

Helping Your Teen Succeed In School



Helping a teenager get ready for school is not unlike training a boxer, only this bout takes place five times a week from September through June. It's our job to make sure that he is mentally prepared and alert, and takes good care of himself physically. The following strategies will help your child to be at his best come the morning bell.

Creature Comforts

Feeling groggy lessens our ability to absorb and retain information. Contrary to what many parents believe, older adolescents need *more* sleep than younger teens, not less. But even a full night's slumber may not prevent a boy or girl from nodding off during first or second period.

As with so many other idiosyncrasies of adolescence, biology is to blame. Sleep researchers at the E. P. Bradley Hospital Sleep Research Laboratory in Providence, Rhode Island, discovered that older teenagers' brains secrete the sleep-inducing hormone *melatonin* an hour later than when they were in their early teens. Not only does this forestall the onset of sleep, it robs them of an hour or so of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, the final and most restful phase of the sleep cycle.

If your child is well organized and willing to prepare for school the night before, consider allowing some extra sleep in the A.M.

Developing Good Homework and Study Habits

The children who endure the rockiest adjustment from elementary school to middle school tend to believe that basic intelligence is unalterable: Either you're born with smarts or you're not. Success or failure is seen as being all but predestined, not a product of hard work.

Teenagers who appreciate the importance of applying themselves have a far easier time, even if they're low on self-confidence. They're more willing to tackle the subjects that give them the most trouble. Parents can help in this regard by pointing out how a diligent effort often spells the difference between success and failure. "An eighty-nine on your geometry test? Way to go! See what you're capable of when you put your mind to it? We're really proud of you."

Create An Environment That Is Conducive To Doing Homework

Youngsters need a permanent work space in their bedroom or another part of the home that offers privacy. Think mini-office. Buy a desk with drawers for storage and enough space for spreading out homework materials comfortably. Be sure that the entire room is well lit, not just the workstation, that your youngster has a comfortable chair and that all the supplies he needs are right there—a dictionary, thesaurus and any other essential reference books should also be within reach.

When the lure of the TV keeps overpowering the will to work, establish a household rule that the set stays off during homework time. (At least one study has found that the sound of a television, even from another room, interferes with retention of information and skills.) If a member of the family has a particular program she wants to watch, it can always be videotaped for viewing later. There are youngsters who claim they can study to music without losing their concentration. The quality of the work will tell you whether or not to let this practice continue. Although a private area for homework is best for your teen, make sure that any work that needs to be done on a computer is done in a common area of your home. This way, you can monitor his Internet usage.

Set Aside Ample Time For Homework

In high school, the late-afternoon hours often fill up with extracurricular activities, sports, part-time jobs and so on. Most days, homework now takes place after dinner. Usually this works out fine since the older teen's changing sleep rhythm allows him to stay alert relatively late at night. But if there aren't enough hours in the night for homework, then you might want to ask the school to include a study hall in your child's day, or, failing that, suggest that he cut back on extracurricular activities or hours spent on a job.

Be Available To Answer Questions and offer Assistance. But Never Do A Child's Homework For Him

Asking for help isn't a sign of laziness, it's one of the ways that adolescents learn. They have a broad range of subjects to master—a fact that adults don't always appreciate. Dr. Lia Gaggino, a pediatrician from Kalamazoo, Michigan, says sympathetically, "We expect kids to be good at everything: reading, language, composition, math, spelling, memorization. It's comforting for them to know that they're not totally on their own and that parents are there to assist them. Let's face it: Very few adults get through their day without somebody helping them."

How Much Homework Is Too Much?

It's one thing when a child's procrastinating stretches one hour of homework into three. But if a teenager is burning the midnight oil night after night, the workload being assigned may be

excessive. Homework aids comprehension by reinforcing concepts learned in school and imprinting information in the brain. One guideline sometimes used is ten minutes of homework per day per grade level: an hour for sixth graders, an hour and a half for ninth graders, two hours for high-school seniors and so on. A ten-year study found that anything more than that does not result in significantly higher test scores.

Show That You Value Learning

From an early age, children receive a stream of negative messages about school. How many movies, TV shows and commercials geared toward young people depict classrooms as penitentiaries run by sadistic teachers who delight in tormenting their terminally bored students?

We need to impart to youngsters a love of knowledge. Learning shouldn't be a chore, but an adventure that enriches our lives. Mothers and fathers are in the best position to seize everyday opportunities for opening children's minds to new ideas and experiences. To hear a teenager speak excitedly about something he's just learned or had never considered before is one of the pleasures of parenting.

