

DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT STUDY SKILLS AND LEARNING STYLES

By: Dr. Ester Cole*

In order to develop resiliency and a sense of purpose, children have to feel socially and academically competent and become self-sufficient problem solvers. Students may vary in their learning styles and study skills. In higher grades, students who have not acquired effective and efficient study skills come under a considerable amount of stress. Parents, in particular, may have questions related to homework or study and organizational skills. The ongoing process of communication with parents is likely to provide valuable information about education and increase their partnership with teachers. Parental involvement in turn, is likely to have a positive impact on their children's achievement and academic success.

The following are sample questions often asked by parents and teachers. The answers provided may be used in consultation with parents of school age children.

Q. Our child is in grade 5/6 and he is disorganized. I talk to him almost every day but it does not help. What can I do?

A. Many adults take the ability to organize for granted. As a result, we tend to get frustrated with children who are disorganized and question their motivation and sense of responsibility. For disorganized children, seeing patterns of simple every day events in school or at home may be difficult. They tend to become confused when we request that they change their behaviour and become organized. Talking to them is not enough, since they may have problems translating their promises into actions.

First, consult with the teacher about strategies which work well in the classroom. With your child, who should take part in the planning; create a checklist for routines at home. Given your child's age, he may decide with your guidance what goals should take high priority after school. Many parents use such a system with little result. This, however, is because they tend to set too many goals and do not use the system consistently. Show your child how tasks you do at home are broken down into small steps. Doing things one step at a time is less overwhelming for all involved. Also, working on one or two goals with success will provide your child with immediate feedback and encouragement to continue the tasks.

Teach your child that organization of materials, possessions and information is sorted according to similar groupings. Try to draw on examples which are of interest to your child such as sports activities. Ask your child to think out loud the steps required to complete tasks you know your child will be good at. This will make him feel in control, and hopefully will enhance his motivation. Also, by making time to listen to your son about his areas of interest, you may make a linkage between those topics and the need for planning and organization.

If your child has become progressively more disorganized, you may need to question other areas. Having difficulties with concentration and organization also indicates stress at school or with peers. Take time to question, listen and praise when things have been accomplished. Your child needs to hear from you that you have noticed positive change.

Q. Our grade 7/8 child becomes very upset when she has tests. After 3 years in Canada, she doesn't do well on tests. Do you think she has a learning problem which was not identified in earlier grades?

A. Although your child may have a learning disability, it is likely that you would have received earlier feedback on the matter. Since test taking is the main area of concern, it may very well be the case that your daughter lacks well developed study skills in this area and that she is still in the process of learning English skills related to academic tasks. Being able to study effectively becomes an important factor for success in higher grades. Many intelligent students can become frustrated with their school work because they lack good study skills. "Learning how to learn" is an ongoing process. Each student has to develop study skills which are viewed as learning tools for them.

Study habits and learning styles vary from person to person. Consequently, doing well on tests and getting ready for them requires your child to re-evaluate her study routines. The following questions are likely to assist her in becoming more confident and more efficient in her studies before tests:

- Does she know why students have to write tests?
- Does she study only the day before a test?
- Does she review her class notes?
- Does she ask teachers for help when she needs it?
- Does she study for tests by only reading the material?
- Does she write summaries before tests?

- Does she study with friends?
- Does she ask herself questions when she studies?
- Does she study the same way for all subjects?
- During tests, does she read instructions carefully?
- Does she feel she has enough time to complete the tests?
- When she doesn't understand directions on a test, does she give up?

Discuss these questions with your child. The answers that she gives you and her teacher will be a guide for improving test taking behaviours. Becoming systematic about these learning strategies will increase your daughter's confidence in herself as a learner whether she has learning disabilities or not.

Q. I can not help my child with homework because of my work schedule. I am concerned because my child does homework for only about half an hour a day. What can I do?

A. Schools usually have a homework policy which is shared with parents. Studies have found that parental interest and support with homework can help children's learning and progress in school. Some parents can not read with their children in English. However, expressing interest, praising work and reading together in the family's first language are important aspects of communication and learning.

Talk to your child about the fact that homework is an extension of school learning. Help your child develop a routine and schedule for homework. You do not have to "take over" the schedule in order to help, as homework is the child's own responsibility. Students do homework in several places - at home; in libraries; after school in supervised study halls; in class after work completion. Your child needs to find the best place to concentrate and study. Your child may need some privacy in order to use time efficiently. It is not always the quantity of time spent on homework that makes a difference. Rather, it is the focus and understanding of the purposes of homework which are important.

In case you are not sure about your role, you should contact the teacher. When the rationale for the homework is clear, your child will be motivated to learn more. A frequent question asked both at school and at home is "did you do your homework?" You may wish to discuss the following questions with your

child: Do you know why homework is given by teachers? Whose responsibility is homework? Do you understand the teacher's expectations? Do you memorize the assigned work or use an agenda for recording? How do you avoid things which distract you when you work? What can you tell your younger sister about the value of homework?

Q. Some of my students have gaps in their study habits and knowledge. Parents are concerned about their learning skills. I would like to help their transition to Senior School by focusing on study skills and self-esteem building. What should I focus on?

A. Your plan is timely, since the transition to higher grades is often stressful for students. Also, the development of positive self-esteem is interrelated with confidence and academic achievement. Feeling capable at school will likely increase motivation for learning and self-reliance.

You may want to use individual and cooperative learning techniques to focus on several interrelated study skills. As you know, talking about effective work habits does not always translate into productive behaviours. Using high interest subjects on the other hand, may involve the students in new ways in the learning process and consolidate their study skills.

Activities which lead to planning and scheduling will be of help to them. Through discussion and project work help students come to the realization that sticking to a schedule will allow for homework and recreational activities. Find out if they think that planning ahead is important. Why? What happens if you don't do so? What will happen if sports teams, for example, did not plan a schedule? Why is time management important in or out of school? Do they keep track of progress in various subjects? Who do they ask for help with organization?

Teach them, as you probably have done in many ways, about the importance of active learning. You may use role-playing to model how non-verbal behaviours in class impact on learning. Focus on activities which will help them understand and remember that: group participation makes learning more interesting; group questions and taking part in discussion will assist their learning and help them trust their abilities.

When projects are given in class, do students understand why they are given? Can they explain the information to others? Use a topic suggested by the students to rehearse the steps needed to complete the assignment including: finding sources of information; being clear about what is expected; consulting with teacher and parents about help with research; having an outline; selecting readings; preparing a draft; identifying what was interesting about the research process.

Learning self-evaluation takes time, support, and practice. Many students are not clear why they get the grades they do. Some think "I was lucky," others, may give up when they are unsuccessful. Consequently, it is important to teach them and then consolidate self-evaluation skills. Do they see the relationship between note making, note taking and learning a subject? Do they understand and review class notes? Do they understand how teachers evaluate students' work? Do they think that report cards are only based on test results?

Students have to internalize the notion that participation in class, projects and tests are all part of evaluation. Being able to identify areas of strengths and learning weaknesses is also an important part of self-understanding and confidence building for all students.

* **Dr. Ester Cole** is a psychologist in private practice in Toronto, providing services to school age children, youth, families and schools. She is the Chair of Parenting for Life- Psychology Foundation of Canada, and the past president of the Ontario Psychological Association.

