



Practical Parenting:

10 Steps to Better Academic Achievement

Over the past almost 20 years in education, I have met with and presented to hundreds of parents. One of their most frequently asked questions is how they can help their children advance academically. The question comes in many forms. Sometimes it sounds like, "What can I do to get my child in the top math group?" Or, "He spends three hours in his room studying, so why does he still fail his tests?" I've even had first grade parents ask, "What should we be doing now to prepare our daughter for college?"

As it turns out, the answer to this question, in any of its forms, appears to be quite simple: **Be their parent.** I say it "seems" quite simple because we all know that there is nothing simple – or easy – about parenting. However, the research is consistent in offering specific suggestions that positively impact the learning and academic growth of our children. I've summed them up in the following 10 practical steps:

1. Talk with your children

If you want your child to be a good reader in third grade or in 11th grade, talk and read with him or her often, from the minute of birth. Research suggests that one of the strongest predictors of a child's reading ability is the amount of one-on-one conversation between child and caregiver in the first three years of life.

2. Provide creative play time

Remember when we would spend hours creating wonderful stories and adventures with our Barbies or our GI Joes? It turns out that, perhaps unbeknownst to our parents, they were helping to build the neural pathways in our brain that helped us to be creative, to make decisions, and to be internally motivated. Much of the time our children spend outside of school is filled with planned activities. Mel Levine, educational expert and pediatrician, suggests that creative play time is the greatest predictor of later success.

3. Establish a bedtime that allows for 9 ¼ hours of sleep

All of the research is very clear on sleep: *our children are not getting enough of it.* The recommended sleep for the average child is 9 ¼ hours a night. Why is sleep so important? The obvious reasons are that tired children aren't alert to learning, aren't alert to surroundings, do not have the same reaction time, do not think before acting, and do not make good decisions. However, the less obvious reasons are equally compelling. During sleep our bodies secrete growth hormones. During sleep the new learning from the day gets stored into our long-term memory. During sleep our bodies process glucose. When our children get adequate sleep, their bodies grow at the proper rates, they retain more of what they learn during the day, and they are more likely to maintain a healthy weight – all of which contributes to greater success in schools.

4. Provide structure and consistency

While over-planning for our children may stifle their creativity, providing general structure is important in helping them to feel secure and safe. When we model for children how to manage their own behavior, when we provide expectations of proper behavior and set rules and limits, we help them to develop self control and to feel more safe and secure. Consistent and familiar routines help children to build good behavioral habits and to feel more in control because they know what to expect. They then feel more safe and secure, which in turns builds confidence.

5. Turn off the T.V. and other electronics

By the age of 18, today's average boy will have spent 16,000 – 20,000 hours watching TV (as compared to 14,000 hours in a classroom) – more than he spends on any single activity other than sleeping. A study of 2,600 children from birth to age seven indicated that for every hour of television watched per day, the incidence of ADD and ADHD increased by 10 percent. T.V. and other electronics may provide learning opportunities, but the learning is passive rather than interactive. According to brain researchers, the brain needs the interaction of all senses in order to grow its tissues fully. Take the T.V., DVD, and computer out of the bedroom, limit the viewing time, and if you really want to help your child's brain to grow, turn off the T.V. during the week.

6. Slow down

Life is busy. Parents are busy. Families are busy. Between school soccer practice, piano lessons, club lacrosse games, and trips to the orthodontist, kids today are on the go and having to multi-task more than ever before. One of the growing impacts of all of this "busy" is that students aren't developing the "Executive Functioning" skills they need to be most successful in school. This results in lost books, missing homework assignments, as well as frustrated teachers, students and parents. When we slow down, we allow our kids the time to think, to make better decision, to pay attention. We give them time to process their emotions, to find perspective. They become less reactive and more responsive. They have time to plan, to organize, and to finish what they start. They become better students (and we might find that we become better parents, too!).

7. Allow your child to fail

Allowing your child to fail is not easy, but it will help your child in the long run. One of the trends researchers are noting is what they are calling a "lack of resiliency" in our children, which they believe is a result of adults trying to shield their children from difficult experiences. However, researchers note that experiencing failure and feeling disappointment helps to build perseverance and resiliency. When our children experience failure, they learn how to handle setbacks and they build an internal set of resources for future experiences. In addition, while we don't want to overload our children with stressors, some "good stress" can be energizing and motivating. Experiencing stress, frustration, and disappointment helps children to build the "psychological muscles" that they will need throughout life. The best thing we can do is to allow our child the occasional and natural failures and to provide them with the tools to deal with those disappointments. They will build self-esteem, stamina, and perseverance.

8. Say "NO"

Children who have learned the lesson that we don't always get what we want tend to be more fulfilled. Saying "no" to our children and teaching them that we don't always get what we want builds the foundation for self discipline, self-respect, respect for others, integrity, and perseverance. These, in turn, help our children to be happier and to lead more productive lives. Dr. Daniel Amen, a neuroscientist and researcher, sites *gratitude* as one of the nine leading contributing factors to positive brain development. He suggests that helping our children to be grateful for what they have, saying "no" rather than encouraging them to ask for more, contributes to healthy brain development.

