



How to Help Your Struggling Student

One of a series of Parent Guides from

**THE
PARENT
INSTITUTE®**

Parent Guide

How to Help Your **Struggling Student**

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Introduction

Nearly every parent of a school-age child remembers the excitement of sending that child off to the first day of kindergarten. The smiles, the hugs, the anticipation, and finally the bittersweet moment when it's time to let go of your child's hand and watch him* climb onto that big yellow bus, or walk through those seemingly enormous school doors.

Most of all, it's a day filled with hope: The hope that your child will succeed. The hope that he will love to learn. The hope that this is the beginning of the greatest adventure of his life.

For some children, those hopes and dreams are easily realized. School is a joy, and learning is a delightful challenge. But for many others, the path is very different. Somewhere along the way, school becomes a frustration. And learning goes from being a challenge to being a struggle.

It's hard for everyone in the family when this happens to a child. The child is not able to cope with what is expected of him. Parents feel frustration and bewilderment because they want to help their child. Often, it's hard to know what to do first.

That's where this Parent Guide comes in. In the information that follows, you'll learn how to identify your child's difficulties and receive some direction for addressing them.



Q: What are some of the reasons for my child's school trouble, and what can I do about them?

A: The first step in helping a struggling student is to try to identify the problem. Have your child's difficulties cropped up suddenly, or seem related to a specific event? Talk with your child, her teacher or any other adult (a coach or religious advisor) who sees your child frequently and has come to know her. Any child's schoolwork may suffer from time to time and it's usually easy to find the cause.

**Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

Identify the problem

- **Has your child felt ill?** Talk with your child to determine if she's really sick or just avoiding school for some reason. If she's really sick, let her stay home and concentrate on getting better. If you're concerned, consult with her doctor.

If you suspect your child is "faking it," talk to her to determine why she's avoiding school. Work with her teacher to help your child overcome her anxiety.

- **Has there been a change in your family**—a new marriage or a divorce, a serious illness, a move, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one or a pet? Talk with her about how she's feeling and let her know that it's okay to feel the way she does. Talk to her about your feelings, too. She'll feel even better if she knows she's not alone.

- **Has she had a problem with friends?** Talk with your child to determine the problem. Encourage her to talk to her friends to resolve the problem. Let her know that most relationships go through rough times. Tell her about any rough times you may have had with your friends and how you worked them out.

- **Is she the victim of a bully?** If you suspect your child is being bullied, she may not admit it. But it's important to put an end to this abuse for the health and safety of your child. Encourage your child to open up to you for her own safety and that of others the bully may be abusing. Regardless of whether or not your child talks immediately, go to your child's teacher and principal with your concerns to put a stop to needless bullying.

- **Has she felt sadder, angrier or more worried than usual?** Talk to her to find out why. If she's not quite sure why, consult with your child's doctor. It's not uncommon for children to suffer from depression or other emotional problems that need the attention of a specialist.

- **Has she suffered what she would consider a big disappointment**, such as a failure on a test, in sports or in a favorite pastime? Talk with your child and help her understand that disappointment is part of life—everybody experiences it. And life goes on. Let her know that it's ok to be upset. Share with her times in your life when you've suffered a similar disappointment. How did you get over it?



If the answer to one or more of these is "yes," you may have found the cause of your child's difficulties. The problem may be temporary and may be solved just by talking with your child and other people involved.

Issues to consider in solving common school problems

While it's not unusual for students to have problems, and even struggle in school from time to time, many problems are pretty common and relatively easy to address. Here are some of the most frequent problems and ways you can help your child overcome them:

Lack of motivation

- **Help your child understand** why it's important to learn what is being taught. It can be hard to see why it's important to learn how to use fractions. But if he is making cookies and wants to double the recipe, knowing how to work with fractions is much more important.
- **Praise your child's efforts.** Stress the importance of hard work and, when he gives it his best, tell him how proud you are that he stuck with it.
- **Be a good role model yourself.** The way you deal with success or failure will teach your child powerful lessons.
- **Teach your child the secret** of talking positively to himself. Athletes know that talking to themselves can help them perform better. In fact, gymnasts who talk to themselves are more likely to qualify for the Olympics than those who don't. Children can use this same technique in the classroom and when they're studying.



Lack of responsibility

- **Help her set goals** for herself.
- **Teach her to plan** her time.
- **Make sure she studies** every day.
- **Provide the tools** she needs.
- **Let her know the importance** of keeping her commitments.
- **Help her get ready** ahead of time.



