

School Mistakes Even Smart Parents Make **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Mistake #1: Believing that “no news is good news.” Haven’t heard anything lately from your daughter’s teacher, yet yesterday’s report card was a real shocker? Homework not turned in? Class work sloppy? Where’d that come from and why didn’t the teacher let you know the very nanosecond that your child began to display difficulty? Well, let’s get real here by putting yourself in the teacher’s shoes—23 kids in her second grade class and no teacher’s aid for back-up. Curriculum to design and teach, kids to love and keep in line, as well as administrators to appease. It’s no wonder that she hasn’t gotten around to calling you when your daughter’s homework completion began to head south. The bottom line is that there were probably bigger fires to put out—the bully in the back row who just can’t seem to stifle the insults and the painfully shy, new kid who has again taken to hiding under the teacher’s desk when teased by his peers. Beginning to get the picture?

You’re sweet, quiet, yet somewhat irresponsible little girl’s less than stellar homework completion is falling beneath the teacher’s radar, and to assume that Mrs. Mooney is going to notice, contact you, and set up a failsafe system to rectify the problem is just not realistic. What to do? Well, start by setting up a realistic communication program with the teacher so that you’ll be able to stay on top of the little darlin’ and put out the fire when it’s just beginning to smolder, rather than having to extinguish a roaring blaze! Will a weekly email work best for the teacher? How about a self-addressed, stamped post card asking the two most important questions when it comes to staying on top of kids’ school responsibilities: “Any assignments not turned in this week?” and “Any test or quiz grades to report this week?” Drop the post card off each Wednesday with the school secretary and ask the teacher to mail it back to you by Friday. Then, when you receive it on Monday or Tuesday of the following week, you’ll have an accurate idea of how well your daughter is faring in terms of homework completion and studying for tests and quizzes. No more shocks after nine weeks have passed and the kid’s already dug a pretty deep hole for herself!

Mistake #2: “I didn’t do so hot on my seventh grade science fair project, so I’m going to win it this time around!” So, your “shade-hardy” pole beans never quite made it to the State competition? (Could be that a little sun and watering just might have juiced up the end result!) Determined that your second chance at the coveted prize for middle school science is close at hand you’re determined to do it right this time, by gosh, whether your son is interested in the project or not. Isn’t it common knowledge that parents are “more involved” these days with their children’s projects, and you’ll be darned if your son shows up with a simple poster board measuring the effects of after-dinner candy consumption on sleep deprivation. Nope, this situation necessitates a serious trip to Radio Shack, complete with lots of electronics, gears and gizmos to wow the other parents, teachers and kids.

Hey, what's wrong with getting involved in your child's work? Well, being concerned is fine, but we're talking commercial-grade over-involvement when his project or homework becomes your responsibility. You're robbing your child of the experience and responsibility of creating, organizing and completing a project on his own. Sure, you can play chauffeur and take him to the library or arrange for access to research on the Internet. But the kid should be doing the legwork and reaping the satisfaction gained from completing a project on his own.

And, the next thing you know, you've inadvertently trained the child to count on you to complete the more challenging math problems, or to fill in the science worksheets because it's too annoying to actually search through the text to find the answers. And, if you find yourself regularly driving to Blockbuster to rent the movie rather than to subject your child to actually reading the book, you've gone too far. Take a look at the possible messages you're sending: "You can't do this well enough, you need my help." Or, "Even though the teacher assigned the text, the movie was a pretty close second...taking a short cut or two never hurts." If you want to avoid teaching these negative lessons make it clear that your child's homework is his to complete, and even though you're going to check it for accuracy, you are not responsible for doing it. Enough said.

Mistake #3: Adopting a "Hey, it worked for me" attitude when it comes to setting up study schedules. Perhaps as a child you were an organized, self-motivated student who just couldn't wait to come home and sink your teeth into some heavy-duty math problems. If so, most likely your grades were good and your parents proud. So, what worked for you should work for your kid too, right? Well, maybe...and then again, maybe not. It's important to take into account not only your child's age, grade, intelligence but most important—his *nature* in determining what's the best study regimen. If he's a bundle of energy and somewhat squirmy after school then most likely he'll be happier, more efficient and certainly more productive tackling his homework after working off some energy by riding his bike or engaging in a quick game of touch football before hitting the books. Or, if your sixth-grade daughter is an organized self-starter and appears insulted by any attempt to regulate her schedule (how does that kid get so much done in so little time?) it's best to respect her nature and let her set her own schedule. The bottom line is to know who your kids are and how much rope to give them in choosing study schedules (work before or after play? studying the night before the test or beginning a few days early?). Imposing unnecessary restrictions upon a responsible child sends the message that you may not trust her judgment and also takes some of the fun out of learning. On the other hand, letting a whimsical kid without a lick of time management figure out how to cram 30 minutes of homework into the five minutes just before bedtime is begging for trouble. Figure out what kind of children are living in your home, respect their individual natures, and have the sensitivity (and guts!) to set up and follow-through with the most effective study regimens.

