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Home ^{work}_^ Improvement

Roberta Schneiderman with Stephen Werby

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GOOD YEAR BOOKS

GOOD YEAR BOOKS

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Preface

I have worked as an educator for over 20 years. That work has brought me into direct and continuous contact with students, teachers, and parents. As a result of my work, I am convinced that we must begin to discuss learning habits as soon as possible in a child's schooling. In the early school years, most children and parents are enthused about learning. Unfortunately, many parents don't realize the value of the skills and knowledge that they can share with their children at this time.

Homework Improvement empowers you—the parents of children grades 4 through 8—to support your children's education. This book provides the tools you need to develop learning habits in your children that will see them through their years of schooling and beyond. With efficient learning habits, your children will maximize their potential whether they are average learners, gifted students, or even if they have diagnosed learning difficulties. An early start on good learning habits will give them an early start on success.

Roberta Schneiderman



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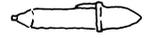
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Introduction

Parent Power

As the parent of a child in grades four through eight, you possess monumental power. You have the power to change the course of your child's education and thereby change the course of her life. Parent Power is more than just becoming involved in your child's schooling. It may be the deciding factor in your child's success and, therefore, in her future.

Homework Improvement gives you all the Parent Power necessary to direct your child toward success. This book will help you gently guide your child to approach schoolwork correctly, complete assignments, learn more, and learn faster. You will have the confidence that the help you're giving is the right kind of help. You will know that every suggestion encourages your child on the road to independent lifelong learning. Every idea and tool in *Homework Improvement* will help your child to learn in school today and face tomorrow's challenges.



Early Involvement in Your Child's Learning

If you wait until the high school years to get involved in your child's learning, you've waited too long. Many of today's high school parents are unable to help their teenagers because teens state in no uncertain terms that they don't want help. At that point, you're not credible and you can't open the door to learning. But you can do it when your child is younger.

Children in grades four to eight are more likely to welcome your input. Once you've become involved at an early age, you will have opened the lines of communication. You won't have to deal with many of the problems that parents of high schoolers often face. You will have built for your child a foundation in learning that she will use naturally in her high school years.

What evidence indicates the inadvisability of waiting until the high school years? Consider whether or not the following observations might describe you in a few years.

- ◆ High school parents say they are tired, especially if their children have experienced years of difficulty in school. Many feel that they have been fighting a losing battle, and that there is nothing more they can do. In spite of years of attempting to help, the problems just keep getting worse. Many say they really don't know how to help and never did.



- ◆ High school students think that parents don't know anything about how things are taught in school today, and they certainly don't want their parents' help.
- ◆ Students who have spent nine or ten years working one way, whether or not that way is efficient, often view new methods as "dumb." Their negative attitudes block any potential for improvement.

As parents of fourth- through eighth-graders, you have an advantage because younger children are more apt to talk about school and perhaps ask for help in studying. Daily dialogues about school allow you to know "how things are being taught in school today." Once you stimulate the dialogue, it is easy to move from "what happened during the day" to the assignments and tasks required of your child and how they will be accomplished. Younger children are less likely to be closed-minded about trying new ways of learning. If you are active in keeping your child open to new ideas about learning, then you and the school will have a much better chance of correcting problems if they occur.

What the Experts Say

Research says that parental involvement makes a difference in the school achievements of children. Consider these findings.

From *A Handbook on Home-School Collaboration*, published by the Massachusetts State Department of Education:

"Neither the school alone nor the parents alone will be able to deal with the complex issues facing children today." ¹

"This notion of the family as educator is not new. What is new is the growing understanding that the responsibility for children's school performance must be a shared responsibility." ²

From findings of a survey of 25,000 American eighth graders, their parents, teachers, and principals, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in Washington, D.C.:

"Achievement of not only our national goals but also state and community education goals will not happen without significantly more parental involvement." ³

"If we want children to have high expectations about learning, then all of us—especially parents—must regularly send those signals." ⁴

"We cannot expect others to perform those duties and we cannot expect children to do well without the guidance, the tutoring, the nurturing, and the commitment of parents." ⁵

From an Oregon school study:

"Academic involvement (by parents) not only produces academic improvement, but also leads to a more positive attitude toward school by the students. This

improvement occurs without regard to socioeconomic status or educational achievement of the parents.”⁶

Suzanne Ziegler, writing for the Research Services of the Toronto Board of Education on “The Effects of Parent Involvement on Children’s Achievement,” found that:

“[T]he gap so frequently found between working class children and middle class children is explained, in substantial part, by certain differing patterns of child-parent and parent-school interaction.”⁷