Lack of effort

- **Help your child** make the connection between hard work and success. If he plays sports or a musical instrument, help him see how hard work in practice improves his abilities. The same goes for schoolwork.
- **Encourage him** when he gets discouraged. Tell him, "If you keep trying, I know you can do it!"

Lack of goals

1. **Have your child write a goal** and post it where she can see it.
2. **Brainstorm strategies** to reach the goal by breaking it down into smaller, achievable parts.
3. **Check progress.** As your child completes each small step, praise her effort.
4. **Look for lessons** in both success and failure. Did she reach her goal? Why or why not? If she did achieve her goal, what can she learn from her success? If she didn't reach it, what can she learn that may help her in the future? Remind your child that even if she didn't reach her goal, she still made progress.
5. **Celebrate progress** ... and set another goal!

Lack of reading skills

- **Have plenty of reading materials**—books, magazines, newspapers, mail, cookbooks, instruction manuals and catalogs—around the house.
- **Give your child books** on topics of his interests.
- **Read aloud together** with your child, no matter how old he is.
- **Clip articles of interest** for your child.
- **Designate a time every day** for all family members to read.
- **Let your child see you reading** for pleasure.
- **Encourage your child** to keep a journal or write creatively.
- **Play word games** together.
- **Talk with your child.** Ask his opinion on different topics.
- **Help your child see** how reading is necessary in everyday life.
- **Practice reading** whenever you get a chance—waiting in line or while commuting in the car.
- **Keep reading fun.**



Lack of organization, homework & study skills

- **Use self-stick notes.** Suggest your child attach one to each book she needs to bring home.
- **Make a place for school stuff at home.** Create a place at home where your child can keep all her school stuff. Put it in a place where she's sure to see it as soon as she gets home from school—inside the front door or in her room, for example. Have her put her school stuff in the box as soon as she gets home. When she does homework, she can put every completed assignment back in the box. Last thing before going to bed, she can stick everything in her backpack—ready to head out the door in the morning.
- **Find a study spot.** When your child sits at this place, she'll know it's time to get serious about schoolwork. It should be:
 - Well lit.
 - Quiet.
 - Comfortable.
 - Neat.
 - Well supplied.
- **Give your child an assignment notebook.** Suggest she take it to every class and write down the assignments as soon as they're given.
- **Have a regular study time.** Ask your child when she's most alert—early morning, after school or after dinner? Help her stick to that time for studying every day.

**Lack of problem-solving skills**

- **Ask questions** that will make your child think.
- **Help him** come up with alternatives.
- **Play games** together that encourage reasoning—like puzzles, board games and card games.
- **Give specific praise** when he attempts to solve a problem.



Lack of critical thinking skills

In schoolwork, it helps to think critically while reading. After your child reads a passage, urge her to stop and consider it. Does she agree? Does it make sense? Is it realistic? She's thinking critically if she's not taking something at face value.

Urge your child not to dismiss a new idea just because it doesn't fit in with what she has always believed to be true. You can model for her by being open to new ideas, as well.

Lack of routines

- **Create a morning routine.** Follow a regular schedule for everything that your child needs to do—from getting up, eating and making the bed, to walking out the door.
- **Send your child off on a positive note.** Say, "Have a great day. I love you!"
- **Don't interrupt school time.** Schedule doctor and other appointments during non-school hours.
- **Ask every day, "How did your day go?"** Ask specific questions about school.
- **Check your child's schoolwork daily.** Praise good work and review mistakes as well.
- **Establish a bedtime for your child.** Stick to it—even in the spring when daylight lasts longer.



Lack of hope

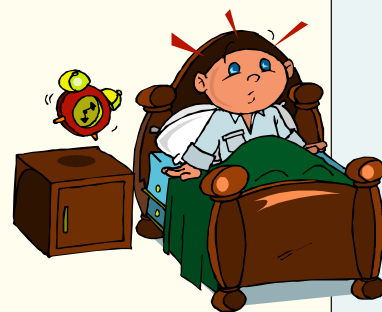
Help your child develop the qualities shared by hopeful people. Encourage him to:

- **Turn to friends** for advice on how to achieve his goals.
- **Tell himself he can succeed** at what he needs to do.
- **Tell himself things will get better** as time goes on.
- **Be flexible.** Help him find different ways to reach his goals.
 - **Aim for another goal** if hope for one fades.
 - **Break his goals** into achievable chunks.