Mistake #4: Taking a "sink or swim" philosophy when it comes to kids and their school responsibilities. One of the biggest cop-outs that I regularly encounter in my clinical practice is the parent who has adopted a sink or swim attitude when it comes to

their child's academic attitude. I understand and sympathize with the dynamics of the situation—months, perhaps years, of Mom or Dad nagging about completing homework, studying for tests, and paying attention in class not only annoys the kid—but it can wear down even the toughest of parents. Face it; many children are just not *internally motivated* to tackle difficult assignments or to complete tedious homework tasks. These kids are normal—they just need *external motivators* to “jump start” the habit of completing what is assigned, regardless of whether it is fascinating or ho-hum.

Take Marcy, for example—single mother of ten-year-old Kevin. This kid was a bright child, but not particularly organized. Inevitably school mornings were chaotic with breakfast eaten in the car and the finishing touches put on homework assignments even as he was dropped off at school. Even though Marcy lectured incessantly about completing homework before turning on the television or going out to play, as soon as Kevin saw that she was distracted preparing dinner, he'd ditch the papers and pencils and head for the TV set. So often had this occurred that she finally made the grand (and in my opinion, mistaken) proclamation, “They're your grades... you are responsible for doing your work. I'm not going to nag you about it anymore. I've had it!” So much for homework completion in Marcy's house! Kevin was delighted with the news—C's were just fine by him and actually allowed for more television and outside play.

Trust me, most children will sink like a passed around fruit cake when given the choice as to whether to stay on top of their assignments or to procrastinate and “deal with it later.” Rarely have I witnessed a grade- or middle-schooler reach an epiphany and realize that “Hey, learning is fun, it's in my best interest, and I'm going to hit the books!”

My advice if Marcy's experience sounds like the daily drama in your home is to:

- Get involved and stay involved.
- Set up a daily planner that your child fills out for each subject every day.
- Consider asking the teacher(s) to sign the planner documenting that it is accurate and complete.
- Insist upon all necessary materials being brought home every school day (folders, books, worksheets).
- Check that all homework your child says is complete is accurate and carefully done. Spot check for quiz and test preparation.
- **Don't take no for an answer.** Draw the line in the sand and insist that the above activities are successfully completed. If so, offer your child positive consequences for a job well done (use of electronics, playtime, daily allowance, special snack, and an 'atta-boy or girl). If not, make life incredibly boring so that even the thickest of kids gets the idea that there will be no TV, CD player, computer, Internet, roller blading with friends or outdoor play each day until he or she follows through with school responsibilities.

Mistake #5: Enduring the kitchen table blues. Own a kid or two who can sit at the kitchen table, book opened to the correct page, chewing the pencil while staring out the window without completing a single bit of homework? It's been 35 minutes, you've prodded her several times to put a move on, and still not a single math problem has been completed! Well, join the club—many, many folks have made the mistake of assuming that just sticking the child at the table and providing the work materials equates to task completion. And, when you say, “Maggie, do it *now!*” she interprets that as “soon”, or “after I've nibbled the pencil to a nub”, or maybe even “If I daydream long enough Mom will give up and not make me do this stuff.” Crafty kid, frustrated Mom.

The problem is that “now” to most adults is, well, *now*. To many kids, though, it's interpreted as *whenever*. To break this stalemate, do yourself a favor and invest the best seven bucks that you could ever spend and buy a countdown timer (from the kitchen department at any drug store). Permanently place it at the homework table, and you're ready to rock and roll. Review the work to be done, determine the amount of time necessary to complete the task, set the timer and say “Go!” Many kids from kindergarten through third grade will dig right in and try to “beat the buzzer” as if it's a game to play--they may not need an external consequence for motivation. However, from fourth grade on these critters understand what you're up to, and will probably need an “If...Then” statement. “Mark, *if* you beat the buzzer and complete the ten math problems in fifteen minutes, *then* you'll get a poker chip that can be saved up and later turned in for some allowance money or a movie. If you don't, you'll lose the chip and have to go to bed fifteen minutes earlier this evening.” Most kids will respond to these consequences if you are **consistent** (not taking them to the movies just for the heck of it) and you choose consequences that are **important** (money, sleepovers, and later bedtimes seem to be perennial winners). Also, consider breaking up the homework time into two periods—one before dinner and a second time later in the evening for completing what still needs to be done. Let your child have a voice in determining the amount of time given to complete tasks, the positive rewards to win and the negative consequences to be imposed.

