

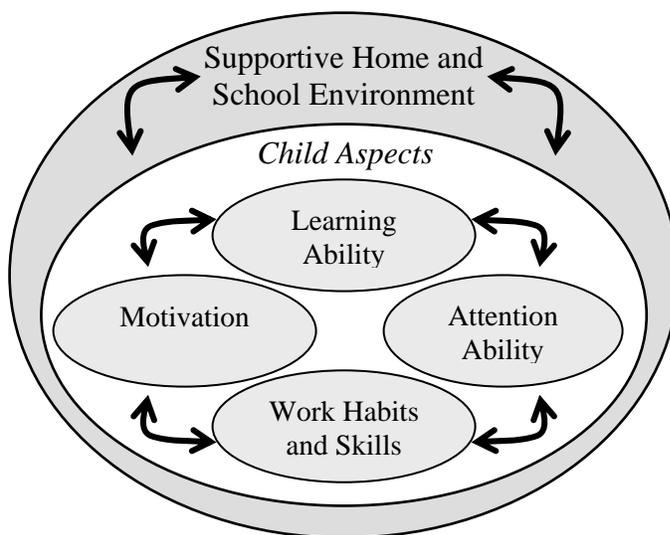
Improving Your Child's Learning and Grades

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. This booklet was designed for that purpose.

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

The
students'
home and
school

environments provide the foundation for learning. As parents, you have the responsibility of getting your children to school in a condition where they are 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 children to school prepared to learn. This includes helping them to discipline themselves to work hard and use good work habits. The Center for Effective Parenting has two booklets that have ideas for creating a home environment for learning and school success (*Creating a Home Environment for Learning* and *Parents Make a Difference! Helping Your Child Do Well in School*).

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 additional testing would be helpful.

Two groups of students may need additional help in school. The first group is those students that 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 that 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 with keeping their attention focused over time. Some students 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 that do not think they can do a task may not start the task. Also, students that 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. Additional information on student motivation and ideas to increase it are available in the booklet entitled *Increasing Your Child's Motivation to Learn* (see the AR State PIRC's web site – www.parenting-ed.org).

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.

IMPROVING WORK HABITS AND SKILLS

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 that 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. If your child needs help in this area, the AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting has a booklet entitled *Homework: How to Motivate Your Child* that provides practical ideas for monitoring and structuring your child's homework times.

Studying Skills

Studying for tests at home provides another important chance for students to repeat material taught in school. Since studying for tests at home is not always required by the school, 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. Parents can teach these skills to their children in early elementary school. As a parent, you play an important role in teaching your child to spend the time to study and to use good study skills. The AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting has a booklet entitled *Strengthening Your Child's Home Study Skills* (www.parenting-ed.org) that has things parents can do to help their children learn specific home study methods.

Organization

In order to regularly do homework and study at home, students will need to plan ahead and get their 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 organization skills. You play an important role in teaching your child how to stay organized and in keeping them motivated to practice the skills. The AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting has a booklet entitled *Improving Your Child's School Organizational Skills* (www.parenting-ed.org) that has things parents can do to help their children write down assignments, bring home books and materials, keep track of papers, and plan ahead.

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.

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

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. The AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting has a booklet entitled *Improving Your Child's Classroom Participation* (www.parenting-ed.org) that provides some specific ideas you can use to improve your child's classroom participation.

TEACHING WORK AND STUDY HABITS

Parents play a very important and specific role in helping their children get good grades. You need to teach your children 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 techniques 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. 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

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.

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

How many points is each element worth?

Find out how many points each element is 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?

If you know how your child did on each of the elements, you will have 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 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.



AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting

Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580

NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166

For additional resources, visit our website:

www.parenting-ed.org

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