

Teens & Tweens

IMPROVING GRADES

What parents can—and can't—do

BY / RONI COHEN-SANDLER

Q ■ Last year in seventh grade, our daughter's grades were not what they should have been. Her teachers said she needed to make more effort on tests, and get all her homework in on time. But whenever we reminded her of her assignments or tried to quiz her before exams, she just got angry and said we were only making things worse. Since this is her last year in middle school, we're even more concerned about making sure she gets off to a good start. How can we help her?

Parents who believe their teens and tweens aren't achieving up to their potential—or, worse, appear unmotivated—are usually frustrated, worried, and at a loss about how to turn things around. Naturally, we all want to see our kids being as successful as they possibly can. Yet it's important to remember developmental factors; this age group is in a state of perpetual flux resulting from rapidly changing bodies, hormonal surges, and sharply increased social pressures—not to mention the accompanying emotional fallout. As part of figuring out who they are, teens and tweens begin to question their relative status in school ("Am I seen as smart?") and academic goals ("Do I really want to put in the time to do well?"). Plus, at any given time, even the most scholarly student may be distracted by personal, family, or friendship difficulties, extracurricular demands, or illness. No wonder their performance fluctuates from day to day!

These are challenging times for parents as well as for teens and tweens. In fact, many mothers and fathers struggle with how to be helpful while also respecting kids' growing need for autonomy—in other words, being appropriately, but not overly, involved. Understanding your daughter's maturational needs and identifying what else could be affecting her performance will help you to walk this admittedly fine line.

The first step may be to take a closer look at your assumptions about her success. Average grades, for example, are not necessarily a sign of underachievement. By definition, half of students earn average marks. Not every teen or tween is capable of excelling academically,



even with the best parental intentions, tutoring, and extra help. It is always heartbreaking, in fact, when students in middle school or high school confide, "I'm not smart enough to get the grades my parents want," or "I know I'll never be good enough." Disappointing parents is far more demoralizing than disappointing themselves.

If you are unclear about your daughter's true capabilities—or suspect she may have a learning or attention problem—it may be wise to have her evaluated. A thorough psycho-educational or neuropsychological workup will clarify her strengths and weaknesses, learning style, and any impediments to her success. Testing usually answers parents' questions, either by validating their nagging feeling that "something isn't quite right" or by putting their minds at ease. Above all, test findings should provide clear and specific recommendations (e.g., tutoring, further assessment, course selection, study strategies,



etc.) for how students can make the most of their abilities.

Not uncommonly, tweens flounder in middle school because they lack the practical organizational and study skills needed for a more advanced curriculum: learning greater amounts of material, grasping and applying broader concepts, and juggling multiple assignments. That is why tweens who did well earlier suddenly begin to struggle in sixth or seventh grade. Like your daughter, they appear unmotivated because their work is done poorly or sporadically (while their focus shifts to their social lives), and are often surprised when they get back lackluster or dismal test grades. Even when you recognize this situation, stepping in and trying to organize your daughter's studies isn't easy when your kindhearted offers to help are summarily rebuffed.

So what can parents do? Fortunately, plenty. (And just as important, there is much you can't do, which we'll get to shortly.) But first, consider these strategies:

WHAT TO DO:

1. Express interest in learning. Inquire about your daughter's experience and what she is learning in school rather than merely keeping track of her grades. Rather than asking, "What did you get on your sci-

ence test?" try, "How did you find your science test?" Or ask, "What's the most interesting thing you did/learned today?"

2. Keep conversations pleasant. To avoid teens and tweens feeling criticized or nagged—and therefore shutting down—talk about extracurricular interests, current events, and other topics besides school. But when you do address academics, wait until she's had a chance to relax and aim for a supportive rather than accusatory tone.

3. Enlist teens and tweens in decisions. Rather than dictating changes you believe might help her, ask for your daughter's input. Encourage her to set specific, realistic, and doable goals. Then find out what she believes she needs to do differently to attain them. That way, she'll be more invested in the outcome. Guide her to ask her teachers for study tips and suggestions. She will find that success breeds success.

4. Set the structure. Encourage good work habits by providing school supplies, a computer, and easy access to needed resources. Let your daughter decide whether she does best with background music or quiet, in seclusion or working with a study buddy. Agree on reasonable house rules to limit distractions such as TV, phone, and instant messaging—and be willing to renegotiate, as necessary, as she matures. If she is older than eleven, hire a professional or peer tutor rather than trying to do it yourself.

5. Maintain perspective. Make sure your daughter knows that you care more about her well-being than her grades, and that you value who she is more than what she does. Feeling shamed or blamed for mistakes only makes kids less inclined to make an effort. Also, keep in mind that her brain will continue to mature through her early twenties. Tweens and teens need support, encouragement and, above all, the gift of time.

WHAT NOT TO DO:

1. Think you have control. At the end of the day, you can't make your daughter become motivated. While incentives sometimes work, true intellectual curiosity and ambition have to come from within. You also can't do school for her. She must learn to approach teachers and advocate for herself. Keeping track of her assignments and monitoring her daily work may boost certain grades, but in the long run it won't enable her to learn to manage her time and study most effectively—skills she needs for college and beyond.

2. Lecture, denigrate, or threaten. Teens and tweens rarely benefit from (or listen to) long parental lectures about the importance of doing well in school, especially when they include poignant anecdotes about their mothers' and fathers' past mistakes or successes. Similarly, "pep talks" that helpfully remind teens of how disastrous their futures will be if they don't hit the books are more apt to spark resentment than responsibility. Instead, stick to your daughter's present situation—gently, kindly, and positively.

3. Compare her to higher achievers. Identifying more successful siblings, friends, or neighbors—and suggesting that your daughter fashion herself after them—is also likely to backfire. Teens don't think, "Good idea! I'll try to be more like Morgan!" Instead, they feel rejected: "My parents obvi-

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ously would rather Morgan was their daughter." Better to reinforce your daughter's pride and esteem by recognizing areas in which she shines.

4. Find the perfect punishment. Taking away the hobbies and activities your daughter most enjoys is not the answer. Neither is eliminating her phone and computer privileges to isolate her from the outside world. Punishment, in fact, is often ineffective. Like most tweens, your daughter is more likely to respond if you reward her for responsible behavior and acknowledge what she is doing right.

5. Overlook her non-academic accomplishments. When grades slip, parents often panic and become intent on fixing "the problem." But consider the possibility that at this juncture your daughter needs to focus on mastering swimming or violin or dance skills, or becoming more secure in her friendships. She can't do everything all at once—or do everything well. Over time, she will learn to balance her various commitments. Until then, appreciate the dedication and discipline she demonstrates in non-academic areas. Lastly, remember that what matters most in the long run is maintaining a strong, trusting parent-teen relationship. *W*

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