

Who owns your children's education?

Another school year has begun. Whether your child is excited about it or dreads it may have a lot to do with the support system. We want our children to take responsibility for their education but we usurp that responsibility when we tell them how it should be done—we adults take control of their education and learning process. We get afraid that a child will fall between the cracks and so we direct instead of support. Our children need us to learn how they learn best, set up what they need to do their best, and then let them find their own way.

It is the rare child who likes to do homework and is self-motivated enough to set aside the time for it without procrastinating and grumbling at the very least. If your child is self-motivated, be sure to defer to his lead on when, where, and how much homework is done. Stay involved with interest in what your child is studying and support all school goings-on, friends, etc. Then count your blessings, step back, and allow him to navigate his way.

The rest of our children do best with strong scaffolding within which they find some autonomy. Scaffolding is a temporary structure used to support workers as they do their task. Children thrive on structure. When they know what to expect and when to expect it, as long as the expectations are appropriate to them and the situation, they usually meet those expectations. Scaffolding is temporary because it needs to change as your child changes (as the building goes up). Structure is necessary. But how the structure is set up depends on your child's current needs. The more children are involved in setting the scaffolding, the more helpful it is to them.

Whether your child simply needs a consistent time set up for homework, is an ADHD child and requires your presence and patience, or has more involved processing difficulties, requiring a specific plan as well as outside help, the amount and placement of the scaffolding is different for each child. Establishing the appropriate scaffolding requires trial and error and can take a long time. The important thing to consider is that your child will respond well when the scaffolding is right. This doesn't mean she will suddenly love doing homework but her resistance and griping will decrease. Our tendency is to set the structure of our choosing—typically what we wanted or think will

work best—and then expect our child to do well. Resist the “I know what’s best for you” approach and put the time and effort into getting it right.

Once it seems to work, then your job is to let go of how your child maneuvers the scaffold. For instance, if he resists doing a particular homework assignment or is especially frustrated or tired, let him know that you trust what he thinks is best (connection), perhaps he could find a different time than the usual (problem solving) or that you will leave it between him and his teacher (giving him the lead). If you need to get more involved with his teacher be sure to ask your child first or at least let him know you are contacting the teacher.

Letting go means to remain supportive in whatever way the specific scaffolding requires but to avoid expecting the results you hope for. Your child may need to remain on a low rung for a long time before progressing. She may want to do only the minimum required. Letting go means trusting her process. She may need more confidence before stepping up to the next rung or improving her grade. Find ways for her to take the lead and honor her progress. Remember, you are not her teacher, you are her support system.

Problems can arise for parents who get impatient with the process or are not structured themselves. Those who are temperamentally less structured and more spontaneous tend to have difficulty setting up an environment for a child who may need lots of structure. Instead of letting chaos reign, get some help from a more structured person or even professional. Some children can find their way fine in an unstructured environment but some simply cannot. It is not fair to blame that child for unwanted behavior when he is coping in an environment that does not meet his needs.

The same goes for school environments. Public schools are doing more and more to accommodate different needs, but some children just do not do well in a public school setting and need a smaller, more intimate environment. Unfortunately these cost money, hence the charter school movement. When a child needs specific individualized scaffolding, which a public school does not or cannot offer, you will see very difficult behavior in the classroom. Instead of more discipline measures attempting to get the

child to comply, it is important for parents, teachers, and administrators to work together to find a way to build effective scaffolding for that child.

A child does not misbehave in school because he thinks it's fun—even though his defense mechanism may give that impression—he misbehaves because he cannot find any other way to cope. His ability to cope and feel in balance is the bottom line for how successful he will be. That in turn helps the school. Getting the scaffolding right both at home and at school is where effort is rewarded.

Watch for “Waiting for Superman”, a documentary on the educational movement in America due out Sept. 24.