

Your Child's Report Card

How to engage your child effectively when the grading period stats come home

If you made the decision as a parent to behave differently than your parents did then kudos to you. Too many adults repeat the mistakes of their own parents by treating their children in a similar manner. Many of us (but not all) had parents who were harsh and abrasive toward us when we brought our less-than-perfect report card home to show them and obtain their signature. Not all families were like this and if you were treated fairly and respectfully by your folks, then good for you. But it was common in families from generations past to just repeat what their parents did to them. They used punishment and fear to motivate their children to do better in school. I remember my mother's cautionary warning of, "Wait until your father gets home," after reviewing my imperfect grades. The punishment administered by my father was a standard number of licks from a belt for each grade lower than a B; the lower the grade, the higher number of whippings. I waited in fear up in my room, sometimes for hours, moving from thoughts of "how to change the grade on my report card," to thoughts of running away from home before the next marking period. I can assure you that experiencing the fear of the impending punishment never generated thoughts of "how I can bring my grades up," although that's exactly what my parents were probably hoping for.

Letting Fear Determine the Outcome

I'm probably safe in guessing that most parents no longer use spanking as a discipline tool today to help their kids get better grades in school, but what they do use instead may still not be getting the results they're hoping for. Adults like my parents used fear to drive the discipline they used with my seven siblings and me. They were afraid that we were not taking school seriously and may do poorly, so they used this fear to pass more fear onto us. Parents today may not spank, but they let their fear of their kids' failure determine the discipline such as yelling, punishing, grounding, and taking away privileges. My word of caution is, don't do this. Modern-day scholars tell us that the negative things we allow ourselves to feel and think about, will expand. In other words, if you continue to believe you're a victim in life, more incidents will happen to you to reinforce that belief. If you complain about what's not right in your life, you'll get more of the same. And if you continue to allow yourself to fear that your children will fail in school, they will live up to your expectations. And then if you force your children to continue to feel the fear you're passing on to them, that too will expand. They will grow up to become more fearful and it will be that emotion that will determine how they live.

Prelude to the Report Card

Now that I've told you what NOT to do, here is my suggestion on what TO DO instead. This formula I'm laying out works best with school-age children through adolescence. First begin by setting your children up for success with the one piece of their school work that you have greater influence over; the homework. Begin by taking your child shopping for school supplies. This means letting them hold the money and carry the hand basket. Stay with them and guide (not control) them on what to buy. Allowing them to pay at the cash register completes the feeling of ownership of the supplies and eventually the process of doing the homework. Next, help them set up the space where they will do their homework. Depending on your child's learning style and temperament, both a main traffic area in the dining room and being hidden away in their room may not work. Find a happy medium that both of you can agree on and build that space with adequate desk space and lighting. The final piece is helping your child establish a schedule on doing the homework; what time it will begin and for how long. Some children need a break between coming home from school and beginning their work. Determine what will work best with your child, document it, and then stick to it.

Establish the “Quiet Time” and Keep it No Matter What

The window carved out for homework should also be marked as a declared “quiet time” of no entertainment electronics. This means banning Facebook, Internet, Nintendo, movies, cell phones, home telephone, or television during this time. Setting up this boundary will help your child concentrate. A young person who knows the rule of no entertainment electronics during the homework window will be less likely to be tempted to turn to it when the task at hand becomes difficult or boring. Because many schools now put textbooks online, I advise parents to have a “family computer” located in a common area for the child or teen to use to access their books. And because of the easy access to inappropriate material on the Internet, the location of the computer should be one in which the parents can monitor the child’s or teen’s usage.

The most difficult aspect of creating and keeping this “quiet time” is one that many parents may have difficulty with or even disagree with; keeping it in place even on days when there is no homework assigned. It is common for some children or teens to be faced with the decision of, “Do I do my homework even though it is due by the end of the week, or do I play with the newest video game that I’m addicted to?” When faced with this dilemma, many will “snow plow” their homework assignments and then panic the night before they are due. Keeping the “quiet time” in place Monday through Thursday in spite of no homework assignments due the next day, helps to avoid this problem. If the child or young teen has no homework on a particular day, the only quiet time activities allowed should be reading, writing, or anything creative and quiet that do not include the banned items I listed previously.

Sharing the Report Card

When your child brings the report card home, begin by doing three important things during the encounter; allow your child to hold the card and read the grades to you, remain completely quiet during the reading, and listen with 100% of your attention. Once the reading is complete, do not pass judgment or invoke consequences or punishment. Your job as a parent is to ask open ended questions that will allow your child to make his own assessment (not yours) of his performance being reflected in the report card. Ask your child questions such as; What is your favorite grade from this marking period, Why, What is your least favorite grade, and Why. Acknowledge any joy you see in her face about a particular subject she did well in, by telling her what you see. For example, if she exhibits excitement about her grade in math, simply say to her, “You look pretty proud of your math skills, what do you think helped you get such a good grade.” If he appears to be sad while talking about a low grade in science, ask him, “What would you have liked that grade to be instead?” When he provides you with an answer, ask him what he could do to bring that grade up for the next marking period.

Please take note, your child’s homework and report card belongs to him or her, not you. A parent who uses too much control over a child and what that child owns, will end up raising a child who is less likely to take ownership of things he should, and avoid self-responsibility.

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