

Supportive Parents = Successful School Year

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Schoolwork doesn't need to be a struggle between parents and teens. After all, you both have common goals. That doesn't mean that answers will always come easily. In fact, many parents experience growing pains at this time.

Supporting a teen in learning can be a complicated dance – one step forward, one step sideways, one step backward, another step forward. Like any dance, enjoyment comes when we relax into the movement and know who is leading; when one partner steps forward, the other steps back. Believe it or not, like it or not, your teen is the one leading when it comes to the dance of schoolwork.

The point of schooling is for our teens to discover the disciplines of learning and of taking responsibility. The goal is to work towards encouraging your child's ownership of the study process. This can only come about with his being allowed to make many of his own decisions. How can you support this development? What follows are suggestions to inspire your creativity in supporting your teen this school year.

Study Habits

There are many facets to good study habits including organization of time, space and materials. Your role is to ensure that your teen knows what good study skills are and to set up the supportive structure providing space, time and supplies. Accept that she'll make errors in the learning process with time management, organization, and setting priorities. Academic success demands effort – this awareness can take time to develop.

Help to set up a regular study space – a desk and comfortable chair with adequate light and all necessary supplies.

Consider providing a small monthly budget for school supplies and stationery. It's easier to get excited about school when you've got new binders, and access to poster board, stencils, report covers and other stationery.

Encourage a set time for study – with a “no phone calls” agreement during this time. (Let your teen choose the time.) Regular breaks are good, but TV or computer are not restorative and so should be discouraged until after studying is done.

Have a calendar posted specifically to track tests, projects and reports. Help your teen to walk backward from due dates to recognize when to begin reviewing or working on a project.

What motivates your teen? What does he want (clothes, car, cell phone, etc.)? This can be the fodder for an incentive program – you all remember, “Let’s Make a Deal”. You can acknowledge what he wants by setting up a program where, for example, he earns points toward something.

Communicating about Schoolwork

“As we are called to our faults, we become them. As we are seen for our virtues, we live them.”

Frances O’Brian

If you notice ineffective study habits, point them out. Remember, though, there is no need to repeat advice. Allow your teen to take on responsibility and experience successes and failures – there is no need to lecture – he’ll learn from his own mistakes.

Seize the moment if your teen wants to talk about school. Ask a question or two and listen well. How does she feel about learning? How does she feel about her ability? What is her favourite subject? What are her goals for this year and beyond? Who is her favourite teacher and why? (This teacher can become an invaluable ally if you develop a relationship with her.) Share a horror story or two about yourself as a teen at school. How did you feel? What was hard for you?

Compliment, compliment, compliment and avoid dumping – criticizing and nagging do not set a good example. Find something to praise – dig deep if necessary – any recognition is huge to the receiver. Your teen needs to know that you notice her efforts. Try describing something positive about the last school year.

Engage in thoughtful conversation with your teen. Show interest and allow differences of opinion. Demonstrate effective listening. Express your belief in her learning process and in her ability to succeed. Knowing that someone is interested and believes in you is a powerful motivator.

When your teen presents a problem with school or schoolwork, let her know that you believe she is capable of finding solutions. Let your child know that you are supportive, but that her work is her responsibility. You can help to build decision-making skills by turning questions back to her: “What do you think?” “What are your options?” “What approach are you going to take with this?” If necessary, help her to break the problem into small, manageable steps.

Homework

Assume there is homework every night. If there is nothing due the next day, study time can be spent reviewing or preparing for an upcoming project or test.

Read your teen’s homework every now and then. It’ll give you a sense of his ability and level. Avoid expressing shock and indignation at sloppy work – home ought to be a safe environment to make mistakes. Ask if this is a good example of what he is capable of; if he seems to be lacking in some skill, offer to help or to find help.

Encourage your teen to teach you something she is learning – you don’t need to understand or comment. This is a great study technique and will give her practice in expressing her understanding of a topic.

As your teen ages, the subject matter of her homework may be difficult even for you. In this situation, you can use your resources to direct your child toward help.

Don't put a spotlight on your teen's academic performance. If you are expecting change in a habit, give it time. Don't harangue him about assignments and homework. Keep in mind what your teen responds to – does he like attention, or not? Do your best to remain calm no matter the situation with your teen's homework. Keep in mind that you are looking to help your teen develop into a capable adult – this takes time.

Approaching Learning

“I have found the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it.”

Harry S. Truman

Be enthusiastic about learning. Model a creative approach to work and learning.

Beware of setting unrealistic goals for your teen. This is a sure-fire way to let the air out of his balloon. Your teen is looking for more independence. If he is making a positive effort, is enjoying himself, and has an overall good attitude toward school, then pressuring him about grades will probably just be counterproductive. He needs to develop his own goals and meet them.

Help your teen to understand his educational and career choices. Visit campuses and go to university and college open houses. Look at course requirements and prerequisites together. Talk to people in the career field he is interested in. Talk about options – how much does he need to earn to buy those things and have the lifestyle he wants? – this can be quite an eye-opener.

Offer lots of opportunities to try new activities. Encourage well roundedness. Acknowledge what is important to your teen. Notice when something ignites her and encourage it. Has she taken on some project of her own accord? (One parent described to me how her son wanted to buy a puppy. Suddenly he was doing research and making sales calls.)

Do you have realistic expectations for your teen's school performance? Some kids find school and learning easy, others don't. What is your teen's real capability? What are his strengths and weaknesses? Remember that small successes build self-esteem. Getting outside help or transferring to a less difficult course may do more to develop his confidence than struggling in a difficult course and getting poor grades.

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