9. Model "frontal lobe" behaviors

The frontal lobe of our brain is the area that is primarily responsible for planning, organizing, decision-making, and reasoning. It is also the area in our brain where our conscience lies. These are all critical tasks for academic and social success. Unfortunately, the frontal lobe is one of the last areas of our brains to fully develop. In order to help the development of the frontal lobe in our children, we need to model those behaviors associated with this area. For instance, get them involved in planning and organizing trips to the grocery store.

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Illustrate how you determine what items you need and how to organize them on the list to be most efficient when you're shopping. Help them to walk through similar planning and organizing tasks they have at home or for school projects. "Talk out loud" the process you go through when making important decisions. Encourage your children to then talk through their decisions. Modeling these behaviors will build connections in their frontal lobes and help to develop your child's brain.

10. Be their parent

Being a parent is the most important – and perhaps the most difficult - job you will ever have. It requires hard work, preparation, patience, and perseverance. It means delaying gratification (and sleep) in order to provide for your children. At the end of a long day it is often difficult to perform our job as parents. When our children beg and plead and throw tantrums, it is tempting to give in to bring immediate peace. When our children are angry at us because we enforced a boundary, it is difficult to hold our ground. While the work on the front end (the first 18 years!) can be tiring, exhausting, and draining, the pay-off and rewards are great.

By being the parent to our children, by following these 10 steps, we provide a safe and secure environment for our children. We demonstrate through our actions that they are loved. Our children become creative and imaginative. They develop problem-solving skills, self-control, and self-discipline. They learn how to deal with life situations and develop life skills. They learn social skills and create stronger friendships. They build stronger brains and develop school skills. And finally, in turn, they experience better academic achievement.

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INSPIRATION CORNER

The talent of success is nothing more than doing what you can do, well.

Henry W. Longfellow

THE DOWN-SPIRAL OF THE HELICOPTER PARENT

"Dad, leave me alone." "Not Again." "Stop Hovering, Mom!" "Ugh!"

Does any of this sound familiar? If not within your own four walls, these phrases, or something similar, can be heard in any grocery, convenience store or mall. This phenomenon called *Helicopter Parents* (a phrase coined sometime in the mid-1970s to describe parents who are overly involved in their children's lives) has reached a fever pitch, particularly on college campuses.

HPs jumped back into the national spotlight in 2004 when **60 Minutes** broadcasted a report on the so-called Echo Boomers—children born between 1982 and 1995—and how they are "overmanaged" and "pressured" by their parents to the point where they become "something that could somehow shatter at any point." Mel Levine, author of **Ready or Not, Here Comes Life**, has said that these parents "are trying to create a really terrific statue of a child rather than a child."

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BRAIN BYTE

DID YOU KNOW? At least one fifth - or 20% - of the population are predisposed to have significant difficulty with reading, and another 20% are at some risk and need some help to get on track and stay on track. *The International Dyslexia Association's "Basic Facts About Dyslexia & Other Reading Problems,"* authored by Louisa Cook Moats, Ed.D. & Karen E. Dakin, M.Ed., provides state-of-the-art research with a practical approach in this 2008 resource for dyslexia and other reading problems.

THE DOWN-SPIRAL OF THE HELICOPTER PARENT, con't from p.3

University professors and administrators have begun to see the effects of this parenting trend. Parents are attending registration with their children, picking courses, intervening in spats between roommates, and even calling professors to haggle about grades. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, many colleges have been forced to create entirely new departments with the express purpose of dealing with the mountains of emails and phone calls coming from parents. *But the HP phenomenon is about more than concerned parents causing a ruckus—they may be doing a disservice to their children.* University officials have noted that “they’re seeing a growing number of freshmen lacking basic skills—negotiating for what they need, getting along with others in a shared space, using common sense to stay safe, and solving their own problems.” In an open letter to parents, the University of New Hampshire’s Director of Residential Life wrote that “we worry sometimes that your interventions may well be impeding your son’s or daughter’s climb toward independence...a step we know is absolutely essential.”

So what should these parents do?

Drs. Phyllis Goldberg and Rosemary Lichtman, authors of *How to Lay Low as Helicopter Parents*, offer 6 practical steps to help HPs pull the throttle back:

1. ***If you want information, contact the parent-relations specialist that many colleges now employ.*** The telephone hotlines/email support services they provide allow you to stay connected in a healthy way.
2. ***Remember that adjustment to communal living - roommates, dorms, personality differences - takes time.*** Be more supportive and less directive as adult children learn new problem solving skills.
3. ***Allow adult children to make their own decisions when selecting courses, completing assignments, or taking part in extra-curricular activities.*** Be supportive, but let them independently enjoy the rewards or accept the consequences. It's been said before: *experience is a great teacher.*
4. ***Make sure that parents' weekend is on your agenda.*** It's a natural and positive means to feel reassured that your adult children are adjusting to their new home environment.
5. ***Resist taking on chores that now should fall to your adult children.*** Washing clothes and cleaning for your adult children help to enable dependency rather than to support adult living.
6. ***Focus on positive qualities and think of reasons to support their unique ideas.*** Remember that they are learning more about the joys and responsibilities of independence.

With the reach and convenience of modern technology (cell phones, email, etc.), it's easier for parents to stay centrally focused on their adult children's lives. But by doing so it delays letting go of them, and in the end makes establishment of their independence harder for all concerned. Creating accountability for adult children fosters a “healthy personal development, sense of self-sufficiency, and positive self-esteem.” And doesn't every parent want that for their children?