Lack of time management

- **Give your child an alarm clock.** Make her responsible for getting herself up in the morning.
- **Plan ahead.** Can your child prepare her lunch? Lay out her clothes? Pack her backpack? All these can make morning time a little less hectic.
- **Teach your child to use small bits of time.** Have five extra minutes before the carpool arrives? Challenge her to memorize one spelling word.
- **Make a calendar.** Have your child write down the due dates for homework and big tests.
- **Look for time wasters.** In many homes, screen time is a terrible time thief. By limiting screen time, your child will have hours free for other activities.



Lack of listening skills

- **Have real conversations** with your child. When he sees how you can pay attention to him, he will learn to pay attention to you and to others.
- **Show you are interested** in what he has to say. Eliminate distractions and encourage him to talk by asking questions.
- **Give your child all the time he needs** to put his thoughts into words.



Boredom

- **Talk with your child's teacher** about possible interesting projects your child might do to make subjects more interesting or challenging.
- **Help her find interesting books** on topics related to what she's studying.
- **Help her relate her studies** to the real world. How might she use the skills she's learning in her everyday life?

Peer pressure

- **Help your child rehearse** things to say to peers who think school is uncool: "You may think it's cool to be dumb—but I don't."
- **Help your child see** that some children are trying to excel, and he won't be all alone if he works hard.
- **With older children,** talk about the particular issue. Let him know you understand what he's going through and trust he'll make the right decision.

Low self-esteem

- **Call attention to the good things** your child does. Be specific in your praise.
- **Take her ideas and emotions seriously.** Don't dismiss her feelings by saying, "You shouldn't feel that way." She does feel that way.
- **Use language that boosts your child's self-esteem.** Say things like, "What a great idea!" Even if you disagree, you might say, "Well, it's a creative solution"
- **Go to her events.** Spending time on the sidelines is a great way to show your child how important she is.
- **Help your child set achievable goals.** Then help her reach them.
- **Show your child** how much you care for her.

Stress

- **Encourage your child** to come to you with concerns. Let him know you are always available to talk.
- **Get regular exercise** together.
- **Set aside some time** to relax together. Teach your child to close his eyes, breathe deeply and slowly relax his muscles.
- **Spend time** on things he enjoys.
- **Eat nutritiously.** Too much sugar or caffeine can add to a feeling of nervousness.



Learning strategies

Visual

Have your child:

- **Write lists** of spelling words and post them.
- **Put up a map** of the U.S. with state capitals highlighted.
- **Make a time line** of important dates.
- **Create flash cards** to study vocabulary words for English or foreign languages.

Auditory

Have your child:

- **Make up poems, rhymes** or other memory cues. Have her repeat them aloud.
- **Have your child read** spelling words and important lessons aloud.

Kinesthetic

Have your child:

- **Move around** while studying or reading while standing up.
- **Act out** an important lesson from history.
- **Use a finger** to focus her eyes while reading.

Getting Help

The first place to seek help is from your child's school or community. Any of the following can either offer ways to help your child or suggest others who may be able to help:

- Your child's teacher(s)
- Your child's principal
- School counselors
- School psychologists
- Religious advisors
- Your child's pediatrician



The following providers can do everything from helping your child with specific skills to providing psycho-educational testing to offering family counseling:

- **Tutors** will work one-on-one with your child, especially focusing on areas where your child has fallen behind. Because of the personal attention they provide, tutors can often help your child advance more quickly through work than he would be able to in the classroom. Some tutors advertise, but most receive their students via word of mouth. Ask other parents with school-age children for recommendations. Your child's school may also keep a list of tutors.
- **Private learning centers** also offer tutoring. However, they typically do so by having your child follow a particular curriculum and by using certain tools, such as specific kinds of computer software.
- **Developmental pediatricians** deal with child development, behavioral issues and learning. They can offer helpful (and research-based) advice for achieving school success, even in the face of learning problems. They can also refer your child for additional testing, or to the care of other professionals, if needed.
- **Counseling groups** can offer a kind of "one-stop shopping." Usually headed by a medical director who is a psychiatrist, the groups also can include psychologists, social workers and education specialists.



Q: My child does not have any of the above problems. I suspect his school difficulty is the result of a learning disability. What do I look for?

A: True learning disabilities are persistent. They often reveal themselves gradually instead of suddenly (as schoolwork becomes more demanding) and they exist no matter what else is going on in a child's life.

A child with a learning disability will often exhibit at least two of the following symptoms:

- **A breakdown in reading.** Your child may have problems learning letters, matching letters and sounds, sounding out words, remembering sight words, or understanding and using what he reads.

- **A breakdown in writing.** Your child may not be able to form letters and numbers as well as his peers can. His handwriting may be illegible. As he progresses through the grades, he may not be able to transfer his thoughts and ideas to writing.



