

# Social Stereotypes: What Can You Do?



Dr. Jenn

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Dear Mr. Vernon:

*We accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it is we did wrong, but we think you're crazy for making us write an essay telling you who we think we are. You see us as you want to see us: in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain, and an athlete, and a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Does that answer your question? Sincerely yours, The Breakfast Club.*

It is easiest to define people in absolutes. We all remember classifying fellow students and other teens in to neat little packages as adolescents, seeing them as geeks, jocks, stoners, sluts, weirdos or snobs, to name a few. Although the specific names may have



changed, kids today are no different.

But what repercussions do labels have on children? The restrictive and difficult to shake labels often become boxes in which kids get trapped. This segregates and isolates them from the group as a whole and holds them back from exploring other parts of their personality, identity or interests. And even worse, once established, this pigeonholing can last a lifetime.

What is the best advice for a parent who sees this happening to their own child? Here are a few quick tips to give your loved ones the greatest opportunity to transcend the stereotype limitations and be the best kids they can be:

**Encourage your children to explore other interests.** Even if your child is a great athlete, it is a vital part of the development process to grow and achieve in other areas. Becoming more well-rounded will benefit your children as they get older and have to face a more multifaceted world than the demands of school life require. As a successful athlete, your child has already achieved a certain level of satisfaction that allows her to feel confident. Take that confidence and encourage him or her to try something else, in addition to continuing with whatever sport or activity has allowed him or her to gain that security. The more parts of your kids that are given the chance to develop the more comfortable they will be with themselves and the better they will be able to get along with diverse groups of people.

**Introduce them to a diverse group of people.** The more time your children spend with other children of different interests and backgrounds, the more likely they are to learn about new strengths of their own and of the diverse possibilities that life has to offer. This also will help your children to become more tolerant and empathetic as they understand different backgrounds and lifestyles. A little understanding can go a long way.

**Remind your kids that they are not the same as their label.** We all have many different parts of our personality. When kids are identified with a specific group, they often get trapped with one label. Help your children to see themselves beyond that stereotype.

**Look at your own behavior.** How do you

reinforce your children's idea of themselves? Do you emphasize the label they have been stuck with or do you help them to explore other parts of their personalities? You may be an unwitting participant in this, too. Be careful, however, not to promote the diametrically opposite position to your child's label. It is no accident that your child has been put into a category. To simply deny the facts is not a healthy approach. Try a more subtle approach and you will see greater benefits.

**Let go of your own childhood.** Often times when we see our children go through things that caused us pain, we assume they will have the same reaction as us. Jane's daughter was a "brain". She excelled in academics, but had no physical or athletic talents. Jane had always yearned to be in sports as a kid, but never had the opportunity or the talent. This caused her a lot of pain and she assumed that her daughter had the same reaction, which was simply not the case. It wasn't until Jane realized that she was projecting her own feelings onto her daughter that she was able to let her daughter embrace her own talents.

**Accept who your kids are.** Children look to their parents for acceptance. When your children see that you approve of who they are, it makes it easier for them to accept themselves, too.

**Reflect your child's feelings.** By repeating back how your children feel about their labels, you get the opportunity to really understand how they feel and allow them the space to talk about what is bothering them.

Like we learned in that classic 80's movie *The Breakfast Club*, we all have a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal buried deep inside of us. Our children do too. It is up to us to help them make peace with their budding identity and encourage them to explore all sides of who they are.

*Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at [www.DoctorJenn.com](http://www.DoctorJenn.com).*