

Helping Children Succeed in School: Ten Mistakes Parents Make

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Like most parents, you probably have done everything to get your children ready to go back to school this fall: Registered them, paid fees, bought school supplies and new clothes, checked out their new classroom, and talked with them about how much fun this upcoming school year will be. It seems like you should be all set - except maybe for your worries about how good of a "homework coach" you will be this year, trying to help your children be successful in school and enjoy life-long learning.

As parents, we often approach our children's school performance and school success with anxiety and tension. We want our children to succeed so they feel happy about their accomplishments and have better opportunities in the future. But we also have the nagging feeling that if our child doesn't do well in school, it will reflect poorly on us as parents. We feel pressured to make sure they DO succeed. Often, with the best of intentions, we end up using exactly the wrong strategies:

Nagging and Lecturing

Parents usually don't start nagging children about homework and study habits until there is a problem (e.g., being sloppy with homework, or not wanting to do homework at all). Nagging only makes the problem worse because your child will either get angry at you or tune you out. Instead, try to problem-solve together with your child. Ask them to come up with several ideas on their own for how to improve this situation. Brainstorm about how to make homework more fun. Try out at least one of their ideas and discuss how it worked.

Taking Over

You don't trust your child to get things done right, so you tell them what to do, when and how. You may keep track of their assignments and deadlines for them, check their backpacks, and organize things for them. This may work in the short run but doesn't teach children to become independent learners who take responsibility for their work. Instead of taking over, help your child figure out what they need to do by asking questions: "*What* will you do? *When* will you do it? *How* will I know? How do you want me to hold you *accountable* for this?" When children are actively involved in this kind of goal-setting, they are more likely to follow through (and they will still need a little help from you anyway).

Focusing on the Future Benefits of School

As parents, we know how important a good education will be later in life. Just don't expect your children to be motivated by this idea; they are more focused on the here and now and give little thought to the future. To motivate them, focus on the *immediate* benefits of learning (having fun, developing new skills, and ability to play team sports in school if grades are good.)

Leaving Homework for the End of the Day

If homework is scheduled too late in the evening, with only bedtime to follow and no time to play, children won't be motivated to be efficient, and also won't want to go to bed since they haven't had any fun yet. Increase your children's motivation to complete homework by giving

them something to look forward to afterwards. Favorite TV shows, videogames, talking on the phone, or having a special snack are all great rewards *after* homework is completed, and may provide the extra incentive your child needs to get through a boring and tedious task.

Insisting on Long Study Sessions

"You will sit here until all your homework is done" - this can feel overwhelming to children and create resistance, resulting in conflict. Instead, schedule 10-15 minutes of study time, followed by a 5-min. break, then another 15 minutes of study, followed by another break. Repeat as often as necessary to complete homework. Children actually get more done that way.

Grounding Children for Missed Assignments and Poor Grades

This is not effective for helping them do better in the future. Instead, use problem solving ("What would help you do better next time?"), offer support, and give them incentives for good performance (extra privileges, special rewards).

Not Communicating With Teachers

This means two-way communication: Let the teacher know early on how they can best support your child's learning (how does your child learn best?) -then ask the teacher periodically, "What's the best thing I can do to help my child with this subject at home?" Don't wait until parent-teacher conferences to find out how your child is doing, or what kinds of problems need to be corrected.

Overfocusing on Grades and Test Scores

When children get the message that grades are all that counts, they quickly lose interest in the *process* of discovery and learning, and instead focus only on the outcome. If they can't achieve the expected grade or score, they end up feeling bad which usually does *not* increase their motivation to do better. Children also need to hear from us that success comes in many forms. Some students will excel in sports, drama, music, or art; some develop excellent leadership skills, good citizenship, become peer mediators, or relate well to animals. Whatever your child's strengths are, be sure you focus on those talents more than you focus on their grades.

Sticking Only to the Curriculum

As long as children learn what's expected of them in school, that's good enough, right? Chances are that this year's school curriculum doesn't exactly match his or her own interests and curiosity (maybe they are into whales and sharks, space travel, jungle life, airplanes, etc). Encourage children's natural love for learning by asking, "If you could learn about anything you wanted to, what would you like to learn?" - then provide them with books, videos, trips to museums, and (most importantly) adult conversations about those topics.

Not Modeling Life-Long Learning

Do your children see you interested and enthusiastic about learning, studying, and achieving? Do you read books at home? Take classes? Go to museums? Look things up? Talk about new ideas? Remember that our children are always watching what we are doing. ♦