Let's also instill in our youngsters an appreciation of the value of hard work and the pride that comes with a job well done, whether it's pulling an A on a chemistry test or stocking the shelves at the local minimart. One recurrent complaint of employers and managers is that too many young people feel it's "degrading" to start at the bottom and work their way up. Adolescents need to hear that every job, no matter how menial, benefits society in some way and deserves a full effort. A diligent work ethic coupled with the right skills will make your teenager an attractive applicant when it comes time for him to enter the job market.

Encourage Reading

According to a study of approximately thirty-five hundred children and their families, children who read more do better on verbal and math tests. Each week the average boy or girl spends about twelve hours watching television and seventy-five minutes reading. Researchers at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research found that each additional hour spent reading translated into half a point higher test scores. In contrast, each additional five hours of TV viewing were reflected in math and verbal test scores half a point *lower*.

Consider Buying or Leasing a Computer

Between 1993 and 1997, the percentage of high-school students who had access to a computer at home rose from 29 percent to 49 percent. The computer has become an indispensable tool in our society and a ubiquitous presence both in schools and in the workplace. As youngsters grow older, they play fewer games on the computer and turn to the technology more for learning and word-processing. If you can't afford a computer, schools and public libraries almost always have systems available for use at no charge.

If Your Teenager Has a Part-Time Job, Set A Limit On How Many Hours She Can Work

About half of all high-school students and college students work part time. Conventional wisdom says that after-school employment teaches responsibility and builds character. While that may be so, the number of hours worked can be a problem. Psychologist Laurence Steinberg of Pennsylvania's Temple University and Elizabeth Cauffman analyzed dozens of studies, including several of Dr. Steinberg's own, and concluded that twenty hours per week appears to be the border line. Cross it, and adolescents are more likely to exhibit emotional distress, school misconduct and alcohol and other drug use.

Academic performance, too, is affected. Students who put in long hours tend to have lower grades, miss more days of school, have difficulty staying awake in class, participate in fewer extracurricular activities and derive less enjoyment from school and less satisfaction in general. Yet one out of every two high-school seniors and one out of every three full-time college students works more than twenty hours per week.

The Child Labor Coalition of the National Consumers League, a private, nonprofit consumer-advocacy organization, suggests the following guidelines for hours, late-night hours and supervision:

Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds:

- No more than three hours per day and fifteen hours per week during the school year
- No more than eight hours per day and forty hours per week during the Summer

Sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds:

- No more than four hours per day and twenty hours per week during the school year
- No more than eight hours per day and forty hours per week during the summer
- No working before 7 A.M. or after 10 P.M.

To register a complaint regarding wages, work hours or illegal work by youngsters under eighteen, contact your local wage and hour office. You'll find its telephone number under the "Department of Labor" in the "State Offices" section of the White Pages' Government Listings. Each state's department of labor also maintains a Web site.

Get Involved In Your Teenager's School

When children leave the security of elementary school, parents may assume that their involvement is no longer needed. But it is more important than ever to attend parent-teacher conferences and to contact individual instructors, even if there are no apparent problems. Youngsters perform better in school when their families are kept apprised of their progress. In addition, parents can gain information about their teens' strengths, which can be important in encouraging their adolescents.

Nowadays much of the interaction between parents and teachers takes place over the telephone. “Teachers are harder to get a hold of than doctors,” jokes Dr. Coleman, M.D., “because they don’t wear beepers!” He suggests that when there’s an urgent matter to take up with a teacher, send in a polite note asking her to call you at home in the evening.

Most will be agreeable; they understand that working parents may not have any other occasion to talk. (For that matter, a teacher’s responsibilities leave them few breaks for lengthy conversations during the day.) Parents, in turn, shouldn’t overlook the fact that many teachers are working moms and dads too. In your note, specify what you wish to discuss, then stick to your point, so that you’re not taking up more time than you need to.

About half of all parents of school-age children belong to a parents’ group such as the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or the smaller Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). It’s a wonderful idea, and not only because the meetings and other functions provide opportunities to help shape school policies. By attending, you get to know the teachers, some of whom may have your youngster in their class. As a recognizable face, and someone who is perhaps perceived as a cooperative, concerned parent, you may be privy to more information about your youngster’s in-school performance and behavior than the parent who is rarely if ever seen.

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