

Helping Hand

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Helping Students Make the Grade

Teachers and parents have equally important jobs when it comes to helping students succeed in school. Homework is exciting for some children, who are challenged by the ideas presented, enjoy the game of completing a math equation, and/or see it as a sign of growing up; and provokes anxiety in other students if they have trouble keeping up with assignments or finding time and space to study.

Whether a child must memorize math facts or solve differential equations, practice spelling words, or analyze the symbolism in *Jane Eyre*, the parents' assignment is to help their students make the grade. From Kris Berggren, author of *Strategies for Stay-at-Home Parents* (Meadowbrook Press), here is a primer on creating a healthy homework climate to share with all parents:



Communicate with the teacher.

Attend back-to-school nights and conferences.

“Face time” with the teacher makes it easier to contact him or her later on. Find out the teacher’s expectations of students and parents in the homework process.

Does the teacher welcome calls at home or prefer messages left at school? Let the teacher know your preferred channels of communication.

Make homework do double duty. Spelling lists, multiplication tables or reports are vehicles for quality time with your children. Offer to go over their spelling list with them (maybe in the car on the way to soccer practice or piano lessons).

Schedule homework time with your child. Help your children use time well without burning out and plan the week’s work in advance. Use a calendar to write down which assignments they’ll do and when.

Create the conditions for homework success.

Students need a place to study with room to spread out books and papers. Homework space can be shared (kitchen table) or private (child’s room), but should be relatively quiet. Talk with kids about whether music, text messaging, or other distractions are hindering productivity or increasing creativity.

Don’t do the math (or the five-paragraph essay or the science project). Allow your child to do his or her own work. Some zealous parents forget that homework is where mistakes are supposed to be made (and learned from). If your child complains that he or she doesn’t “get it,” talk with the teacher.

Don’t make excuses for tardy/sloppy homework.

Curb the natural impulse to defend your child. (“He had a hockey game until 11,” or “She had play practice.”) Your child needs to learn that his or her actions have consequences, and to plan ahead.

Tips for Children about Personal Safety

Today, more than ever, it's very important that young children are aware of protecting their own personal safety. There are many steps that educators and parents alike can share with young students to keep them safe at school as well as at home or in other places, including the following ideas:

- Know how to contact parents, call emergency services, and memorize personal information
- Always check first with the adult who is caring for you before going anywhere with anyone
- Use a family "code word" and don't go with anyone who does not use the code word
- Never hitchhike
- Use the "buddy system" in public places, and always walk and play in groups
- Never go into public toilets alone
- Call home when you get to your destination, and call again before you leave to return home
- Don't play in or take shortcuts through dangerous or deserted areas
- If you are followed or frightened, knock on the nearest door and ask for the police to be called, and do not hide
- Walk on the left facing traffic so you can see if a car stops near you
- Find and go to a cashier, mom with kids, or security person if you get lost or separated while shopping
- If you are separated, never leave the area (store, mall, zoo), even if the person helping you asks you to step outside

Family Counseling: Who It Can Help and How



Jenna recalls her family's reluctance to seek counseling. "My husband was worried about the cost. My children feared friends and neighbors would find out. And I felt ashamed. I thought, 'Are we really so bad off that we cannot work things out on our own?'"

Your family may be reluctant to obtain professional help for problems at home. Yet doing so can help you identify and change dysfunctional communication and behavior patterns and improve your overall family relationship. Plenty of families you'd consider "normal" or "healthy" seek out counseling at one time or another.

Sometimes, a family has trouble working through an unexpected crisis or stressful event. Or, perhaps constant family squabbling is making home life unpleasant. Often, when a family "troublemaker" acts out, it indicates larger family issues.

Other possible reasons for seeking counseling include:

- when a child or teen is troubled, has behavioral problems or performs poorly in school
- when a family member is abusing a substance
- when words or actions are physically/emotionally hurtful or abusive
- when a physical struggle is used to settle disagreements
- during times of family transition (birth of child, divorce, etc.)
- when problems are recurring and never adequately solved
- when one family member has a mental illness

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Teens and Eating Disorders

Overeating habits related to tension, poor nutrition and food fads are relatively common eating problems for youngsters. In addition, two psychiatric eating disorders, anorexia nervosa and bulimia, are on the increase among teenage girls and young women, and often run in families. These eating disorders also occur in boys, but much less often.

Treatment can relieve symptoms or help control eating disorders, and usually includes individual therapy, family therapy, working with a primary care physician, a nutritionist and medication. Adolescents may also suffer from depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. It is important to recognize and get appropriate treatment for these problems as well.

