

# How to Sabotage Your Child's School Experience

*William G. Nicoll, Ph.D.*

*Resilience Counseling & Training Center  
North Conway, New Hampshire*

With schools ready to open soon, magazines and newspapers are filled with articles on how to prepare your child for a successful school year. Advice is freely given to parents on how to help your child become the next Einstein, Mozart or DaVinci. There seems just no end to such advice to parents each fall, so there's no need to offer yet another such column here.

Instead, let's consider a parent's other option. How can you sabotage your child's upcoming school year, de-motivate learning and undermine his/her achievement and school success? There are several methods, often employed, rather unwittingly, by well-meaning parents that actually serve this sabotaging purpose quite effectively. Moreover, there are some notable benefits to such an approach. Think of all the many dollars you will save on school supplies. No sense buying them if your child's diminished interest in, and motivation to, learn will result in their disuse anyway. Taking a more long-term perspective, consider the sizeable savings you will potentially realize by avoiding those outlandish higher education costs including college tuition, room, board and text books! Sabotaging your child's motivation to learn early on in the educational process can result in as much as a \$50,000 to \$400,000 savings. This includes the cost of 4 years in college costs; money that could instead go directly into your 401k retirement fund instead of building a successful future for your child.

With over 40 years experience as a classroom teacher, special education teacher, school counselor, family therapist, college of education professor, and consultant to schools around the world, as well as avid consumer of the educational and child development research, I've identified a rather extensive list of parenting strategies that research evidence has found to undermine children's school success. Ironically, these strategies are often mistakenly used by parents (and sometimes even recommended by teachers) with the intent of motivating children to achieve. Unfortunately both experience and the research evidence indicate that these strategies backfire. They result in decreased learning motivation, lower academic achievement, lower aspirations, and the avoidance of school work.

Listed below are the **'Top 5'** parenting strategies for "educational sabotage". Use these tactics this year if your goal is to sabotage your child's learning (and thereby maximize your retirement savings fund).

**#1: Focus on Correcting Mistakes.** This is the single, best strategy to sabotage learning motivation. Just recall the last time your mother or mother-in-law pointed out that the dinner you prepared was overcooked, or had too little/too much salt. Do you recall thanking her for noting your shortcomings and feeling a warm, loving bond developing between you as she attempted to make you a better wife/mother or husband/father? Didn't this "mistake focused" feedback just make you want to invite her over again and prepare an even better dinner? No, then why do you think the same strategy would ever help your child? When children are very young we applaud and accept every attempt and effort they make to learn language, walk, hold their own drinking cup, kick a ball, and so forth. Such encouragement of their efforts serves to stimulate their natural striving toward improvement and growth without fear of criticism.

Then, as they begin school, we take this successful method that worked so well for the past 4-5 years, and turn it upside down. We now focus on their mistakes, errors, and shortcomings. We insist on drawing our children's attention to what they did poorly, not good enough or need to improve. Try this method on your spouse and see how well it works! Clearly, this strategy is almost fool proof for parents seeking to sabotage their child's education.

**#2: Use Rewards to motivate achievement.** While many parents believe that offering rewards (aka: bribes) for school work motivates children to learn, research evidence now quite convincingly indicates just the opposite. Extrinsic rewards (money, treats, special activity, etc.) for completed school work, grades or books read actually, in the long run, decrease motivation to learn. Rewards for learning are a short run motivator, but long-term de-motivator! Indeed, studies have indicated that methods such as offering a prize for reading a certain number of books will also decrease reading comprehension skills. Children learn to read to get the prize, not to understand what they read in the book. This approach also leads to children "negotiating" for increasingly better rewards in exchange for providing the grades or results desired by their parents. Eventually, the child's position toward school work becomes one of "OK, so you want me to get good grades, but what is in it for me?" Once your rewards are no longer interesting, the motivation to do the school work or achieve disappear. Reward systems are only effective for tasks that are otherwise uninteresting or unappealing (lack intrinsic motivation) and are found to be counter-productive for tasks which are viewed as positive or desirable.

**#3: Praise and Punishment!** Keep your focus on trying to "make" your child work harder and achieve better grades via a combination of praise for A's and 1<sup>st</sup> place and, restrictions and the loss of toys, privileges, and favorite activities whenever performance does not meet your high standards. Punitive strategies, when consistently used, turn learning into a war between parent and child. Your child understands the axiom, "*never fight with someone who can defeat you by simply doing nothing; he/she is invincible*". Thus, the more you criticize and punish, the more your child will employ passive resistance to defeat your demands and attempts to overpower him or her. An added benefit is that punishments transform learning into a negative, potentially painful process with each day offering yet another chance to fail in the parent's eyes and suffer some form of punitive response. Over time, most children will develop a 'suit of armor' to protect themselves from failure. Your child will eventually refuse to work hard and achieve instead stating in regard to grades, "I don't care; I don't like school" (a response that actually means, "I do care deeply, but if let you know that, you'll use it against me and hurt me further.").

Research evidence has also now verified that praising children (the flip side of punishment) also subtly undermines their motivation to achieve. Praise involves an adult evaluating the child with such statements as, "Oh, you are so smart, you got all A's or 100%" or, "I'm so proud of you for winning first place". Children complete the implied logic behind praise which goes something like, "If I get all A's or 100% correct I am smart, therefore if I get less than 100% or an A, I am dumb" or, "If I win my parent is proud of me, but if I don't win then she must be disappointed, embarrassed by me". Not trying unless guaranteed success becomes an attractive solution to avoiding such potential failure.

**#4: Become "Arnold, the Homeworkinator!"** Transforming every evening into a battle of wills over homework is a "can't fail" strategy to sabotage your child's school year. Make him/her learn and do the homework RIGHT! This is best accomplished by insisting upon your child doing his/her homework at the place and time you demand (preferably when his/her favorite TV show is on or friends are involved in

some enjoyable, healthy, playtime activity). Be sure to constantly check in on your child's progress, point out mistakes to be corrected or work to be done over, and insist on perfection! This nicely transforms learning into a parent/child power struggle; a struggle in which the parent demonstrates his/her black belt in parenting martial arts. Though your child will think he's defeating your efforts to "make him do his homework" you will actually emerge the victor. By using your child's energy to defeat you, you will actually obtain your goal of sabotaging his/her motivation to learn and to achieve and thus undermine higher education aspirations. Of course, the irony in all this is that research strongly indicates that homework, at least in elementary school, has no positive effects on learning. Middle and high school homework does have some positive effects on grades but either too little or too much adversely impacts achievement. Research indicates that as the amount of time parents spend "getting their child to do homework" increases, the more the child's grades decrease.

**#5: Remain detached and uninvolved in your child's school experience.** Avoid attending or participating in school activities, events, or conferences. Also, be careful not to inquire or discuss your child's day at school including what they've learned or found interesting and enjoyable. This effectively communicates to your child how unimportant his/her life is to you and how unimportant school and learning are in general. It is also important to avoid engaging in any fun, interesting learning activities outside of school as well such as libraries, museums, wildlife parks, and so forth. This strategy helps to foster a "who cares" attitude in your child regarding their school progress and aspirations.

Of course, if you happen to be one of those parents who choose the opposite path of fostering a love of learning, high aspirations and a motivation to achieve, you'd be well advised to avoid these 'Top 5' educational sabotage strategies. Just don't complain when you are paying all those tuition fees, room and board bills and textbook costs or looking at expensive graduate school options! For such parents, we'll explore in the next issue the 'Top 5' parenting strategies to motivate children and win them over to learning and achieving.