

How to Help Your Child Succeed at School

Very young children are naturally driven to learn and explore. They are at the very beginning of their lifelong quest to understand and gain mastery of the world around them. As they reach out, fall and get back up again, they gain a heightened sense of mastery, competence and self-efficacy. Somewhere around kindergarten, however, parents and teachers begin to undermine this process by devaluing the process of learning and replacing it with a mad dash for the end products. Suddenly, the intrinsic motivators of natural curiosity, competence and self-efficacy are less valuable than extrinsic motivators such as stickers, points and grades. Unfortunately, extrinsic motivators undermine kids' desire to learn over the long term. Want your kid to lose interest in school? Pay them for their A's and worship at the altar of grades. If you'd instead like your kids to remain curious and hungry for mastery, here are some tips for re-orienting kids' priorities.

- **Keep report cards off social media and the refrigerator.** We can tell our kids that we value learning all we want, but when we gush over grades and stick them to the refrigerator, we show them that what we value most are the grades. Of course, grades are what most parents are stuck with, even if they are [flawed and incomplete indicator of learning](#) as well as what's known as an "extrinsic motivator," which has been shown to [reduce motivation over the long term, undermine creativity,](#) and [encourage cheating](#). Some schools have moved away from letter-based grades and are using reports focused on mastery- or standards-based evaluations, which can help parents and kids focus on what's being learned rather a grade. No matter what kind of report your child gets, humble-bragging about it on social media only feeds parental competition, raises the pressure for kids and teaches them that your love and approval is contingent on the content of their report card.

- **Focus on the process they used to get that grade.** When we invest less energy and emotion in the number or letter at the top of the page, we can begin to ask our children questions such as, What did you do to get this grade? Which study techniques worked for you and which ones did not? What are you going to do differently next time?
- **Look forward, not back.** The best question parents can ask when faced with a grade, whether high or low, is: How are you going to use this experience to be better next time? This technique works particularly well for anxious and overly perfectionist kids, because they can get stuck in a negative feedback loop, obsessing wholly on the numbers and grades. Helping them shift their focus back to the process can alleviate that anxiety, particularly when we help them prioritize the aspects of learning they can control.

Model: Talk about your own failures and successes with your kids, showing them that you, too, are invested in the process of learning. If you berate yourself over failures, so will they. If, however, they see you being brave and learning from your mistakes so you can be better next time, so will they.