

Avoid the pitfalls of labelling kids

by Michael Grose



People are natural labellers. We're quick to categorise others, particularly when they hold different views to ourselves. Terms such as 'racist', 'feminist' and 'socialist' are used liberally at the moment.

The trouble with placing a label on a person is that it stops us from thinking too deeply about what they're saying and prevents us from understanding who they really are. It's hard to see beyond the label.

The same principle applies when we apply labels like these on kids:

"She's the bright one of the family."

"My child is the one on the autism spectrum."

"He's such a naughty kid."

"She's an only child."

"He's shy."

The labels we place on kids can become their defining characteristics. Anyone who has been called 'stupid', 'tanglefoot' or a 'klutz' will know that these tags can become an overriding narrative, remaining well into adulthood. *"I'm hopeless with accounts. I was a klutz in maths when I was a kid and I'm still hopeless with figures,"* is an example of a self-limiting storyline that has its origins in childhood.

Even positive labels can be a burden for some children. Be told often enough that you're the 'smart', the 'good' or the 'responsible' child of the family or class and you've got some lofty expectations to live up to. There's nothing wrong with setting high behavioural or academic standards, but a child's good behaviour or high achievement shouldn't become a badge or label that they always have to wear.

Look beyond the label

Instead of labelling kids, look beyond the label when you talk about them. For instance, when working with a child on the autism spectrum a teacher or coach will need an understanding of the child's condition in order to communicate with, manage and teach the child. But autism shouldn't be the defining characteristic; it shouldn't be the only lens used to relate to the child.

A child is so much more than any condition they have, but being labelled as the 'autistic child', the 'anxious child' or the child with oppositional defiant



disorder immediately colours the perception others will have of them, as well as affecting the way the child sees him or herself.

Help kids to define themselves broadly

Many children put self-limiting labels on themselves. A child who defines himself as being stupid because he struggles academically benefits from parents who lovingly point out that there is more to life than schoolwork. Help your kids see the strengths that they have in other areas of life such as making friends or success at leisure activities, along with personal qualities such as loyalty, patience and persistence. In other words, help children see past any labels that they place on themselves.

Label the emotion or behaviour

Just as we should resist calling a child who bends the truth a liar (as it may well become a self-fulfilling prophecy), we should also avoid labelling kids who experience anxiousness in new or unfamiliar situations as 'anxious children'. Being tagged an 'anxious child' gives a child a great excuse to avoid situations such as attending school camp or going to a concert because she feels uncomfortable, nervous or shy. The anxious child tag can stop a child from showing the bravery and courage she needs to overcome nerves, self-consciousness or feelings of discomfort.

Instead, talk about anxiousness, nervousness and tension – which are emotions that children will naturally experience – while avoiding using the terms as tags or labels. For instance, it's possible to feel anxious without being an 'anxious person'. Labelling the child instead of the feeling can too easily define and restrict kids.

Talk about behaviours that may reduce these feelings, such as planning ahead, practising and mindfulness. This will help kids feel that they have some control over their feelings, whereas being tagged with a label or name negates a child's feelings of control and makes self-regulation more difficult.

Catch yourself next time you're about to stick a label – positive or negative – onto a child. Separate the deed from the doer, the kid from the condition, and focus on the behaviour or qualities that he or she needs to succeed in whatever it is they are trying to accomplish.



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