She also found that parents can be taught “to be as effective as some parents already are.”⁸

“The children of parents who are aware of what their offspring are studying at school and who are in regular communication with their teachers continue to show higher school achievement than others, all the way through secondary school.”⁹

According to her research, “The evidence suggests that no other single focus has the potential to be as productive for students as the closer linking of home and school, of parents and teachers.”¹⁰ And finally she states that “research findings accumulated over two decades . . . show that children have an advantage in school when their parents encourage and support their school activities.”¹¹

In *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, published by the U.S. Department of Education, the importance of parental involvement continues to be emphasized:

“Families need to be involved in improving learning in the home and in every school across this nation if our children are to become competent scholars and more successful and productive citizens.”¹²

What Will Help Children Most?

Throw Away Your Assumptions

When you engage the various tools of *Homework Improvement*, you may have to suspend some of your assumptions about how your children do their schoolwork.

Assumption 1: *The word studying means something to your child.* When your child is told to study for Friday’s test, does she know what that means? Many children *think* they know, but they really don’t. Too many students think that staring at a book is studying. Study skills are not inborn. If you assume that your child knows how to





study simply because she knows how to read, you're compounding the problem for later schooling. These skills need to be taught, and your child needs to learn them.

Assumption 2: *A child has a repertoire of ways to approach academic demands, so when given an assignment, she decides what is required before settling on the best method for completing the assignment.* It's just not true. Most kids can't name a single studying tool other than flash cards, let alone an entire repertoire.

You may be making other assumptions about how your child approaches schoolwork. Discard all of them. Instead, start by assuming that your child does not possess adequate learning skills. Then you can start her on the right path. Using the various tools and ideas in *Homework Improvement* makes learning fun and easy. Your child's self-esteem will grow as success builds upon success.

Getting Children Organized

Children can find countless obstacles, both real and imagined, to prevent them from doing schoolwork successfully. Here are some of them:

I forgot my books!

I forgot the page!

It's a dumb assignment and the teacher is dumb!

I'm dumb! I can't do it! I don't understand!

I don't remember what to do!

I don't have anything to do!

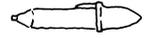
Studying doesn't work, it doesn't help me!

Does this sound familiar? It does to too many parents, but the real dilemma is what to do about the obstacles. At the fourth- to eighth-grade level, you can do a great deal!

Planning to Remember

The demands made on parents are overwhelming: a first (and sometimes a second) job; evening community meetings; attendance at the fitness center; time to shop, cook, clean; and taxiing children around town to scouts, pee-wee football, gymnastics, or appointments. If you don't keep an orderly calendar, you can't remember where you are expected to be.

You, as a parent, must help your child think about her calendar, her schedule. *At least* 50 percent of the reason for lack of success in school can be attributed to an absence of organization. Take the simple idea of remembering to do one's homework, or remembering to do it but not leaving enough time to do it. For example, if a spelling test is planned on Friday and a dentist appointment and gymnastics meet are on Thursday, then Thursday is probably not the most efficient time to study. Studying should be planned for Tuesday and Wednesday with a ten-minute review on Thursday night. Once your child understands that time is a lim-



ited commodity, she will understand the value of organization.

You can even teach younger children that time can only be spent once. If playtime is too long, then TV time will need to be shorter, for example. The idea is to make the child understand that planning her time will allow her to do everything.

This is your opportunity to teach her about organization and its relationship to responsibility. Preadolescents always want to act older, and it is your job both to encourage that personal growth and to prevent behaviors that you deem inappropriate.

Encourage your child to take charge of her schedule. Tell her that the more responsibility she assumes successfully, the more you will give her, and that completing responsibilities will demonstrate to you that she truly is “big enough” to do some of the things for which she continually asks permission.

To help her along this path, draw parallels between the assignment notebooks used by students and the shopping lists and sophisticated business diaries used by adults. Your fourth- to eighth-grader wants to act beyond her years. Convince her that being organized enough to remember responsibilities is the most grown-up thing she can do. Once you introduce the idea of organization to your child, you, the parent, must support its value and assist in its continued use as educational demands increase. *Children don't forget to do their assignments. They simply don't plan to remember them.*

Instilling the idea of organizational responsibilities at an early age can result in a gradual, natural transition to complete and well-organized school lives for adolescents. Assignment notebooks need to be maintained in a systematic and organized fashion. *Parents who help their children to establish and maintain an organized assignment notebook will reap the later benefits as calm supportive parents of achieving adolescents.*

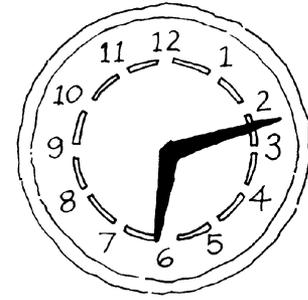
Homework Improvement shows you how to construct and use tools that will help your child learn to organize her schoolwork and subsequently her life.

