



THE FAMILY TREE

“Solving The Mystery of Poor School Performance”

Just about every child runs into an obstacle in school, somewhere along the way. Most problems are fairly obvious – poor eyesight, an ineffective teacher, or prolonged absences because of illness or family issues. But, occasionally the problems are less clear-cut – a learning disability, attention disorder or clinical depression.

Regardless of the reason, it is very important that you address any problem or concern as soon as the first “red flag” appears, before the issue becomes more serious. As your child’s grades go down, so will their self-esteem. Studies show that chronic academic failure plays a significant role in such destructive adolescent behaviors as truancy, delinquency, and drug and alcohol use. Furthermore, failure in school is likely to negatively impact your child’s future success as adults in other important areas of their lives, such as work, relationships, health and emotional well-being.

And, your son or daughter is not the only one who suffers when there are problems in the classroom. School problems can also place tremendous pressure on the rest of the family, sometimes resulting in daily battles over everything from getting up in the morning to finishing homework at night. Given the likelihood that at least one of your children will experience some difficulty in school, we at The Family Tree have talked with educators and seasoned parents to elicit a few “tried and true” suggestions for you when the going gets tough – whatever the concern might be.

Do your detective work. As in any investigation, there is always a chain of inquiry when putting all of the pieces together. There are many sources of reliable information – your own observations, your child’s explanations, conversations with the teacher and/or other parents, assessments from school counselors or psychologists, along with other more general expert information found in books and articles. Let’s look at a common scenario. After several arduous arithmetic homework sessions, you find that your third grader simply does not “get” fractions, but insists that he is trying. You can start by making a few simple observations to rule out possible concerns. He has always done well in math, even with progressively more difficult material. And he has never had trouble following directions or understanding assignments. Baffled, you

turn to his teacher, Mrs. Jones, who simply states that math doesn't appear to be your youngster's strongest subject, but it's early in the year, "and we should just wait and see."

Because you are not satisfied with this solution, you begin asking some questions about Mrs. Jones' teaching history, and you start talking with a few other class parents, who report similar issues with their own kids. Your detective work leads you to conclude that Mrs. Jones, a reassigned eighth-grade algebra teacher, doesn't have a clue about teaching fractions to third-graders. To further test your hypothesis, you schedule a tutoring session with a retired elementary teacher, who has your child successfully working with compound fractions by the end of the session.

Work the problem as soon as you identify it. Because learning is a building block process, even the most minor problem can invoke the domino effect when left unresolved. Therefore, it is essential that you start looking for solutions as soon as you have identified any cause for concern. Begin by having an honest and positive discussion with your child about the issue at hand. Assure them that the problem **can** be solved, and emphasize the many positive academic and personal attributes they possess. And **never** use words like "lazy" or "dumb" when talking to your child about their learning difficulties.

Once you have had this initial discussion, begin identifying your options by talking with your child's principal, teacher (or when the teacher is the problem, other teachers), counselors, parents, special interest groups (such as those formed to address certain learning problems), and other experts in your community. Should your child be referred for special education resources, take the time to understand the process, as well as your legal rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Once you have compiled a good list of options, begin researching the most appropriate and/or affordable solution. For example, effective tutoring may be obtained through a variety of sources – for profit companies (such as Sylvan and Huntington), private individuals, coach classes at school, or as part of other after school clubs and activities. However, even though all of these options may come with excellent recommendations, some of them are more expensive or less accessible, given your budget constraints and/or your child's schedule.

As you gather ideas and investigate resources, involve your child as much as possible in this process to ensure that they also feel comfortable with the proposed solution. Keep in mind that any decision can be reviewed and changed if the results aren't what you're looking for or need.

Keep tabs on the follow-through. Just as it is essential to tackle a problem when it first arises, it is equally important to make sure that the chosen solution is working. Stay on top of your child's progress (or lack thereof) to measure success. And gather information from anyone who is responsible for your youngster's academic well-being, being especially mindful of any red flags they may raise. For example, in one recent case we know of, an 8-year-old girl was referred to an experienced and highly

recommended reading tutor. After several weeks, her mother followed through with her child's teacher, only to learn that although her daughter was showing some improvement in the subject, she was now afraid to volunteer answers in class. This was something the little girl had always done readily before, even when she didn't know the answers. Upon digging a bit deeper, Mom discovered that the tutor used a rather belittling form of teasing to goad her somewhat sensitive child into performing. Case closed – Mom hired a new tutor, and the little girl regained her confidence in class.

Last, but not least - Praise, Praise, Praise! As your child makes progress, and they will, remember to offer praise whenever it's due. These verbal affirmations are even more important than any other reward system. Your child will want to try even harder to succeed, and their confidence and self-esteem will go up as a result.