

Surviving The Teenage Years - A Good Start to the School Year

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As parents, we typically operate reactively to our children's school performance. At the first hint of academic problems we begin our efforts to encourage our children to make the necessary corrections. Too often, by the time that we realize that there's a problem (often after reviewing report cards or getting a call from the school) precious few months remain in the school year to correct the problem(s). In addition to the academic challenges, these occurrences usually fuel family conflicts. Things can go from better to worse pretty quickly.

A more effective strategy is a proactive approach and this is the time of year to begin creating an effective game plan for the upcoming school year. The main components of a good game plan include: effective parent-child communication, maximizing positive incentives, ongoing feedback regarding academic performance, and good follow through.

1. Effective Parent-Child Communication: Now is the ideal time to begin this discussion with your child – before the crises in school occur. Carefully pick a relaxed time when everyone can communicate effectively. The focus should be positive not negative, for example: "I think that this is going to be a great school year for you, let's come up with a plan to help you be successful."

2. Maximizing Positive Incentives: It's human nature to rely on threats and punishments versus using positive incentives. The problem is that this approach is rarely effective and often creates more problems than it solves. Consider the privileges that your child is looking to increase (e.g. curfew, driving lessons, use of the family car, increased allowance, etc.) and begin having conversations about linking these privileges to school performance.

3. Ongoing Feedback Regarding Academic Performance: In addition to report cards, there are several ways to receive ongoing feedback regarding your child's academic efforts. These include: regular conversations with your child (providing positive feedback and praise whenever possible), obtaining teacher email addresses and checking in on a regular basis, having your child bring a progress form around to all or select teachers on a regular basis for them to jot a note along with a signature (all schools have these available). Some combination of these usually works best, depending on your child. A good rule of thumb is to focus more on effort than grades.

4. Good Follow Through: After developing a well thought out plan, it is critical for everyone to follow through with what was agreed upon. If the positive incentives are motivating to your child there's a good chance that they will follow through. It is critical that the parent be a good model and follow through as well.

For more information on an effective step-by-step approach to develop the parent-child "contract," a book entitled "Parenting Essentials; Seven Steps to Parenting Success" is available for free on our website (www.CompassHouseServices.org, click on "Press Room" and then "Seven Steps to Parenting").