SYMPTOMS AND WARNING SIGNS

Anorexia Nervosa

- typically a perfectionist or high achiever in school
- suffers from low self-esteem
- irrationally believes he or she is fat
- desperately needs a feeling of mastery over life
- experiences a sense of control only when saying “no” to normal food demands of his or her body
- in pursuit to be thin, the girl or boy starves
- often reaches the point of serious damage to the body, and in a few cases may lead to death

Bulimia

- binges on huge quantities of high calorie food and/or purges body of dreaded calories by self-induced vomiting or using laxatives
- binges may alternate with severe diets, resulting in dramatic weight fluctuations
- may try to hide signs of throwing up by running water while in the bathroom a long time
- purging is a serious threat to physical health including: dehydration, hormonal imbalance, depletion of minerals, damage to vital organs

The First Sip: Your Child’s Exposure to Alcohol

Your role as a parent is important in determining how your children will handle the temptation to drink alcohol. So how do you send the right message? Alcohol is harmful and, for minors, illegal, but not providing information yourself will likely result in your child learning about it from other kids—and maybe trying it in risky settings. Here are considerations that may help.

Be a good role model

Be aware of the messages you are sending to your children. Managing your stress through exercise or a hobby shows your child that you don’t have to drink to relax. Choosing soda over beer at social gatherings teaches your child that you don’t need to drink to have fun.

Build your child’s self-esteem

Saying “no” is easier for children with a positive self-image and strong sense of self. Help your child develop these characteristics by emphasizing strengths, reinforcing healthy behaviors and loving him or her unconditionally. Empower your child

with the opportunity to make decisions. Show your child respect and trust with more freedom and responsibility as he or she grows older.

Begin alcohol education early

Preschool through early elementary years is a good time to use “teachable moments” to talk about alcohol. At this age, children are interested in how to be healthy and how to avoid harmful substances.

At about age 9, begin discussions about risks of alcohol, how it affects the body and its dangers to growing bodies. Friends and “fitting in” become important at this age. Find time to talk casually about alcohol and friends and how to say “no.”

Be there for your teen

Your teen needs and wants your involvement and guidance (though he or she may not act like they do). Take a firm stance on alcohol and set rules, but give your trust and the freedom to make choices. This will empower your teen to make the right decision when offered their first sip.

Help Your Child Overcome Shyness

Shyness afflicts many children at some time in their lives. It's natural to feel awkward, uneasy or disoriented in situations that are new or overwhelming. Some children experience shyness in new situations or when they feel outnumbered. Older children may suffer shyness with peers, particularly those of the opposite sex.

Shyness in children creates difficulties for them in two respects: the adult reaction to their shy behavior and the anxiety and loss of experience their shyness may cause. Adult responses to shy children can make them more shy. When a parent asks a child to say "hello" or "thank you" to someone they barely know, the child may remain quiet or hide behind the parent. The parent says, "He's shy," or the other adult will say, "Is he shy?" These comments label a child ("I must be 'shy'") and make it more difficult for the child to try new behaviors, while drawing attention to an already overwhelmed youngster who may feel criticized.

Children who feel anxious because of their shyness must learn to cope with that feeling. A child who doesn't feel comfortable participating loses out on the fun of a game or party. The longer they feel shy, the harder it is for them to change. Shyness can develop into an anxiety disorder like "social phobia" or "social anxiety disorder," requiring treatment with therapy or medications.



When to seek help

If your child's shyness increases or begins to cause anxiety, withdrawal, and emotional reactions in "safe" situations, consult a professional. If your child isolates, has trouble interacting with others, appears listless or nonverbal, or seems involved only in imaginary play, seek a doctor's assistance. The doctor can make an appropriate referral.

What to do

Handle the child's shyness gently. Invite friends who have children to your home and develop regular opportunities for your child to be around others in a comfortable setting. Involve your child in a group activity that matches his or her interests, such as a library program, dance class, or science day camp. Try one step at a time, and "check in" with your child to monitor adjustment. Practice interaction skills with your child at home. Play "telephone conversation," and role model how to make a friend.

Teachers may include the basics of making friends in their curriculum. Your pediatrician may have advice to offer, and parenting magazines sometimes feature articles about shy children. If shyness interferes significantly with a child's functioning, then an evaluation by a psychologist or psychiatrist may be in order.

Last, take heart! Praise your child's strong points and enjoy him or her as she is. Someday in the future, you might wish that your 16-year-old had some of that cautious shyness that he or she had when six.