

# *School Work*

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## **Not Working Up To Her Potential**

One of the things I am very thankful for in my own parents is their relative lack of emphasis on school work and especially on grades. They didn't interfere with our developing a natural life-long love of learning. Mark Twain wrote "I never let my schooling interfere with my education," and this has been my motto. My parents let us know that they had confidence in our ability to succeed academically, and that grades weren't nearly as important as our finding life paths which would be suited to us and would enable us to exercise our creativity and make a contribution to the world.

I remember countless instances of coming home with report cards which said "She isn't working up to her potential. She should be getting A's." But I wasn't worried, because I knew my parents understood that learning was more important than letter grades. They never pressured me about school work until my final year in high school. Then they said to me "You have four younger siblings and we can't afford to pay a lot for university. Would you please do some school work this year so you can get scholarships?" I felt this was reasonable, so I did.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that no one stood over us to make us do our schoolwork, all five of us children ended up in careers requiring lots of university education. And all five of us still read for pleasure. I raised my own three children this way, and all three of them continue as adults to love to learn. Alison Miller

It's very important to make sure our children grow up loving to learn rather than being anxious about performance or hooked on doing everything perfectly. Studies have been done to see what effect extrinsic motivation (rewards such as grades or money) has on intrinsic motivation (enjoying a task because it's interesting.) It appears that extrinsic motivation has the capacity to destroy intrinsic motivation. Little kids love to learn new things and attempt new tasks, whether it's talking, sounding out words, walking, climbing, or helping wash the dishes. But as they become older they frequently lose their love of learning. Making learning a duty, and attaching rewards and punishments to it, has taken away their natural excitement about accomplishment. Love of learning is lifelong; love of grades sometimes interferes with it.

It appears that for many children school learning has now become a source of anxiety and overwhelming obligation rather than fun and accomplishment. If this is the case with your child, it's important to turn this around as soon as possible. Let him know you have confidence in his ability to learn and to do the work, and that you believe it's important that he have a personal and social life as well as do schoolwork. Let him know that you believe his grades aren't as important as enjoying his work and feeling he's accomplished something. Do not offer rewards for A's or B's, as

these only encourage him to focus on the grades rather than on the learning. Express confidence that he will be able to handle the challenges before him, and offer help to make the load manageable.

Demystify for your children the requirements of higher levels of schooling if they are becoming anxious about doing well enough. At the higher levels the main differences are that children have to spend somewhat longer completing their work, more research is sometimes required, and they have to organize their work over a longer period of time. That's all. It isn't insurmountable.

Help your children organize their study habits to cope with the new challenges. Give them a regular time and place to do their work, and teach them (if the school hasn't done so) to make a list of assignments and their due dates. Help them figure out how long each assignment will take, and which tasks they need to do first. It's best to avoid monitoring them constantly, lecturing them or, of course, doing their work for them.

Let them organize their schoolwork so that they feel comfortable with it. Different children study in different ways. Remember the differences in temperament (Chapter 1 of *Sidestepping the Power Struggle*). Some need silence; some need music. Some need regular short breaks, others work for a long time and don't like interruptions. Allow your children to study in the way which works best for them. But don't let them stay up past their bedtime doing schoolwork. Make sure they start their homework early enough to get it done and have some relaxation time. If there's too much work for the time available, you may need to intervene with the teacher, as she may not be aware of the problem unless an adult lets her know. Your child probably isn't the only one with the problem.

### **Meaningless Homework**

When my son Justin was ten, he came home with pages and pages of boring arithmetic problems, all of which he already knew how to do. I didn't want him to start to hate schoolwork, so I wrote on the assignment sheet "I refuse to permit my son to do this meaningless work. Please assign him something more suitable to his abilities." Justin was shocked, but the teacher did as I asked and my son's interest in math revived. (He followed his math skills and is now a computer programmer.) Alison Miller

I feel that we as parents have a responsibility to see that what our children are being taught challenges them just enough to keep them interested. If there is too much work, or it's too monotonous, too easy, or too difficult, talk to the teacher. Chances are other

children are having the same difficulty as your son.

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### **Points to Ponder:**

What are your children's feelings about school and homework? Are they anxious about grades and performance, bored, or interested in learning?

What do you need to do to make sure they keep or regain a love of learning?

## *Helping with Homework*

There are times when homework makes our home grind to a halt. What's a parent to do? "Sometimes I feel like quitting school." The demands of homework can be overwhelming. All parents want their children to get good grades because as adults we understand their long-term importance: our child is part of an educational system in which high grades are required for success. Our high expectations make it very difficult to watch our children struggle, sometimes unsuccessfully, with school work. *It's important to remember that grades are never as important as our relationship with our child.* They also aren't as important as our child's love of learning.

Here are some guidelines <sup>[1]</sup> for helping with homework. Start by designating a *Daily Study Time*, (at least 30-60 minutes every day, depending on the child's age).

This is to be time when no one in the household watches TV or makes noise of any kind, although it is true that some people work better with music in the background.

## **Managing Your Emotions**

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| ***Stay positive to keep your child positive.***

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Your child is already aware of what she can't do and is reminded of this often enough by her peers. Praise and acknowledge what she can do. Your positive attitude will be passed on to your child.

