

“My Johnny is a blue belt already!”

Parents have a right to be proud of their kids’ achievements. Once in a while, they can’t help bragging a little. It gives them a reason to be proud of their own parenting as well as the child’s success.

There are those parents, however, who’d rather exaggerate the braggadocio than face the fact that Billy is not really a hotshot. “My Billy gets straight Bs and B plusses in math.” True, madam, but he is fifteen years old and still working on subtraction.

Parents often ask me why Johnny next door started karadee only three weeks ago and he already has a rank while their Jimmy has not even been examined yet. True, madam, and he will not be examined for a few more months since he really is still learning his left from his right. He’ll get there with a little patient support.

“But aren’t your standards too hard? That Johnny has been in karadee now two months and he is already an orange belt.” No, madam, my standards are actually pretty reasonable. By the way, what does an orange belt mean?

“I am a little frustrated. My Jimmy doesn’t seem to be learning anything while his friend Johnny has been in karadee only three months and he is already a blue belt!” Yes, madam, I am sure Johnny is a blue belt, but what has he *learned*?

A rank is a measurement of achievement and an estimation of learning. People who graduate college with a BA in American Literature do not all read the same books or study with the same professors, but we can assume that they will be somewhat conversant on Hawthorne, Twain, Faulkner and maybe Steinbeck and Salinger. To say, “My Johnny got a B+ in his exam on Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*,” is not the same as saying “My Johnny finished his Literature 101 course with a B+,” which is still less impressive than saying, “My Johnny finished the semester on the Dean’s list.”

“My Johnny is a blue belt already!” does not give tribute to Johnny’s natural coordination or his ability to learn; rather, it is a statement of how rapidly the school wants to promote its students. Would Johnny be promoted as quickly if his exam had more than a half-dozen requirements? Would he be promoted as often if he had to review all the material from past exams as well? Would he be a blue belt if there were not 12 other shades of the rainbow to go through first, or if he were held to a slightly higher standard? Would Johnny be promoted as quickly if exams did not cost \$45 each?

Ranks are ways to set goals and smaller, more easily achievable goals make sense for kids. Unfortunately, it is very easy to get kids (and parents) to believe that the colored belt has more meaning than it has. Originally, there were no multi-colored belts. Three ranks of white belt (novice), three ranks of brown belt (seasoned novice), and then black belt (qualified beginner)! The ranks between white and black should get a pat on the back not an item in the newspaper.

“My Johnny made black belt already! And he is only 9 years old!” that, dear madam, is another problem.

We address The Youngest Black Belt next time.