

Maximizing Your Child's School Experience

William G. Nicoll, Ph.D.

Resilience Counseling & Training Center
North Conway, New Hampshire

Last month, this column focused on strategies for sabotaging your child's school experience. Despite the considerable financial incentives for doing so (e.g., savings in college expenses and increased contributions to your retirement fund), apparently many parents are still interested in seeing their children succeed and maximizing their educational experience. So, in the interests of providing a "fair and balanced" approach to parenting, let's look at what parents can do to maximize their child's school experience.

Many parents mistakenly believe the best approach is to focus on teaching their children academic skills at home. This usually includes the practicing and teaching of reading and math skills, assisting with and reviewing homework, and the offering of rewards as incentives for good school performance. The research on children and school success suggests something quite different! None of these practices are helpful and indeed, the research evidence indicates they often create problems. Homework is a perfect example. The educational research indicates that homework in elementary school has no positive effects on learning and further, as a parent time involved in homework increases, children's achievement actually decreases. Rewards for reading books and school grades, the research suggests, are associated with lower reading comprehension skills and demotivating students to learn.

The research is clear, parent/family factors impact children's school success more than all the school instruction variables combined! However, what we've also learned is that it's not the parent's job to teach their child; rather, it is to raise a child ready to learn. When parents are successful in doing their job, then teachers and the school can take over and provide the quality instructional methods and strategies. When teachers from nations around the world were all asked to describe the characteristics of their "ideal student"; that is, the one with whom they would have maximum success as a teacher, the six most common responses were:

- 1) Interested in and motivated to learn,
- 2) Responsible for self and his/her behavior and learning,
- 3) Cooperative, works and plays well with others by being considerate and helpful toward classmates,
- 4) Brings "Intellectual Capital" (i.e., wealth of knowledge and experiences) to the classroom to invest in his/her learning,
- 5) Self-confident with a positive self-concept and
- 6) Respectful of others including both peers and adults from all backgrounds.

To think of this in another way, a child's school experience is similar to a football game. There are three distinct roles and responsibilities at the playing field, players, coaches and cheerleaders. It's the child's responsibility to "play the game" and go out on the field (classroom) and give it his or her best effort. It's the job of the coach (teacher) to teach the players the skills they need to succeed and keep them motivated and confident. And it's the job of the cheerleaders (parents) to support and encourage the players as they struggle to succeed on the field. No cheerleading squad has a cheer that goes, "*How many times do we have to tell you, hold on to the ball, hold on to the ball, Focus! Focus! Practice! Practice ... You're*

Grounded!” Rather, cheerleaders recognize effort, progress and express confidence that their team will eventually prevail. This is your job as a parent; be your kid’s #1 cheerleader! To learn how, this fall go to a high school football game when the last place team plays against the first place team. Sit yourself near the last place team’s cheerleaders and let them demonstrate how to support and encourage your child even when the going gets tough!

As the Irish poet, playwright and Noble prize winner for literature once put it, “*We must never forget, education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire!*” Below are the top five (5) strategies to help you become an effective educational cheerleader, to ‘light the fire’ in your child, and to maximize his/her school experience:

#5 : Watch TV and movies together. Yes, watch television! There are numerous educational programs on every day on the Animal Planet, History Channel, Evening News, Travel Channel, etc. that you can watch, learn from and discuss. In other words, discuss and learn about the world together.

#4: Prescribe daily dosage of at least three “Put Ups”. That’s a ‘put up’ not a ‘put down’! Take time to build your child’s self-confidence and self-efficacy by at least three times daily noting something he/she has shown an interest or strength in, worked hard at or improved upon, or a behavioral quality that you observed and admire.

#3: Establish family rituals and traditions. Schedule a regular time each day, and/or week, to engage everyone in a family activity together. This can be a family dinner, game night, movie night, or play games in the yard, share a housecleaning weekend morning, an evening walk, or whatever fits with your family. Such family rituals and traditions provide time to work and play together, to cooperate in a shared activity and to talk with one another.

#2: Engage in learning activities at home. Don’t teach, but do learn together by discussing stories, books, news events, and newspaper, internet or magazine articles together. Invite your child to assist you in cooking a dinner, fixing the dripping faucet, preparing a shopping list, and so forth. These activities involve you and your child in learning together in a learning a process that is fun, not a chore.

#1: The Family Field Trip. Plan regular family “field trips” to learn together about the world and all it has to offer. Remember, “interested in learning” and possessing substantial “intellectual capital” to invest in their school experience are characteristics teachers identify in the “ideal student”. Walk the beach to collect shells to identify in books, get a net and go seining in the intra-coastal, go to museums, attend dance, musical and library events, attend local cultural festivals, spend a day at a nature reserve or state park. In other words, find as many ways as possible to bring your son or daughter out into the world to experience what the world, and education, has to offer them.