***Quietly observe and support, but don't smother.***

Children can interpret too much attention as a lack of confidence. Standing over her reinforces her belief that she is not capable. To give her approval and encouragement remind her of what she does well, that your love isn't conditional on her grades, that she will overcome this difficulty, and that you are there to help.

***Avoid letting yourself get impatient and angry.***

When you feel your patience wane and your frustration escalate, step away, breathe deeply, and remind yourself that this is your beloved child. Many parents find tutoring their own children to be extremely difficult, because they are just too close. Also let go of any guilt about being upset in the past – this is a new day, and all any of us can do at any given time is our best. Sometimes older siblings can be very effective tutors when parents can't manage it.

***Watch your expectations.***

Do you perform your daily tasks consistently from day to day? Children are as susceptible to exhaustion from the daily grind as we are. Watch for signs of being tired, over-excited, recovering from illness, allergies, etc. and make allowances. The pressure of working for someone who expects optimum performance at all times would be unbearable!

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## Setting Up for Success

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***Confidence comes from success.***

Encourage your child to complete assigned tasks. This leads to success. As adults, we know how to learn from our mistakes, but children sometimes repeat errors endlessly, which only reinforces them. They develop habits that do not result in success. When you hear "I don't like to . . ." or "I hate that," it often means "I don't

think I can.” If you think that the issue is confidence, not ability, bring the child back to the task and help him complete it.

***When a task is too difficult – adapt it for success.***

When you see that a task is too difficult, and success is not likely, change it a little. Talk to your child’s teacher about adapting tasks for your child. The same thing applies when the task is too easy and the child is bored.

***Help the child eliminate distractions.***

Children who struggle with school work are often easily distracted and learn to use their distractibility to become skillful procrastinators (chattering incessantly, sharpening pencils, getting a drink, going to the bathroom, etc). Let them know that there will be time for fun when the work gets done. Some children need short breaks every 15 or 30 minutes. Determine how long your child can concentrate for, and allow her regular breaks.

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## Making it Work

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***Offer help when it seems necessary, but give it only when it is accepted.***

Don’t insult your child by taking work out of her hands. Don’t force her to make corrections according to your standards. Teachers don’t expect work to be perfect; you shouldn’t either.

***Corrections – When and How***

Always give your child the opportunity to find his errors first. It is important that he learn to judge his own work. Avoid making critical comments. Suggest respectfully that something may be amiss: “Hmm, do you think these two questions are exactly alike?” or “You might want to have a look at the third one again.” Remember – *say it the way you would like to hear it.*

Humor is often a great relief. Try comments like: “Hah! Caught you at last!” or “Hey, I’ve been looking everywhere for a mistake, I think I’ve found one at last!” Be prepared for them to say “It’s good enough. I just want to get finished!”

***Give honest and effective praise, but don’t judge.***

Always make sure that praise is warranted – children know if their work is well done without your judgment. To make praise effective, focus on the specifics of the task, never on the child. Comments like “good boy,” “good job,” or even “good work,” are subjective and judgmental and the child might secretly refute them.

Instead, make objective comments that describe the child’s effort, “You got that many done in such a short time? You really kept focused!” “Your numbers are very neatly written.” “I understand that creative writing is hard for you. Two paragraphs are more than you’ve ever written before. I can see that you tried really hard.”

Effective praise recognizes the child’s effort. The result is secondary. Avoid demanding perfection: “It’s great that you got through all the questions. Everyone makes mistakes when they are learning. You can do any corrections tomorrow.”

### ***Keep a close eye on your child’s emotions.***

Watch for and try to prevent catastrophic reactions, like going to pieces and floods of tears. This kind of reaction indicates that the child has reached her limit of frustration and pressure. She is afraid of her behavior and her inability to control it. If this happens, hold her gently and provide reassurance and understanding. Now is not the time to reason or continue with the task. It is seldom an issue of discipline – the child doesn’t react this way on purpose.

Try to anticipate these reactions and avoid them. Persistently avoiding a task may be a warning sign that the child can’t cope with it right now or today. Be flexible, and suggest an alternate activity.

### ***Your relationship comes first.***

The way you communicate (your tone, your attitude) is far more important than the details of what you say. Your job as a parent is to see that your child has challenging tasks that he is capable of doing; support as he needs it; praise as he earns it; and above all a healthy parent-child relationship! The love and security of your relationship will help him to enjoy himself and gain satisfaction from what he is doing. Don’t lose sight of the fact that school performance is never as important as your relationship with your child.

**Points to Ponder:**

How do I feel about my child's homework? Am I anxious, impatient or angry? Can my child see this?

Am I able to stay positive and encouraging when helping my child with homework?

Am I able to stay out of the way when my child wants to do it herself?

Have I made it easy for my child to concentrate on homework?

This chapter has considered the complexity of the issues involved in helping our children take responsibility. By the age of around 19, they need to be able to manage their lives as adults, so it is entirely appropriate that we hand that responsibility over to them gradually rather than suddenly. Remember to distinguish between "kid issues" and family issues, and to allow natural consequences for kid issues, so that your children feel that they are in charge of these aspects of their lives.