

Will your child have a successful school year?

I have written before about setting intentions for the school year but think it's important enough to bring it up again. While many school experiences are out of you or your child's control, more is possible to intend than you may think. Set a time with your children to make some intentions—whenever each of you is relaxed. Make it light and fun and include plenty of pretend.

The key: Don't tell your children what kind of a year *you* want them to have. Instead, begin with something like, "I want you to think about the school year ahead and how you can make it happen the way you want. If you could design it, what would it look like?" Or, "If you could call the shots, how would you like this year to go?" Maybe, "What would you do differently this year?" And, "If you overheard your teacher talking about you at the end of the year, what would you like her/him to say?" or "What grades would you like to end the year with?" Then ask, "What can you do to make that happen?"

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 are calling the shots and it's fun. If it starts with bombing the school, go with that, play along, until the fantasy plays out. Then you can add—"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, you might ask him to write down some ideas and keep it in a drawer to check throughout the year and revise when necessary. Include peer relationships, going over what has and hasn't worked in the past. "Who would you like to be friends with this year? Why?"

Setting intentions has a way of directing one's path. You want your child to feel in control of her experience. The most successful students know they can affect change in their lives.

Probably 90% of school children think they are slugging away for teachers and parents, not themselves. We must convince them that their education is for them and that they have choices about how it goes. I'm convinced that more children would take more responsibility for schoolwork if they understood that it is *their education* and no one else's. For too many, school is a prison sentence to endure. What we want is for our children to love learning and take responsibility for their education. But in order to put your child in the driver's seat, you have to give over the wheel. 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 make mistakes and even 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, allowing the fall may be a great service—easier to allow when children are young and not in their junior year of high school.

After you have talked about the year in general, get to day-to-day specifics. What do you each need to do to make mornings work best? When and where is the favored time and place for homework? How much help does your child want from you? Allow your children to determine their own homework agenda as much as possible. If their best time doesn't work for you, instead of trying to change it, let them know you won't be available for help at that time and discuss when that would be. You don't want to end up feeling resentful and trapped by your child's homework schedule.

Make a policy, agreed on by all, about homework corrections and the consequences of unfinished homework. Stop policing and let your children know that consequences come from school, not you. One mother I know said that if homework was not done by 9:00, it could be left unfinished or completed in the

morning, it was up to her child. Either way it went to school. She took herself out of the fight and homework battles ended.

Do not minimize the importance of play and relaxation. All research confirms the importance of play, especially unstructured and non-directed play, in a young child's brain development and learning. Don't allow overscheduling of after-school activities.

Too often the school year gets away from us. Bad habits and family battles mar evenings when we need to be connected. We end up feeling out of control and worried. Set intentions now and empower your child to direct his own way. Avoid the temptation of telling him what *you* think he should do. Have faith in your child's desire to do well. By guiding and supporting rather than nagging and directing, you empower him to feel capable of managing his own life.