay, I kid about those last few, but it's shocking how much strangers want to know about my child, and from what I understand the competitiveness only gets worse over time.

According to [a number of disgruntled parents](#) with access to the internet, once kids start school parents get competitive about grades, and then extracurricular activities, and then college applications, and then degrees achieved, and then prestigious jobs and paychecks, and then the number of grandkids and where they go to school, and so on.

And it's not just parents. Every trip to the pediatrician's office includes me staring at a chart where a dot represents my son and how he compares to the other kids. Is he too small? Is he too big? Is he perhaps just right?

And there are new things to be competitive about being invented every day. Just this month the [New York Times declared that sleep may be the next frontier](#) for parental anxiety.

"I can see sleep being another weapon in competitive parenting and career-building," Marian Salzman, a trend spotter and chief executive of Havas PR North America [told the Times](#). "If you want your child to succeed, do you have to buy them these sleep devices?"

Parents are being driven crazy, not to mention broke, by the endless standards they are expected to meet. The comparisons and competitions never end.

So I'm just not going to begin.

My son recently turned 18 months. He has yet to sleep through the night. I shared this fact with some mom friends recently, and the horror was writ large on their faces. They began to list when and how they got their kids to sleep through the night. One succeeded at six weeks she told me excitedly.

My son clearly sleeps enough, he has plenty of energy (trust) and what we're doing works for us. He'll start sleeping through the night when he's ready and done teething.

Personally, it turns out I need less sleep to survive than I previously thought. I like to view this as a liberating discovery rather than a depressing one.

For the first time his age doesn't match the numbers on his clothes. His dot at the doctor's office used to always hover just above the 50th percentile, but by his last check-up he had dipped just below.

Should I freak out? Should I start cramming food down his little throat like he's a duck that's being fattened up for foie gras?

Nah, I think I'll pass.

I'm happy with the way my son is developing. He's happy, he's energetic, he's learning every day. Already at a year-and-a-half he's proven to me that he has his own way of viewing things and doing things. Why would I compare someone so unique to a mass of strangers, all of whom are also unique in their own ways?

So the next time someone asks if you're child is talking yet, remind them that [Albert Einstein was slow to talk](#). Some say he didn't utter a word until he was four, and the term "[Einstein Syndrome](#)" was named after him to describe "exceptionally bright people whose speech is delayed."

The next time your kid's dot is below that 50th percentile mark, remember that [Michael Jordan didn't make the high school varsity team](#) as a sophomore partly because he was, at 5'10", not tall enough. He made sure he was the best on the JV team - and every other team after that - and after his final growth spurt ended up at 6'6. Also, Daniel Radcliffe is 5'5" and Tom Cruise is 5'7" and I feel like they're doing alright in life.

And the next time someone starts pestering you about your kids grades, hoping to compare and possibly brag, remind them that straight A's don't always translate to professional success. [As Inc magazine put it](#), "some of the most successful people in the world have gone on to have amazing careers in business and public life after having less than stellar runs in academia." They name drop several politicians, like Al Gore, John McCain, John Kerry, Joe Biden, and both presidents Bush as "mediocre at best" in school. And then there are the dropouts, including Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Thomas Jefferson, John D. Rockefeller, Walt Disney, Richard Branson, Elton John, James Cameron and Frank Lloyd Wright.

I'm not saying you should encourage your kids to drop out of school or ignore doctors' warnings about not meeting medical milestones. I'm merely suggesting that your child's height or the grade they got on a math quiz or when they uttered their first word or took their first steps may have very little (if anything) to do with what kind of life they will lead.

So heads up fellow moms, I'm sitting out the rat race. I hope you'll join me on the sidelines.