

Time for Setting the School Year Up for Success

With school back in session, now is a good time to set intentions and daily habits with school-aged children. Before enthusiasm for the new year wanes, set a time to make plans. Maybe it's a family meeting, or sitting around the table after dinner, or after reading and before going to sleep—whatever part of the day is relaxed and comfortable. Yeah, I know, with sports schedules, when does anyone have time for a relaxed, comfortable family gathering. So maybe it's stolen time on the weekend, maybe it's just between you and one child at a time. But it's worth the effort to make it happen.

The key: Don't tell your children what they have to do. Instead, state from the beginning that decisions must work for everyone. Depending on the age of your child, you might begin with a question like, "What do you want to get out of this year?" or "If you could call the shots, how would you like this year to go?" Then maybe, "What would you like to do differently this year, if anything?" or "What would you like your teacher to say about you at the end of the year?" or "What grades would you like to end the year with?"

Encourage your children to fantasize, wave a magic wand, and make it up. The key is to get the conversation going, which will happen only if they know they can call the shots—at least in the beginning—and have fun with it. If it starts with bombing the school, go with that, play along, until the fantasy plays out. Then you can talk about reality—"So given that that probably won't happen (with humor), what do you think you *could* make happen that would work for you?" If your child buys into the conversation, have him write down what he wants and keep it in a drawer to check throughout the year. Revise it when necessary. Setting intentions have an amazing way of working out. You want your child to feel some control and not get bogged down in futility. The most successful students know they can make something happen.

It's my educated guess that 90% of school children think they are doing schoolwork and getting grades for teachers or parents, not themselves. It is our job to convince our children that their education is for them and that they have choices about how it goes. I'm

convinced that more children would take control of their education if they understood that it is theirs and no one else's.

For too many, school is a prison sentence to merely "get through". But in order to put them in the driver's seat, you have to get out of the car. You can sit in the back seat if your child needs more active guidance, as long as you don't become "a backseat driver". When parents take charge of schoolwork, children don't have to. They will happily relinquish responsibility when we take it for them. Then we complain about our irresponsible children. Who set that up?

Sometimes we have to let children fall on their face before they realize that the responsibility is really theirs. As long as we are there to catch them and to acknowledge how much it hurts to fall, we are doing them a great service allowing the fall. It's much easier to do when children are young and not in their junior year of high school.

After you have talked about the year in general, get to the day-to-day specifics. "What works best for homework? Getting it done right away or after chill time? Where do you like to do it most? How much help would you like from me?" Allow your children to determine their own time and agenda as much as possible. If their favorite time doesn't work for you, instead of saying "You have to do it at such and such a time", let them know that you wouldn't be available at that time if help is needed. If they want to go beyond your hours of mental awareness, let them know exactly what hours you will be available and stick to it.

Make a policy—agreed on by all—about homework corrections, if needed, and the consequences of homework not done on time. Stop policing them and let them know that their consequences come from school, not you. One mother I know said that if homework was not done by 9:00, it could either be left unfinished or completed in the morning, it was up to the child. But either way—finished or unfinished—it went to school. She took herself out of the fight and nightly battles ended.

Too often the school year gets away from us. Bad habits and family battles become the norm, and we end up feeling hopeless, out of control, and worried about a child who is falling through the cracks. Don't let that happen. Set your boundaries up now. Allow your children to take responsibility, make decisions about what works and what doesn't, create their own agendas within your parameters, and take ownership of their education. It may feel like you are dropping the ball. But in the long run, both you and your children will be far better for it.