Mistake #6: Believing that “My child's IQ score will predict classroom performance and allow for correct expectations.” “What”, you say, “the scores on that pricey intelligence test that my kid just took are not going to predict her grades or whether she'll get into an Ivy League college following high school graduation?” Well, no, they probably won't. Not that it was a total waste of money, though, as intelligence is certainly *one* of the factors that predicts efficiency of learning, abstract reasoning and comprehension skills, all important when it comes to learning in the classroom as well as in life. But, there are more important factors contributing to the end result (report cards, knowledge learned, love for learning). In fact, Lauro Cavazos, Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, provided excellent research results strongly suggesting that the single, best predictor of school success was not intelligence, or socio-economic status, or race, or ethnicity. It was *parental involvement* in terms of working with children, making sure that they completed their studies, reading to them and, basically, *teaching and motivating good study skills*.

In my own clinical practice I've found IQ tests to be important for prediction and placement when your child is at an *extreme end* of the Bell curve. For instance, kids with Borderline IQ's benefit from educational accommodations including low teacher to student ratios, personalized help, and multi-sensory approaches to learning. At the other end of the scale, those spooky-smart "gifted" kids with IQ's in the top 1 or 2 percentile flourish with challenges and expectations well beyond those for the norm.

However, for the child with Low Average, Average, or even Bright Average IQ, it's motivation, time management, organization and self-discipline that score the A's and B's. Basically, we're talking sweat equity here and not inborn potential. Kids who take their work seriously tend to do well, whether in average or honors courses. Give me a child with a 100 IQ who displays a love for learning and the self-discipline to tackle the boring and tedious (as well as the fascinating) *any day* over the future MENSA genius who could give a hoot about staying on top of his work. So, when considering where to place the scholastic bar of expectations for your kids, please gather your information carefully. Use your own intuition, talk with the child about expectations, and gather information and insight from the teacher. Consider each kid as an individual, not a clone of the older sibling who was in all advanced classes or who dropped out and finally achieved a GED. Understand their basic potential, insist on time management and study skills, challenge reasonably—but try not to expect too much, or too little.

Mistake #7: Using *person* praise instead of *effort* praise. What's the difference? Well, a lot. Praising the *person*, "Jack, you are so smart—just look at the number of blocks that you've stacked up so high. I can't wait to tell your father what a brilliant little three-year-old we have. I'm so proud!" focuses on Jack's intelligence and Mom's blubbering about the kid stacking up a bunch of blocks (which he and every other child have probably been doing since the first month in preschool). Praising the *effort*, "Annie—what a great idea, even if it didn't work exactly as you planned. Tying two jump ropes together so that more kids could play double-Dutch makes sense, but they keep coming apart. Want to look for a longer rope instead?" not only lets your daughter know that her idea is great, but it also becomes a teachable moment—if tying ropes doesn't work out, well, let's see about getting a longer one. "Good idea Annie, and I'm proud of your persistence in not giving up" sends the message that perseverance is what pays off, not just task completion.

In fact, studies at Columbia University have shown that kids who are given consistent effort praise tend to fare better when later faced with challenging, even frustrating, situations than those raised with a constant diet of person praise. Why, because they have been given the gift of persistence by their parents and teachers—the "don't give up until you've tried everything" type of praise rather than the "you're so smart" drivel that just doesn't hold up when brilliance isn't enough and creativity, persistence and frustration tolerance are what's needed.

So, when the report card arrives remember to focus not only on the grades, but also on the teachers' comments. In grade school these will probably be hand written, giving insight into your child's work habits and persistence. In middle school, be sure to notice and comment on the numbers in the column following the grades. Usually 1's, 2's, 3's

and 4's suggest good attitude, participation and behavior. It's those pesky 5's, 6's and 7's to watch out for (lack of homework completion, disorganization, poor behavior). Be sure to praise the effort, even if the grade is less than stellar, find out what can be done to improve the grade and get involved in that aspect of your child's studies.

And, yes, it's okay to give your kid some money for his report card. It probably won't make a bit of difference in his grades, but he can finally buy that new PlayStation 2 game that he's been asking for and driving you nuts about. And, you'll feel better. But, the grades cannot be bought—they are based in your child being committed to his school work and being praised for his effort, not just for the end product or his ability.