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Family Focus

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Nancy Anderson alternately wept and raged in my therapy office. Her 12-year-old son, Jake, had failed two subjects in the first semester of seventh grade. Jake had a history of struggling in school, despite performing well above average on standardized tests. Nancy explained that she and her husband, Bill, had tried everything at one time or another: rewards, restrictions, daily backpack checks for assignments, and frequent teacher conferences. They had Jake tested in sixth grade for learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder, and there was no indication of any problem.

Jake refused to go to a tutor or see a counselor for help. He remained a happy, fun-loving child at home except for conflicts with his parents over schoolwork. Athletically talented and socially adept, Jake seemed relatively well-adjusted. He had a good relationship with his two older brothers, both of whom were excelling in high school.

As children begin to mature, they search for their own sense of identity and control. If parents inhibit this process by being too intrusive or demanding, a child may rebel. Often, the rebellion is unconscious in that the child is not aware of why he or she behaves the way they do. It is important for parents to avoid reacting to the child's behavior as a personal challenge to their authority. This kind of reaction only sets the stage for a full-scale power struggle. The unfortunate result of family power struggles is that no one really wins.

Here are the strategies we used to help Jake turn around his low academic performance:

1) Never let your child see that you are more worried and concerned about their schoolwork and grades than he or she is! Of course you may be quite upset, but you need to hide your reaction. Most children derive a sense of power from the ability to upset authority figures. Think back to your own childhood, to a time when you frustrated your parents, and see if you can recall having this feeling. Watch not only your words, but also your tone of voice and overall body language when you are communicating your new sense of calm.

2) Work at having a positive, loving relationship with your child, despite your (hidden) frustrations. Because the topic of school is probably highly charged, stick to safe, neutral subjects for discussion. Have fun together, laugh, and enjoy your child's company. Let him or her know all the qualities they possess that you admire and appreciate. Find what they are doing well and focus on that. Be sure they have positive pursuits that they enjoy so that they can have a feeling of accomplishment and pleasure in areas other than academics.

3) School is your child's responsibility, not yours. After all, you already finished seventh grade successfully, so this is not really about you. Let him or her know, in a calm, caring tone of voice that it is their decision whether or not they do well in school. If your student struggles with the work, you can tell him you know he will do well with extra assistance at school, from you at home, or with tutoring. Ask him if he's receptive to having help, and if so, what form of help? Ask him if he wants you to check in and offer assistance from time to time, or if he wants to be the one to approach you for help.

4) Be consistent. Be sure other family members are following the same approach. Otherwise, you will lose time and need to start the process all over again. One pique of anger about schoolwork will undo much of the effort you have already made. Inform teachers and school personnel of your approach and ask them for help in making sure they apply consequences at school if she doesn't turn in work or gets low grades. Your child will be accountable to them for neglecting his work, not to you.

5) Be patient. Lower your immediate expectations. Your child's patterns developed over time, and will take anywhere from one school semester to two years to improve. Think in terms of the big picture - your child's future happiness and success - instead of dwelling on the current situation.

6) Keep trying to get to know your child and to help him learn about himself. After your new approach has been in place for a few months, ask him how he feels about his life in general - his activities, friends, school,

etc. Ask about his goals. Be nonjudgmental and loving. If he does not want to have this conversation, don't persist. Try again in a few months.

7) Avoid lecturing or giving unsolicited advice about school. Listen to your child as you would to one of your close friends. If she complains about school, be sympathetic. Sometimes a child's low performance in a class is related to his dislike of a teacher. If she tells you she didn't study, forgot to hand in an assignment, or got a low grade, be sympathetic. (This is when it's especially hard for parents to stifle themselves. But I can tell you that most kids resent parents' negative or nagging reactions to their mishaps, and wind up directing anger towards you instead of where it belongs - at themselves). You want to leave room for her to figure out if she wants to do anything differently. And for her to understand that the power to change resides within herself.

8) Don't hesitate to get support for yourself and other family members if following these rules becomes too difficult. Talk to the school counselor or set up an appointment with a family therapist.

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