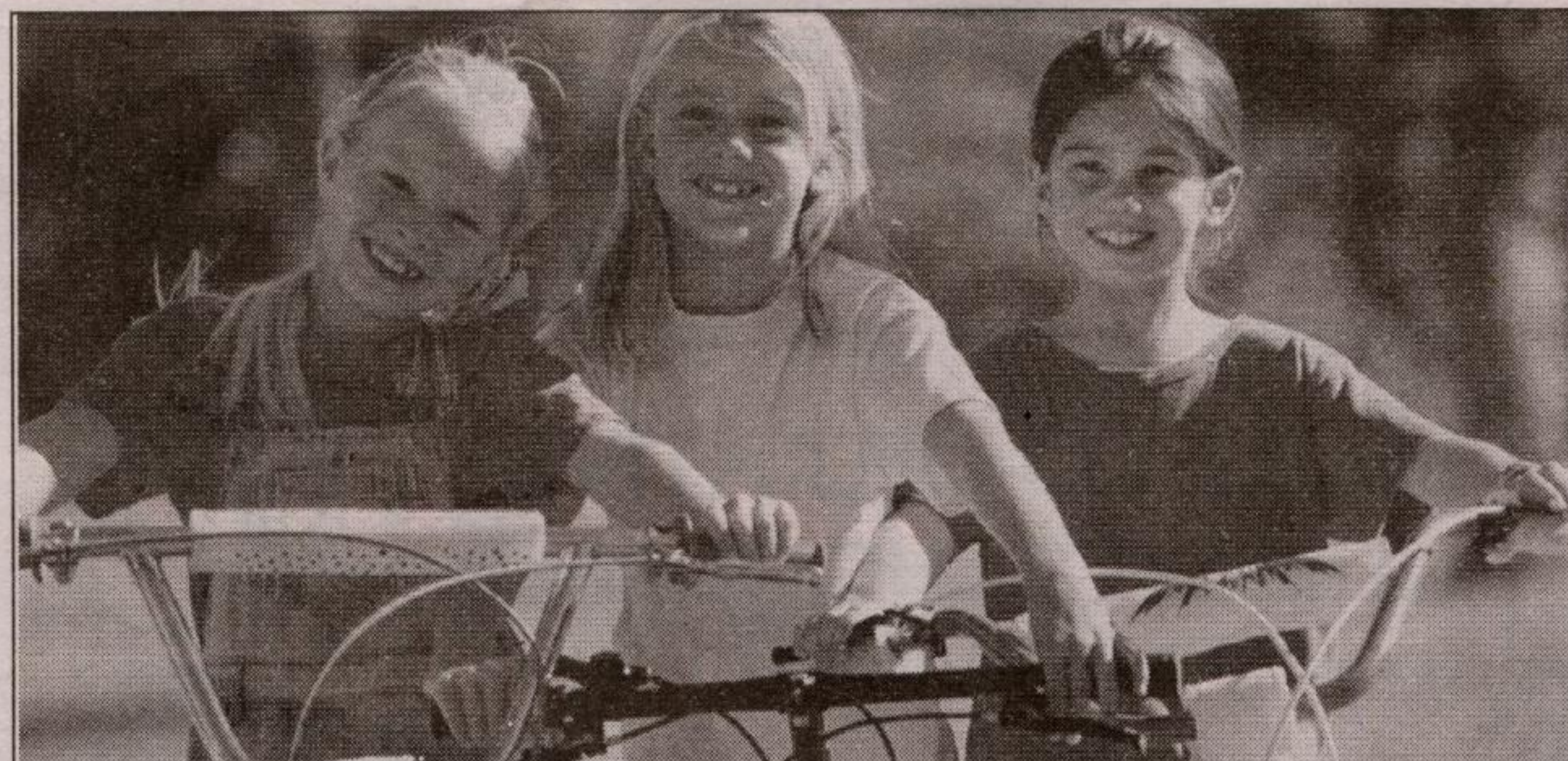


F E A T U R E

GIFTS FOR PASSING?

By Barbara Burrows



It is final report card time. Often parents reward children for "good" report cards with gifts or money. In high school, students have even been offered cars for achieving a particular academic standard. Surprisingly, there can be pitfalls for offering rewards for school work well done. Striving to get good marks for promise of a reward takes the focus off learning and puts it onto achieving a particular mark. The studying is done, not because the student finds pleasure in learning and wishes to learn more, but to achieve a high mark to get the gift. Our children gain so much more if they develop an inner desire to learn.

Simply getting good marks does not mean one enjoys learning. Some good students never read another book after graduation.

A desire to learn makes people inquisitive, always trying to understand more. It leads to a passionate interest in the world, curiosity about how things work, desire to work well — all enormously important in the adult job market. A desire to learn does not disappear when school ends. Learning continues throughout life, either formally or informally.

It is difficult to measure and report on a child's inner motivation to learn. Focusing too

much on the measurable aspects of the report can discourage a child's curiosity. If a child feels they have not "done very well" they may lose some of their innate desire to learn.

There is a widely held belief that the child who achieves during the year tried hard and the child who failed to achieve did not try. This simply is not true. Children do well or have trouble for a very wide variety of reasons — largely related to how secure, safe and settled they feel in everyday life or with their particular teacher.

It is also important to recognize that report cards, particularly in early grades are very subjective. What one teacher experiences as creative zeal, another defines as poor impulse control. Certain children get along well with certain teachers; other teachers and children do not connect easily. When a teacher and child have not connected well, a child is not likely to get as glowing report card as the child who has blossomed with a particular teacher.

Placing little emphasis on the report card is one thing parents can do to help their children develop a desire to learn. Think of the report card

as a communication tool, a way for the school to communicate with the parent about the child's progress and difficulties. Unless the child wants to, especially with young children, it is not even necessary to discuss the report card with the child.

Research has proven that when parents are interested in what children are learning, and particularly when parents can recognize when effort is required to learn, children do better.

Rather than focusing on what was "good" or "bad", why not celebrate all that has been accomplished at the end of this school year?

Keeping an open discussion going with children throughout the school year can help parents be aware of what is hard for their children. Try and find out how each day goes, what the child finds easy, what is difficult, what is interesting and what is boring. Ask especially if any work or anything that happened on the playground was too hard or frustrating.

At the end of the school year, rather than discussing what is good or bad on final reports encourage children to think back over this school year. Help them recognize their gains, not by reading what their teacher says, but by reviewing their progress in their own minds. Remind them of their academic level last

September as compared to now. Perhaps during the year they learned to read, memorize some times tables, learn French, print, or write stories. Discuss which of these new skills were easy and which they had to work hard to accomplish.

Maybe they didn't make much progress academically. Maybe they made important social gains. Perhaps last September it was hard for them to leave home, but now they feel so secure about going to school they are begging to ride their bikes. Maybe they got into squabbles with other children early in the year, but now can get along without fighting.

This discussion encourages children to think about their real accomplishments. When they review, and realize what they have gained over time, they can get a realistic view of what they have gained over the year. This reflective process helps children develop a true pride in their work, and pride is what motivates them to want to learn more.

Rather than focusing on what was "good" or "bad", why not celebrate all that has been accomplished at the end of this school year? Gifts can be part of this celebration if you wish or do not need to be. With this approach, you encourage your children's desire to learn, which in the long run, is much more important than good marks. ☺



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