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### **Passing the Pen to the Next Generation**

By Lynne M. Smelser, Ph.D.

In an age of Internet chat, video games and reality television, there is no shortage of mindless diversions to keep a child occupied. And yet, despite the competition, my 8-year-old daughter wants to spend her leisure time writing short stories. I should be thrilled, right? Well, I'm not thrilled. In fact, it scares me to death because this is not just any story. She wants to enter this story into a contest, a competition that she won last year.

It started on a snowy February day when Rebecca created a story about ducks that build. We laughed, drank hot chocolate, and together enjoyed her adventurous tale of farm animals vexing old Farmer Sam by using his tools to build a replica of the Eiffel Tower in his backyard. And since her victory—which led to multiple newspaper interviews, a television appearance on PBS, and celebrity status among her friends—new stories pop up everywhere for her. She tells stories as we drive in the car. She tells stories to strangers in elevators. She tells stories to her three-year-old little sister who is merely trying to get into the bathroom to go potty. Even at night when I sit in my own bed reading, I can sometimes hear her across the hall dictating her next story to her stuffed animals.

Don't get me wrong, as a writer myself I am thrilled to see my child so excited about writing. On the other hand, as a writer myself I know about winning contests, and about losing them. I know what it is like to work tremendously hard on a short story and have it amount to little more than a rejection slip. I also know the pressures of trying to live up to a reputation created by previous contest victories and the heartbreak of not even placing. So when people hear my daughter's stories and the tale of last year's victory that inevitably follows, I shudder. What if she doesn't win again? What if she doesn't even place? What if she is disappointed? That's the strange thing about being a parent. So much of our own past scars and dashed hopes can surface.

A revelation came last week when I asked her, "Don't you want to win again?" came out of my mouth. But the real revelation came with her answer. "No," she replied, "I just want to tell the story of an angel going to first grade."

I had just spent weeks correcting her stories as she spontaneously told them. Telling myself that I was merely an experienced writer guiding and shaping the young writer across the hall, I offered suggestions

for characters, possible conflicts, and exciting endings for her tales. Her story about a fearful angel starting first grade, was quickly “guided” by me into the tale of a little girl with a wild imagination taking her first music lesson. Her idea about an anteater who could catch fairies was “shaped” by me into a story of a grandma who liked to play baseball. I had turned her contest into MY contest without even realizing it.

Before I became a mother, I verbally thrashed parents in my newspaper column for being too focused on winning, too high pressured regarding achievement, and too blind about the pure joy kids feel playing a sport. I reprimanded the entire junior sports world as being nothing more than parents living out their own dreams through their kids.

Then came my own foray into parenthood and that first writing competition. For that contest Becca wrote and illustrated a story that I mailed, but then promptly placed in her memory box for a “someday” when she and her husband/kids could read it. The afternoon had been all about giggles and lips outlined with hot chocolate. Then she won. She actually won FIRST place out of more than 200 entries and suddenly that switch flipped on inside of me. I wanted to guide her, to protect her and to propel her.

Perhaps I was a bit hard on the junior sports parents. Staying back and giving kids space to grow is not as easy as it looks. When I become editor and chief of my daughter’s writing I become that parent on the sidelines ordering around a confused seven-year-old who just wants to kick the ball before the game ends. And to be honest I know very little about farm animals who use tools or angels who go to first grade. So as I stared into my daughter’s eyes during our conversation last week, I had to accept the fact that I had indeed co-opted my daughter’s own unique experience as a writer. While it was a difficult moment for me, it was certainly a good first step that I will quickly follow with more steps putting me far enough away to give her room, but close enough to help *if asked*. All the while I will be reminding myself that children need room to experiment, grow and find their own voices. They need their own chances to win *AND* to lose with unwavering parental support through it all. And maybe if I step back just far enough, our struggles to grow as writers will become our bond as we both sit at our desks and learn to live with the writer across the hall.