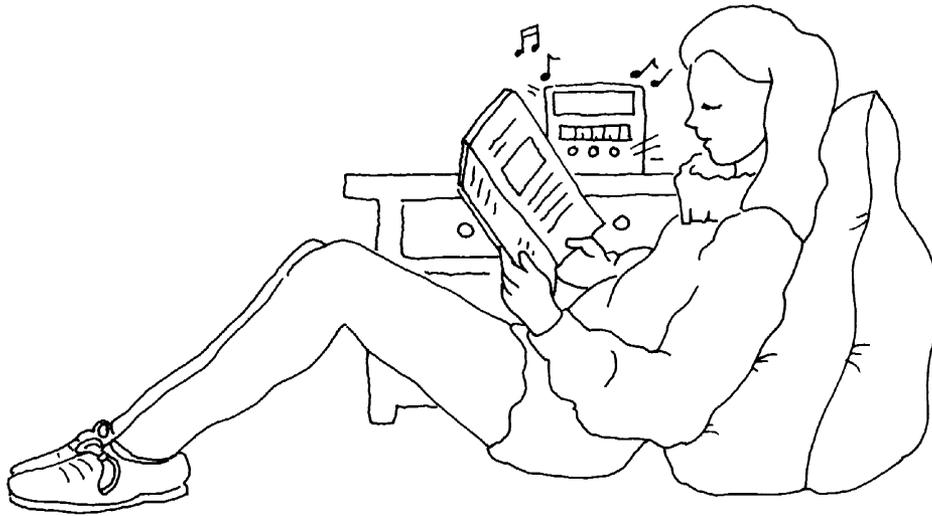
Efficient Studying

Now that your child is organized, she is on her way to efficient studying. The word *studying* could be the most interesting word in education: it means so much to teachers and so little to students. Many students don't really know the meaning of the word *study*, but they understand *homework*: they write something. It's not difficult, therefore, to understand why the most common definition of *studying* is “I just read it over and over.”

Reading and rereading works for some children, but only those who have high powers of concentration, a good memory, and a dedicated sense of purpose. These kids, the exceptions to the rule, are highly organized naturally. For too many children, that method of studying will result in poor grades and discouragement about the merits of studying. If that's your child's only method, her difficulties will begin as school demands increase.

Children whose only study method is to read and reread material often sit down (or more frequently, lie down) and, with a book in hand and radio set to a favorite station, they begin studying. They read a few sentences, think about something else, try to read a few





more sentences, look at the clock and think, “About fifteen more minutes should do it.” Meanwhile, they begin to yawn and wonder why they feel so tired. Here’s the message the brain is getting: “No physical movement other than eyes moving across the page . . . mind wandering . . . must be getting time to shut down here . . . not much happening.” Of course they claim that studying doesn’t help! The truth is that *their* studying didn’t help. They didn’t know *how to study*.

Efficient studying requires the use of more than just eyes. Complete studying should involve several senses and employ a variety of tools. Mere reading and rereading does not work as efficient studying for most children because it is incomplete.

Even if your child’s dominant learning style is visual (that is, she learns best by using her eyes and she likes to study by reading material over and over again), she needs to learn to adapt her learning style to the demands of the task. When that task involves studying for any kind of demonstration of knowledge—a quiz or test, a presentation in front of the class, or any demonstration that she has acquired the knowledge she was supposed to acquire—the study method should approximate what she actually will be doing in the evaluation.

For example, if she is studying for a written spelling test, the final step in studying needs to be a practice test where she writes the words. If she is studying for a spelling bee, the final step should be oral, not written. An oral practice quiz will help for an oral test, but will likely result in a poorer grade if the test is written.

Let’s examine why oral quizzing may be a problem. You pronounce the word; your child hesitates. You pronounce it again and unconsciously emphasize the difficult syllable, or perhaps raise your eyebrows when she spells the word with an *a* instead of an *o*. Your child immediately self-corrects, saying, “I meant an *o*.” Satisfied that she knows the word, you praise and go on to the next word. At the end of this process, you and your child are satisfied and hope for the best on Friday’s spelling test.

During Friday’s test, your child is asked to fill in the blanks in sentences using the spelling words. She must both remember and spell the words. Your child stumbles over the