- **A breakdown in math.** This can show itself in any phase of your child's school career. Some children with math breakdowns are unable even to count. Others can count, but cannot master addition or subtraction. Still others do well with basic math, but fall apart when they encounter concepts such as long division, which require students to proceed through several steps to find the answer.

- **A breakdown in memory.** Your child may not be able to recall math facts, remember his spelling words or be able to follow directions with more than one step.

- **A breakdown in oral communications.** Your child may have difficulty understanding and following oral directions. He may not be able to "use his words" to express himself as fully as he would like, often resulting in intense frustration.

- **A breakdown in organization.** Early on, your child may have a desk so messy that it takes him 15 minutes just to find the right notebook. He may forget to do his homework or, if he does it, forget to turn it in. As he gets older, preparing for projects and research papers (which will require a good deal of organization) may become a struggle for him.



Q: I definitely see some of the symptoms of learning disabilities in my child. In fact, I've been noticing them for a long time. Can I get some help from my child's school?

A: Most of the time, yes. Some kind of help (there is a wide range) should be available to your child. Start by scheduling a meeting with your child's teacher or counselor.

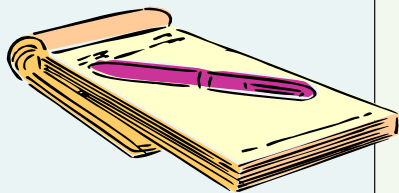
Before the meeting, tell the teacher you suspect that a learning disability is causing your child to have serious trouble in school. The teacher is no doubt aware of the trouble, but, like you, may not be sure of the cause. Let her know you will be coming prepared with specific examples of your child's difficulties (homework samples, observations from your child's performance at home) and ask her to do the same. Make clear that your purpose in meeting is to come up with a plan for helping your child.

Depending on your child's age and level of difficulty, there are several different directions you and the teacher can take to put your child back on the path to success:

- **Accommodations in the classroom.** Dealing with your child's disability may be as simple as working with his teacher to make accommodations in the classroom. Ask if your child can be seated next to the teacher, take some tests orally instead of in writing, get a list of directions to back up what the teacher says orally, or be allowed to write with a computer instead of writing assignments by hand.



- **Discussions with key school staff.** Educators such as members of the school administration, counseling team and special education staff, who have more training in handling special needs than do general education teachers, can give you and your child's teacher more specific suggestions on how to help your child overcome her disability.



- **Formal evaluation.** If all else fails, your child may need special education. She may also need the kinds of related services, such as occupational therapy, that are available only to special education students. The first step toward getting special education for your child is a formal evaluation, called a psycho-educational evaluation. Either you or your child's teacher may request that the school's special education team conduct a psycho-educational evaluation of your child.

The psycho-educational evaluation usually has three parts:

1. **Tests to measure your child's potential.** These are usually intelligence tests.
2. **Tests to measure your child's present level of performance in reading, writing and math.**
3. **Tests to measure how well your child processes information.**

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If your child qualifies for special education, the team will prepare an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for your child. The IEP offers several things:

- **Your child will have a unique set of goals** based on his strengths and weaknesses.
- **He will be evaluated regularly** for progress on these goals, and you will receive these progress reports.
- **Your child will have a list of accommodations** and a plan for special help set down in a legal document that is designed to help him meet the goals.

If your child does not qualify for special education, that does not mean she will be left to cope on her own. She can still receive classroom accommodations, as noted earlier, through her classroom teacher and other staff. In some cases, these accommodations are deemed necessary to fulfill your child's right to access a free, public education. These accommodations can be compiled into a document available from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights. This is called a Section 504 Plan.



Q: Are there any services outside of school I can access to help my child?

A: Yes. If you need more information about learning disabilities and your child's educational rights, the education offices of your government—federal, state or province—have a wealth of information. So do agencies such as the Center for Parent Information and Resources and advocacy groups such as the Learning Disabilities Association of America.

If you are interested in finding services from government or nonprofit agencies in your local community, it pays to be a regular reader of your local newspaper. Local governments, houses of worship, and advocacy groups sometimes offer speakers or workshops about issues that can help you help your child.



Conclusion

Most children struggle with school at some point in their lives. The reason for struggles can be anything from a disagreement with a friend to the onset of a learning disability. The solution can be as easy as talking to your child or more complicated like having him tested for placement in special education classes.

Whatever you determine is your child's problem, work closely with his teacher and his school. Together, you can help your child learn without struggling.

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