



Having a collection of any kind helps kids become better learners.

"They don't know what else to do."

As adults, we know that we can't all be "generalists," skilled in every area of learning. "Nevertheless, we often apply tremendous pressure to our children to be good at everything. They are expected to shine in math, reading, writing, spelling, comprehension, problem solving...and none of us adults can do all this," says Mel Levine, M.D., author of *The Myth of Laziness* (Simon & Schuster).

Telling a child to try a little harder doesn't help. "Parents may have certain misconceptions," he says. "They work it backward: 'My child doesn't like it, that's why he struggles,' as opposed to, 'My child struggles, that's why he doesn't like it.' If adults don't truly understand why it's happening, they can't explain it to their child. Nor can they choose appropriate strategies to help her succeed. But accepting that everyone learns differently enables parents to help their child use her innate talents to smooth her progress in school and in life.

Strengthen the Strengths

"First, find out what your children can do well," advises Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D., author of *You're Smarter Than You Think* (Free Spirit Publishing). "That serves as their core." By pointing out a child's positives, you affirm his ability to learn, giving him the self-esteem he needs to face and overcome obstacles.

Pay attention not just to your child's natural abilities, such as athletics or language skills, but also to his "affinities," those interests that make his eyes light up—whether it's playing with a pet, listening to music or adding to his baseball card collection. Any interest a child is passionate about boosts his innate curiosity.

Next, encourage your youngster to explore his talents further. If your child is a showman, talk to him about trying out for school plays. If he's usually the one leading the way on the playground, tap into that leadership potential and suggest he run for presi-

dent of one of the clubs in school, recommends Dr. Levine. "Building on their strengths often gives children the confidence to generalize to other things," points out Dr. Rimm.

The key is letting kids know that they can draw on a sense of accomplishment whenever they need it. "You might tell them, 'Think about something you do well and consider how you feel when you are doing that,'" suggests Dr. Goldstein. "The idea here is to bank on those feelings." Say your daughter is a standout in band but falters in science class. By encouraging her to think about how she feels as she plays whenever she's struggling with a school assignment, you're helping her feed off her successes. Explain that excelling in some things, such as music, can give her the strength to deal with other, more difficult things. In time, it's a message your child will take to heart.

Always use your youngster's strengths to reward, not to punish, says Dr. Goldstein. "We tend to steal away our children's 'islands of competence' in an effort to motivate them to perform better: 'If you don't do your math, you can't go play soccer.' Well, the soccer field may be the place where this child shines." It's better to take the opposite tack. He recalls how one girl's parents did. They knew she was trying hard to learn multiplication so they agreed that each time she mastered a new times table, they would all spend the next Saturday afternoon playing miniature golf, their daughter's favorite pastime. This served as a positive incentive that not only helped the girl continue to strive in math class, but also reinforced each new accomplishment.

Learn a New Way

David Jackson often begs his mom to give him multiplication problems, just for fun. Yet he finds his language-arts homework excruciating. "We have twenty spelling words and six vocabulary words, and we have to put them in sentences," says the nine-year-old from Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey. "I usually do two words in one sentence. It shortens the work." David is

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Their mother, Rosemary, can sympathize. "I didn't like math myself," she says. "I know the girls are trying. I don't want them to feel frustrated." Unfortunately, she's at a loss about how to turn the situation around.

Smart Kids, Poor Grades

When a youngster scores well in some subjects but flounders in others, parents often can't help but focus on what's not going right. "We have a tendency to look at a report card and focus on the lowest grade," observes child-development expert Sam Goldstein, Ph.D., of the Neurology, Learning and Behavior Center in Salt Lake City. "It's human nature."

But this can be frustrating for children as well. "If they are gifted in one area and poor in another, that seems to be hardest for parents, and kids, to understand," says Sylvia Rimm, Ph.D., author of *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades* (Three Rivers Press). "Children may be confused about why some things are easy and others so impossible." The result? Negative feelings that can affect their self-esteem, behavior and interest in school.

Does your child avoid doing homework? Give up easily? Complain of boredom? Rush through assignments? All of these are coping strategies children use to deal with an untenable situation, explains Dr. Goldstein, co-author of *Overcoming Underachieving* (John Wiley & Sons).

“Touting your child’s positives increases self-esteem.”