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Helping a Child Who Procrastinates Part 1: Age Eight and Below

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irritation or impatience, a child may become frustrated or discouraged, and these feelings will get in the way of his progress. Your child needs to experience the satisfaction of completing a task on time in a positive atmosphere so he can build greater confidence and self-discipline.

Charts with incentive rewards are usually highly successful. Target one specific behavior at a time and follow through until your child has mastered it. For example, each day you can chart that your child completed his homework or practiced his musical instrument for the required time. For a much younger child you can pick a task such as putting away his toys. Only note your child's successes on the chart and leave out his lapses.

In the beginning it doesn't matter whether he does the task completely on his own. You may need to prompt him a bit or even help him. But later it will be time to see if he can achieve success without your help.

Many parents tell me that it is hard to be consistent when using charts, and that they forget about them over time. The trick is to make a chart for just one week at a time. Pick a week when you know you will be able to monitor the behavior you want. Then skip some time if necessary and go back to charting for another week. When the behavior becomes consistent, pick a different behavior and change the reward. Use stickers for one chart, stars for the next, and perhaps happy faces for the next.

A few things can get in the way while helping your young child. An attitude of perfectionism, either yours or his, can sabotage his ability to work steadily until he completes a task. Procrastinators often say that they are afraid to start a project or task unless they know they can be perfectly successful. This all-or-nothing approach can be very inhibiting. Encourage your child to try and not to be afraid of making mistakes along the way.

Impatience can also get in the way, either on your part or his. Try to see the bigger picture when your child is slow to shed his procrastination tendencies. You are working toward a long-term goal. Be a cheerleader for each small positive effort he makes and

We all procrastinate at times; it is normal and natural. Many of us are really good at finding lots of other things to do when laundry is piling up, home repairs require attention, or closets need organizing. It is when procrastination is chronic and we miss deadlines, commitments, or responsibilities that it becomes a problem.

One frustrating challenge for parents is having a child who frequently procrastinates, especially if you are at the other end of the spectrum and enjoy getting tasks done way ahead of time. But even if you also tend to procrastinate, your child's behavior may disturb you if it taps into your own dissatisfactions with yourself.

It is important to address procrastination as early as possible. It may become a more entrenched behavior as a child ages, and older children are typically more resistant to parents' intervention. First we will look at how to help your young child, under the age of eight, and in a future column we will consider strategies for older children.

The first rule of thumb is never let your child hear you identify him as a procrastinator. Young children tend to define themselves as their parents see them, and you want to avoid having your child label himself negatively. In fact, in order to overcome procrastinating tendencies a child needs to think highly of himself and his abilities. If a child regards himself as a person who can't please his parents and teachers, doesn't do things "right," or is "lazy," he will become discouraged and will be less likely to improve.

Children respond well to having tasks broken into small parts that they can master. They need to learn to work hard, take a short break when needed, and then work some more until a task is completed. Parents can show empathy along the way, saying that you know it is difficult to keep working and focusing. Remind your child how good it feels when he has completed a task and how proud you are of him.

It is essential for you to maintain a positive and encouraging approach (even if you are ready to scream inside!). If parents show

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help him realize that it takes time to change habits.

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