

# THE LAW OF AVERAGES

Even if your child doesn't show a distinct talent, there's no excuse for not encouraging them to be the best they can be, learns CHARLOTTE PHILLIPS



## Foot off the pedal

Instead, we could start to take things easy, give the family – and pets – a break and just smell the roses. Have a duvet day. Have a few.

That was my approach. Unfortunately, says Matthew Adshead, Headmaster of Old Vicarage School in Derby, it was wrong.

There's no excuse to allow children to sink into marshmallowy mediocrity, he says.

## Let them thrive

Failure is inevitable and children need plenty of opportunities to equip themselves with some of the sterling qualities that they'll need if they're to make something of themselves.

"Kids who sit around all day long, not doing stuff because mum and dad want to spoil them, that's useless parenting," he says. "Get up at 8am on a weekend and get them out to clubs."

**"HOW OFTEN DO WE CELEBRATE THEIR MOMENTS OF *kindness, compassion and thoughtfulness*? THOSE QUALITIES COULD MAKE THEM MULTIMILLIONAIRES"**

**T**he school and parenting websites make it sound so easy. "We aim to find the spark that enthuses every student to become the best they can be," says one. "Every child has a hidden talent just waiting to be realised..." enthuses another. The message is unmissable. Not only is every child gifted in one way or another, but it's the job of a good school to excavate that gift, no matter how deeply buried.

Not everyone is convinced. "It sounds like a marketing tool," says one parent. "Other schools may have thought your child was a bit of a div, but we will find that special talent."

Teachers, too, are cautious. "It's not for us to 'discover' a spark in all pupils; it's our job to ignite in them a spark so that they're curious and interested," says Caroline Spencer, Head of Francis Holland Junior School.

## Talented vs. mediocrity

The problem, says Dave Watkin, Assistant Head at Culford School, is that it's all too easy to end up with a very blinkered view of what talent actually is. "I think schools, in trying to provide points of distinction, are providing a yardstick against which we measure a child,"

he says. "Too often we pigeonhole a child, while also limiting what we define as talent."

As somebody whose own school reports were so reliably average that you could have set your IQ by them (and my teachers probably did), this talent-scouting message has come as a surprise, particularly as my children followed in the family tradition, such average-sized chips off the old block that, until my partner objected, I planned to name the first two Mean and Mode.

The joy of having demonstrably average children surely meant that you could pretty much take your foot off the aspirations accelerator. You could wave an ecstatic farewell to all those activities, like the so-called "fun" extra maths and English homework; the riding (when you've seen one pony attempting to roll with your child still in the saddle you've seen them all) and the music lessons (we're still wondering if it was the cat who left the damp patch in the violin case after a particularly distressing D major scale).

The school labours diligently on behalf of its pupils. One child who didn't quite gel with sports is on the way to becoming a medal-winning rower. Shy children find themselves speaking in assembly. But teachers are not looking for buried talent. Instead, they're encouraging pupils to be the best they can.

## Getting them ahead in life

For starters, says Dave Watkin, children may excel in ways that don't appear in league tables but may get them just as far in life. "How often do we celebrate their moments of kindness, compassion and thoughtfulness? Those qualities could make them multimillionaires – as well as someone I'd want at a dinner party. If we're going to prepare kids properly, we need to give them the tools to deal with whatever life throws at them."

It's too late for Mean and Mode, who are now out in the big wide world. I'd do it differently if I had my time again. Well, I'd have hidden that violin case, at the very least.