

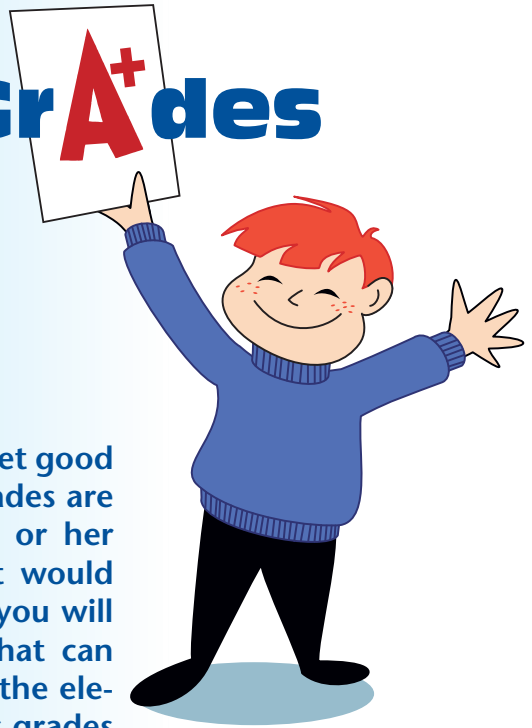
Improving Your Child's Learning & Grades

Developed by



Arkansas State PIRC

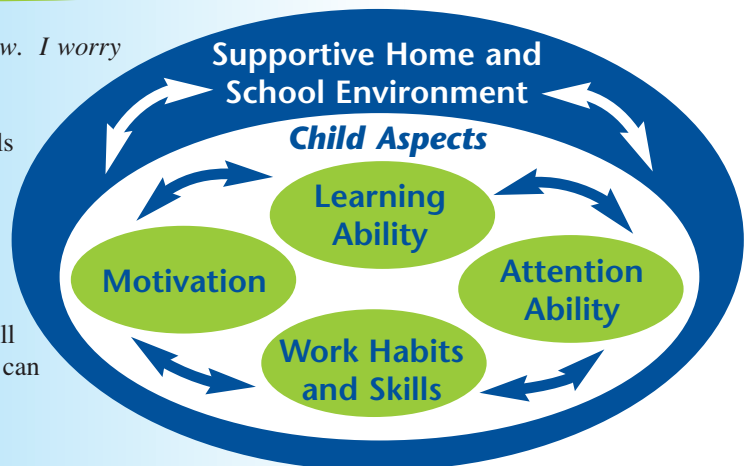
Most parents want their children to learn and get good grades. What can you do when your child's grades are low and your child is not working up to his or her potential? There are no simple formulas that would apply to all students. To help your child best, you will need to understand the different elements that can affect learning and grades. Once you discover the elements that are negatively affecting your child's grades you can provide some practical help in those areas.



ELEMENTS THAT CAN AFFECT LEARNING AND GRADES

"I need my child tested. His grades are low. I worry that something is wrong with his learning."

Reports like this are often heard in schools and clinics. While problems with learning can show up as low grades, there are also other elements that can affect grades (see figure). These include the home and school environment, as well as aspects within the child. In order to help your child, you will need to consider each of these so that you can develop the best plan.



Supportive Home and School Environments

Your child's home and school environments provide the foundation for his or her learning. As a parent, you have the responsibility of getting your child to school in a condition where he or she is most ready to learn. This includes both physical and mental readiness. Physically, you need to send your child to school on time, well-rested and well-fed. Mentally, you need to send your child to school happy and calm, motivated to learn, and well-behaved. In addition, you need to send your child to school prepared to learn. This includes helping your child work hard and use good work habits.

Child Aspects

Teachers typically arrange the content and pace of their classroom program around the “average” student. You can expect a student with average learning and attention abilities, who is motivated and uses good work habits and skills, to be successful with learning and grades. Problems in one or more of these areas can show up as low grades. As indicated by the arrows in the figure, each element affects and relates to the others. In order to get good grades, each element needs to be working well enough.

Learning Ability

Mental ability or intelligence is the ability to gain and apply knowledge. Tests that measure intelligence are generally good predictors of success in school. Through teaching, students learn specific knowledge and skills. Achievement is the term that is used to describe this type of learning. Schools and clinics can measure a student's mental ability and specific learning skills with special tests. Intelligence or IQ tests measure mental ability. Group achievement tests given at school or individual achievement tests given at school or clinics can measure a student's learning in areas such as reading, math and writing. In general, you can expect a student to learn or achieve specific skills, such as math and reading, at a rate similar to his or her mental ability. For example, you can expect a student with “average” mental ability to learn an “average” amount of math skills. If your child is doing poorly in school, you should talk with the school principal or your primary care physician about whether this type of testing would be helpful.

Two groups of students may need additional help in school. The first group is those students who have below average mental skills. Since the regular class program is set up to teach the average student, these students may fall behind. They may need additional help, such as tutoring or additional instruction at school and home, in order to keep up with the class. The second group of students is those who are learning at a rate that is well below what you would expect from their mental ability. An example would be a student with average mental ability whose reading skills are well below average. This student may have a learning disability. Many times, students with learning disabilities will need special help at school such as special education.

Attention Ability

In school, students have to sit still and pay attention for long periods of time. Some students have problems keeping their attention focused over time; others have trouble sitting still and being quiet. Students with these problems can have difficulty getting their class work and homework completed. If you think your child has problems with attention and hyperactivity you can ask for an evaluation from your school principal or primary care physician.

