



IN THE FIRST INSTALMENT OF A FOUR-PART SERIES ON PARENTING AND EDUCATION, WE SHOW YOU HOW TO CREATE A GROWTH MINDSET

SCHOOL REPORT STRESS



It's the end of the term and you've just received your child's school report. There are areas where they're doing well, but others where they seem to be struggling. Phrases such as 'more effort' or 'needs to concentrate on...' jump out, and you realise that the child who was once excited about learning now seems negative and unmotivated.

SO, WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The first step is determining whether your child's declining performance is a pattern or an aberration, says psychologist Michael Hawton. Your child could be suffering 'end of termitis', a condition particularly prevalent in the winter terms, or they could have become what some experts call 'a shutdown learner'.

The first step is to discuss your child's report with them (see tips p.66) and to make an appointment to see their teacher.

Michael points out that it's important to see yourself and the teacher as a team working on behalf of your child and to address facts. As he says, it's important not to lay blame, so start sentences with: 'This is what I'm observing...' or 'He's gone from 92 per cent in the first test to 54 per cent in the second.'

Michael, author of *Engaging Adolescents*, says the first step is ascertaining whether the teacher is concerned, then working out if your child needs extra assistance and what form that might take.

But he believes plenty can be done at home. 'Kids are wired to learn even from being a baby. It's about motivating their desire to learn and then creating the right circumstances.'

He suggests focusing on those one or two things where your child shows a special ability, whether it's drama, sport or in making and maintaining friendships. Discuss the effort they put into those areas of their lives, how it makes them feel good about themselves and how a similar effort in other areas might be equally satisfying.

'We want kids to learn to be their own teachers. Instead of using too much praise, we need to focus on perseverance. Teachers are focused on helping kids to start something, continue and then finish it.'

A key tool in kids fulfilling their potential is encouraging them to have a 'growth mindset' rather than a 'fixed mindset', a concept promoted by professor of psychology Carol Dweck.

In short, those with a fixed mindset avoid challenges, believe that one setback defines them and think that success is based on the talents and abilities you're born with.

Those with a growth mindset see challenges as an opportunity to learn, view setbacks as a single result at one moment in time and believe that effort is rewarding and worthwhile in itself. They're prepared to

stretch themselves and take risks, regardless of the outcome.

Parents can help by checking themselves on how they praise, says Carol. As she says, studies show that telling children they are smart encourages a fixed mindset, whereas praising hard work and effort cultivates a growth mindset.

It's also important to consider the language you use when talking with your kids. Rather than saying: 'Don't worry, I know you're not very good at maths and I wasn't either,' try to encourage. 'I understand you're finding this difficult, but if you keep working hard you'll get there,' is a better response.

Parents can also fuel their child's own motivation by using their passions – whether for music, sport or something esoteric – to foster their child's curiosity. Likewise, asking them questions about what they're learning rather than their results



DOES TUTORING WORK?

It's a growing industry where tutors can charge more than \$100 an hour, but is tutoring the answer for a struggling child?

While there is much debate around tutoring children to gain places in selective schools and opportunity classes, the consensus is that tutoring can help a child's learning and motivation. Individual instruction can be beneficial, but parents need to be careful their child doesn't become dependent on a tutor and do less thinking,

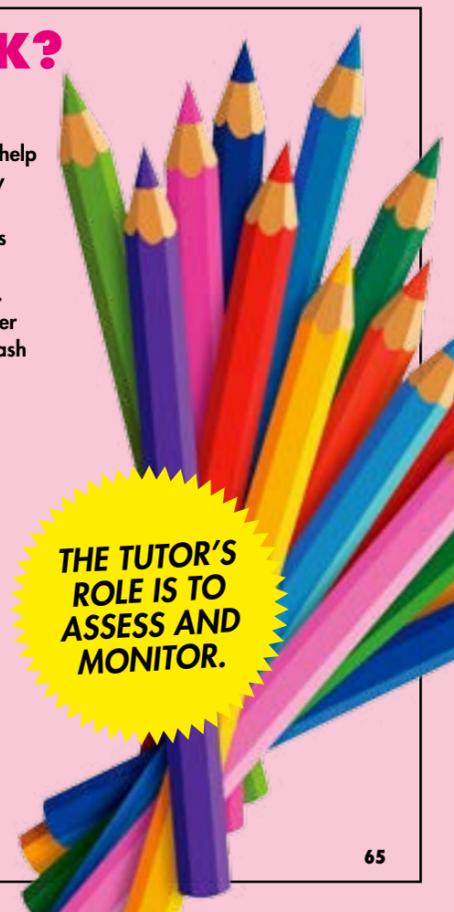
problem-solving and brainstorming themselves.

