

Paul Adams is supposed to be studying for tomorrow's economics test, but he is staring at the wall, an unopened pile of books in front of him.

'Have you started revising?' inquires Mrs Adams. Paul looks irritated. 'I'll start in a moment. I'm just clearing my mind.' It is Mrs Adams' turn to look irritated. 'Get your book out and start learning.'

Paul starts flipping through the pile of books. He gets up, looks through his school bag, sighs and returns to the table empty-

handed. 'Where is your economics textbook?' asks Mrs Adams sharply. Paul shrugs. 'I can't seem to find it. I thought I'd packed it.' Mrs Adams looks despairing. 'How do you think you're going to study for this test?' Paul looks unconcerned. 'I know enough from class and homework. I'll be fine, really.'

Mrs Adams explodes. 'Am I the only one who cares whether you pass your test or not? Am I going to have a nervous breakdown trying to get you through grade nine?'

Discussion

1. How important is it to do well academically?

In today's highly competitive and demanding society, parents are aware that a strong academic record is needed to secure their child's place in this society, at university or in the job market. But we have to remember that our children come in all shapes and sizes and academic abilities. If a child is not academically inclined, it may well be counter-productive to put him under undue pressure to perform. On the other hand it is frustrating to see a child who has great academic potential consistently underachieve because of a lack of interest and application. The most important thing you can do is to get a good sense of where your child's abilities lie, and encourage him in a suitable direction. Impress on him that the key to success is hard work and dedication, and that there are many opportunities for different skills and interests. 'Do the best you can' is what your child should be hearing from you on a consistent basis. Praise small milestones and achievements. Don't measure your child against his sibling, friend or classmate, but against his own personal goals. Many successful entrepreneurs did badly at school, while kids who sail through school often struggle later because they never learnt to study properly. In the end it is all about attitude and the will to succeed in one way or another.

2. What is a fair balance between work and leisure?

The older the child, the more time he will need to spend on homework. Check the school's homework guidelines. But individual children have individual needs. Perhaps a child who does maths homework quickly will take longer with mapwork. If you have more than one child doing homework you will have to allow for the fact that they move at different paces. At times children may have to put in extra hours on a special project. Point out to them that that is how the real world works! It usually helps to do the more challenging homework first while the child is fresher. Leisure time is essential. Encourage your child to keep a balance between indoor and outdoor leisure activities. Research indicates that children who spend hours in front of the television, computer or playstation are more likely to be obese and to lack perseverance and concentration. You may want to put a limit on these activities, especially during the school week. Children of all ages should spend some time outdoors and some time socialising. Also allow your child some time to relax or do something for himself (read, pursue a hobby, listen to music, play with a pet, etc). This is very important for growth.

3. How hands-on should I be when it comes to homework and studying for tests?

Younger children need more hands-on supervision, but all children benefit from their parents' interest and encouragement. When both parents are working and coming home late homework is often the last thing you feel like looking at, but it is crucial to keep in touch. Teachers say that children who do well are usually the ones who get support from their parents at home.

Children may need help with the content of their homework, or you may just need to be around to ensure that the homework gets done, and encourage the right attitude.

This does not mean that you should be doing your child's homework for him. Especially in high school, children are expected to be able to work independently. You can't write his tests for him! Keep an eye on his work so that he knows you know what is going on. Ask him how much help he needs. If he is struggling with a subject that you yourself are unfamiliar with, see the teacher or organise extra lessons.

Homework support also means ensuring that your child has a space at home that is conducive to doing homework, somewhere quiet and well-lit, with the stationery he needs. A homework diary is a crucial tool, especially in primary school where it is also a tool for communicating with your child's teacher. The diary, books and stationery should be looked after. Your child needs to be encouraged to focus and to be systematic.

4. Do I worry too much about my child's academic performance?

You need to be clear about your child's abilities, and regularly check in that he is working to the best of those abilities. If you know, based on his academic history and ongoing communication with his teacher, that he is under-performing, you may want to intervene. Your intervention may take the form of punishment, encouragement or offering incentives – you know what works best for your child. If he is at risk of failing or not meeting the necessary requirements despite being hard-working and diligent, some extra lessons may be required, or a different approach to studying. Your child's teacher will be able to give you advice. But worry about the things you can control, not the things that are out of your hands.

We believe that work brings us happiness, fulfillment and dignity.
– from *Love of Work*
by Marcellin Champagnat,
founder of Marist schools

5. Do I impose my unfulfilled ambitions and wishes on my child?

This is a trap that parents can all too easily fall into. Especially when children have amazing opportunities that their parents never had, it can be difficult to understand that they may not want or be able to make use of those opportunities. Of course you want good things for your child – but make sure that it is what he wants too! See your child for who he is and not as an extension of yourself. Children may rebel if they sense that your wishes for them are partly self-interested and you may push them away from potential success and enjoyment. Remember your own childhood and imagine how you would have responded to similar pressure.

6. If my child has a don't-care attitude to his homework and studies, is there much I can do about it? How do you teach someone to care?

Talk through schoolwork issues that arise. Try not to nag! It is more likely to have an adverse effect. Build an awareness – without laying a guilt trip – that your child's education is a

continued

privilege, that someone in the family is working hard to make it possible. Also remind him that the effort he is putting in now has a direct relation to the options that will be open to him later in life – what and where he studies, what types of work will be available to him, etc. If these consequences are too remote to motivate him, you might want to create more immediate consequences – rewards or temporary removal of certain privileges.

Even better: show, don't tell. The best way to get your child to care about his work is to lead by example. If you and others in your family are serious about things that matter to you – whether it is your career, or cooking, or keeping the family together – and work hard to make these things happen, this is bound to rub off on your child. Help him to develop an enthusiasm for schoolwork. Show an interest; discuss the work that he is doing in class. The more interested he is, the more involved he will get. He needs to know that you are available.

On the other hand, some children are obsessed about

schoolwork and don't need to be more stressed. Stress and tension will more than likely have a negative effect on academic performance. Praise these children for their work, but also praise them for who they are, so that they don't feel that they need to do well to earn your love.

Another child might do adequately but not seem to be making as much effort as you would like him to. This is a difficult problem to solve. You will want to make sure that he does not develop a laziness or a sloppy attitude to life, but if he is happy and spending his extra time constructively pursuing a variety of other interests, perhaps you need to allow him to do that.

*We give the best of ourselves and
strive always to improve
– from Love of Work
by Marcellin Champagnat,
founder of Marist schools*

© 2007 Sacred Heart College

PARENTING with

HEART that knows no bounds



SACRED HEART COLLEGE
parenting@sacredheart.co.za

An initiative of the Sacred Heart parent body

Schoolwork

Useful contact information

Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre	011 484 1734
Childline	08 000 55555
Famsa: Parktown	011 788 4784
Soweto	011 933 1301
Teddy Bear Clinic	011 484 4554
Lifeline	011 728 1347
DARE (formerly Drugwise)	011 788 0717

Further reading

Parenting with Panache by Dereck Jackson, Wordsmiths Publishing, Johannesburg, 2001
Life Talk for a Daughter and *Life Talk for a Son*, Izabella Little, Oshun Books (Struik), 2006

Other titles

in this series include:

- Moodiness
- Drugs
- Fear
- Pressure and suicide
- The generation gap
- Balancing one's time
- Bullying
- Self-esteem
- Sleepovers
- Death
- Parental presence
- Siblings
- Discipline
- Parties and dates
- Money and material possessions
- Responsibility
- Peer pressure