

PARENTING TOOLS TO MAXIMIZE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

All parents are interested in helping their child succeed academically. Did you know that the way a parent and child interact can greatly influence a child's academic success? In fact, the way we relate to our children, *our interaction style*, is often more important than what we are trying to teach them. One study (Gottman, 1997) actually showed that **parenting style is a better predictor of long term academic achievement than children's IQ scores.**

What style of parenting is the "best" in terms of academic success?

The answer to this question lies in understanding how parents impact children's emotional intelligence. Research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence is one of the leading predictors of academic achievement, social competence, and physical health. Emotional intelligence is a skill that can be learned.

In simple terms, emotional intelligence is the "ability to handle one's emotions." This skill includes the capacity to control impulses, to delay gratification, to read other's social cues, to self motivate, and to handle the ups and downs of life. A child with emotional intelligence is able to "shift and focus" their attention in the classroom; to address the task at hand. They are capable of pacing themselves, dealing with frustrations, and solving problems.

How can parents help their children develop "emotional intelligence?" Specific communication skills are the answer. Two of the most effective of these skills are Showing Understanding and Structuring.

Showing Understanding: Showing understanding is an empathic way to respond to a child. *It is instrumental in building children's confidence.* If a parent helps the child to communicate honestly by showing that they understand the child's feelings, a connection is open for a more satisfying relationship. From a physiological and neurological standpoint, several benefits result from responding empathically. Physiologically, showing understanding has a calming effect on a child's body. When children are under stress, heart rates and blood pressure increase and interfere with the ability to process information and problem solve. When children have their feelings reflected back to them in an accepting manner, there is a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure

Specifically engaging particular emotions when speaking to your teenager can directly correlate with their success in processing what it is you want them to understand. Brain scans suggest that negative emotions are processed in the right hemisphere. When children are afraid, sad, or overwhelmed there is more blood flow activity in the right hemisphere. On the other hand, with emotions considered more positive in nature -- those that contribute to a child's motivation to pursue and persist at a task (e.g., optimism, a sense of control, happiness)-- there is more blood flow in the left hemisphere.

Interestingly, words are also localized in the left hemisphere. When words are used to describe some of these negative emotions, they are processed by utilizing both

lobes. In other words, simply providing a word for the feeling actually influences the way these negative emotions are processed. Thus, a child who is overwhelmed or worried that they cannot solve a specific problem will experience a greater sense of hope and optimism having these feelings reflected back to them in an accepting manner. So should you notice that your child seems to have given up in a particular subject in school, or appears to be overwhelmed, you might introduce the topic of conversation by saying: "You are overwhelmed and do not know where to begin..." or "Sometimes does it make you even wonder whether it is even worth trying?" Homework issues can often be exacerbated by parent-child power struggles. Your child may believe that you are overly involved and annoying, when in fact you may worry what will happen if you loosen the reins. Beginning a conversation with, "It bothers you to have me constantly checking in on you, doesn't it?" or "I bet you wish I would just trust you and let you do it your own way," can often serve as means to remove the struggle, focus on what works for both of you, and nurture your teenager's budding independence.

Structuring: Structuring is planning surroundings or events in children's lives so that they will be more able to identify and set reasonable expectations, successfully attain them, and have their own needs met at the same time. In the past, it was believed a child's brain development was complete around adolescence. Current brain research shows that this is not the case. *One of the most important areas in the brain, the frontal lobe, is the last to develop and continues developing into adulthood. It functions much like a CEO and is responsible for planning, problem solving, and controlling impulses.* This is an important skill for all adults, but not always mastered. Structuring is an important strategy to help guide teenagers to learn how to better achieve success in all areas of their life.

5 Steps to Successful Structuring:

1. Define the problem
2. Describe the goal
3. Identify obstacles
4. Brainstorm solutions
5. Communicate and record the plan

Introduce situations for your teenager to walk through these steps with your guidance. Be an advisor they can turn to for counsel, and help them talk through the process. Model situations you have had success yourself! Resist rushing to rescue when an obstacle seems difficult. Positive outcomes achieved without assistance will increase confidence in self-reliance. Emotional intelligence is a skill that can be strengthened. It can serve as a building block for success in academia, and life. The results will be well worth the time you invest.

Dr. Anne Townsend is the Director of the Institute for Family Education and professional parent coach.

For more information, call 410.825.2332 or visit online: **familyed.org**