Experts agree that tutors help 'bridge the gap', particularly when the child has a lack of foundational knowledge, has missed time at school or has undisciplined study methods.

As Pearl Subban, a lecturer in teacher education at Monash University, points out: 'The tutor's role should be one of assessment, monitoring and assistance, not to take over and perfect.'

If you're looking for a tutor, consult friends, your child's teacher or the school counsellor and don't discount peer tutoring offered at some schools.

There's also help online, particularly Sydney 'super' teacher Eddie Woo's WooTube channel, which breaks down maths into achievable chunks.



THE TUTOR'S ROLE IS TO ASSESS AND MONITOR.

makes them see that what they're doing is interesting.

When children are in secondary school, it's also helpful to highlight the importance of working hard. They may not care about the short-term gains, such as a test mark, but by pointing out that long-term the effort they put in will give them more choices in life gives them agency over their own outcomes.

But what if your child has fully shut down and has become discouraged and disconnected from school over time? They may have fundamental skill weaknesses, dislike reading and writing, avoid homework and may even display increasing anger towards school.

School psychologist Richard Selznick says such children usually have cracks in the foundation of their learning, they lack understanding and are frustrated by work they can't handle, and their home life has become strained due to

arguments over their learning.

He believes the key is assessing areas of concern and working with the school to address the issues specifically, rather than with 'scattershot remediation'. Alternatively, you may want to consult a competent person to assess your child outside of school. He also advises taking the heat out of interactions, because it only adds to your child's stress. Look for small attempts at effort and remark on those.

Richard also advises maintaining equilibrium by doing fun activities with your child and letting them know you're on the same team. Finally, he advises finding a mentor for a shutdown learner, because they often don't feel good about themselves. 'It is important for [them] to have at least one person in school who values him or her and will rally on [their] behalf – even if he or she isn't succeeding academically.'

HOW TO DISCUSS SCHOOL REPORTS WITH THEM?

The comments are familiar: 'a pleasure to teach', 'easily distracted', 'needs to focus on...', 'lacks concentration'. But how should you respond to your child's school report and how can you discuss it positively with your child?

Parenting educator Michael Grose says you need to self-check before you open the report to ensure your expectations of your child are realistic, you appreciate that children learn at different rates and you want to safeguard your child's self-esteem. Experts then recommend the following:

*Focus on strengths and emphasise the positives – even if they're not good at subjects

you think are important.

*Ask your child to assess themselves – do they think the report is a fair assessment? What are they proud of and where do they think they can improve.

*Keep a broad mind. Reports are a snapshot. Look for learning skills, such as initiative and problem-solving, which have lifelong benefits.

*Don't compare your child with their classmates or their siblings. It's tempting to ask how others have done, but don't.

*Set goals together, but make sure they're realistic and achievable. Chat to your child's teacher and work out what they can best focus on.

'I DON'T LOVE STUDYING. I HATE STUDYING. I LIKE LEARNING. LEARNING IS BEAUTIFUL'

Natalie Portman



WORKING AS A TEAM WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER WILL HELP.

WHAT YOUR TEACHER WANTS YOU TO KNOW

There are plenty of ways you can support your child's teacher. Create order at home so kids are less disorganised at school, talk to your child about their learning, encourage them to ask questions and reassure them about being competent at basic tasks, such as tying their shoes and taking care of their belongings. Gabbie Stroud, author of the new book *Teacher* published last week, has other helpful tips for parents:

*Understand that a teacher is trying to create a community of learners. To that end, a teacher will often be focusing on creating an environment in the classroom. If

that means your child's reader is not changed that day, try to think of the bigger picture.

*Remember that assessments give only a glimpse into the black box that is a child's brain. They don't tell the whole picture.

*Don't forget that parents are the first and lifelong teacher of their child. As Gabbie points out, you taught them how to speak and other skills, so it's important you work alongside the school in developing their learning.

*Just because you went to school yourself once upon a time, doesn't mean you know what it is to be a teacher! Work together as a team.

