

Another Year to Learn and Grow

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By now you are all back on your school schedules, busy dealing with homework and activities and your jobs and volunteering and everything else that being a parent in today's world entails. But since the start of school really is the beginning of the year, no matter how old we get, maybe you could take a few minutes to reflect on what you want to happen this new school year. What is it you hope for your child this year? How would you like to see them grow in their knowledge, their skills, their attitudes and their relationships? And what can you do to help them grow and develop to their highest potential?

First things first! Children cannot grow and develop to their highest potential if they are not eating well, getting enough sleep and enough exercise. It's up to parents to ensure that there is plenty of healthy food available - it can be weird, as long as it's healthy. (There's really no harm in having spaghetti for breakfast or cereal and fruit for supper!) Elementary age children need about 8-10 hours of sleep. Even though you can not make your children sleep you can set the expectation that at a certain time, it's "lights out" and time for bed.

When you're thinking about how you would like to see your child grow and develop this year, maybe you could think about how they might grow in their planning and decision-making skills(a very low asset in our teens!) by beginning to take ownership of their own health. Perhaps they could help with shopping for healthy food or help with the cooking or choose a menu for dinner. Maybe your child could help decide what activity he or she would choose to help get the whole family moving. Maybe you could all take a walk or bike or play kickball. The idea is the more opportunities children have to plan and make decisions; the better they get at it. People learn how to make decisions by making decisions! Of course, there are definite parameters for practicing decision-making – **you are still the one in charge**, but within those parameters some choices are good growing experiences.

Children can also learn and grow by taking more and more responsibility for their own school work. I think most parents would say that responsibility is a skill they would love their children to acquire. Again, people learn to be responsible by practicing being responsible! As parents you can set the expectation that learning is very important and you can model how you and all adults are still learning everyday. (Who would have thought that Pluto would get dropped off the planet list? We're all still learning!) And you can make sure that your children have a built-in routine and well-lit place to do their school work BUT you cannot learn for them- they have to do that. So, it might be a good idea to focus your efforts more on helping your child learn how to be responsible than actually helping them do their homework. One way to do that is to make sure your child knows you are always there to help, but you are also very confident that he/she can

handle their school responsibilities. Often helping children learn how to break down large tasks into manageable steps is all they need. As we all know, it's really hard to learn anything when you're feeling totally overwhelmed!

Children are surrounded by opportunities to learn and grow as part of a family and part of a classroom and school community. What do you want your children to learn this year about building relationships – being a good friend both at school and at home? How can you help them learn the skills they need to become caring, kind, helpful family members and classmates? Again, like any other skill, these friendship skills need to be practiced if you want your child to get good at it. Maybe this year, you could focus on helping them learn ways to settle conflicts. Conflict is inevitable in families and with friends. You can't make conflict disappear for your children, but you can help them learn specific steps to settle conflicts respectfully. You can help them practice “perspective taking” - thinking about the conflict story from the other person's perspective. You could help them practice “XYZ “ (Haim Ginot). When they're in an argument or had their feeling hurt, they learn to say “When you do or say X, I feel Y, so I'd rather you do Z”.

“Time Out” is another great way to deal with conflict. Help your child understand that when you're really angry, it's good to take some time out just to cool-off. This is not a punishment where you **send** kids to time out. The idea here is to help your child learn the value of time-out as a tool for settling conflict. We all know from experience, it's hard to think clearly when you're very angry. In the end you want your child to know when he or she needs to take some time out before trying to settle a conflict.

All this being said the most powerful way to help your child develop the skills and values you want them to have is to model those same skills and values for them. If you eat junk, even if you serve very healthy food to your children, they're getting a very mixed message. If you send your children out to play while you watch TV, they're getting a very mixed message. If you want your children to learn about the value of taking a time out, then you have to do that too. If you want your children to be kind to others, you have to show them how you do that

It's a tough job being a parent, but the good news is we don't have to be perfect, we just have to try. Have a great year!

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