Motivation

A student's motivation to learn can also affect school performance and grades. Motivation is what drives students to stay engaged in learning. It involves student beliefs about their skills and about what the results will be if they try. Students who do not think they can do a task may not start the task. Also, students who believe that things will turn out bad, even if they try, may not start a task. Motivation also involves the value of learning to the student. Some students know they can do it and that the result will be good if they try, but they do not want to do it. These students will choose to do something they value more. What parents and teachers expect, communicate and do with students has a powerful effect on motivation to learn.

Work Habits and Skills

This element involves the behaviors that the student must do to learn and get good grades. What it takes to learn is not a mystery. Learning requires repetition across time. The key words in this statement are repetition and time. For example, we learn phone numbers by repeating the numbers to ourselves many times and across many occasions. Students have chances to repeat information they are trying to learn in three key activities: classroom participation, homework and studying for tests. Problems in one or more of these areas can lessen the amount of repetition and decrease learning.

Students will need to discipline themselves to participate in class and spend regular time in doing homework and studying for tests. In doing this, they will need to use specific organizational, work and study methods.

Class Participation

Participating in classroom activities provides a critical opportunity for learning new skills. Participation helps students make deep, meaningful connections in the mind that are important in learning. Participating in class involves several types of behaviors as listed in the table at the right. Signs of problems with classroom participation can include low grades, incomplete work coming home as homework and low grades on classroom papers. If your child often does not know how to do homework, this could be a sign that he or she is not participating well in class. Teachers typically assign homework as a drill or repetition of skills already taught in school. Teachers are the best judge of your child's level of class participation. Although you are not present in class to monitor or encourage your child to participate, there are some things you can do to improve your child's classroom participation.

Homework

Homework provides an important chance for students to repeat skills taught in school. Research shows that students who do homework learn more than those who do not. In addition, the more time a student spends doing homework, the more learning takes place. As a parent, you play an important role in helping your child do their homework on their own and on time.

Class Participation Behaviors

- Paying attention
- Being on-task
- Responding to questions
- Participating in group discussions
- Asking questions
- Seeking help
- Making good use of class time

Studying Skills.

Studying for tests at home provides another important chance for students to repeat material taught in school. Since the teacher or school does not always require studying for tests at home, you need to help your child develop this habit. Since learning requires repetition across time, it is best for your child to begin studying several nights before each test rather than “cramming” the night before. It is also important for your child to use good study methods during his or her study time. Effective studying requires many different skills. You play an important role in teaching your child to spend the time to study and to use good study skills.

Organization.

In order to regularly do homework and study at home, your child will need to plan ahead and get his or her books and papers to and from school. Disorganization can be a part of the cause of poor grades. Organization and planning ahead are learned skills. Children often have a hard time organizing themselves and staying motivated to practice good organizational skills. You play an important role in teaching your child how to stay organized and in keeping them motivated to practice the skills.

TEACHING WORK AND STUDY HABITS

You play a very important and specific role in helping your child get good grades. You need to teach your child to use good work habits and skills. Since habits and skills take time to develop, you should expect to spend most of the school year working with your child. Students form their work habits at the early grade levels. A good time to work with your child is when the school load increases (for example, about 4th grade). You can successfully teach a child as young as 9 years of age to use many of the same study methods as high school and college students. At first, you will need to put in extra time teaching your child the skills and monitoring your child's use of the skills. This may take most of a school year. You will probably always need to stay involved with your child's education; however, you can expect to spend less time as your child becomes more independent and skilled.

You can use this four step process to teach your child good work and study habits.

- Develop and communicate high expectations about your child's work and study habits
- Teach your child how to use the specific work and study skills
- Monitor your child's use of the skills
- Reward your child for using the skills, with praise, encouragement and tangible rewards

Additional information and ideas on how to improve any of the specific elements that can affect grades is available on the Center for Effective Parenting's Web site – www.parenting-ed.org. Look for these handouts on the Web site.

- *Creating a Home Environment for Learning*
- *Parents Make a Difference! Helping Your Child Do Well in School*
- *Increasing Your Child's Motivation to Learn*
- *Homework: How to Motivate Your Child*
- *Strengthening Your Child's Home Study Skills*
- *Improving Your Child's School Organization*
- *Improving Your Child's Classroom Participation*

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM

In many ways, getting good grades is like a game. Successful students know how to play the game. You will better know how to help your child if you know why the grades are low. A good place to start is for you and your child to talk with the teacher about what goes into the final grade. The following questions can be helpful when talking with the teachers.

What elements go into the final grade?

A grade in a course is usually made up of several elements such as those listed in the table below. Every class may be different. Find out what specific elements are included in the subjects with low grades. Find out how many of each element there are for a reporting period.

Possible Grade Elements	How many?	How many points each?	How did I do?
Tests			
Quizzes			
Class work			
Homework			
Papers			
Projects			
Final Exam			
Extra credit			

How many points is each element worth in the overall grade?

In early elementary grades, sometimes every element is worth the same amount. For example, a homework paper is worth 10 points and a test is worth 10 points. In later grades, it is common for the value of each element to differ. For example, a homework paper can be worth 10 points, while a test can be worth 100 points.

How did my child do on each of the elements?

This will give you a better idea on where to focus your attention in helping your child. For example, you may find that your child had several zeros on homework papers as a result of not turning them in. This may suggest a need to work on organization. Other children may have low test grades, which might suggest a need to work on improving classroom participation, homework and study skills.

What kinds of suggestions can you give me to help my child bring the grade up?

You and your child can use the answers to the above questions to keep up with the current grade in the class and to make any adjustments to work habits. The teacher may also have some good ideas your child can use to pull up the grades.



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