

Solid Education Built on Good Study Habits

by Jill Noland

Anyone who's been through grade school and on to college can look back and say, "If only I'd learned how to study, the whole process would have been so much easier."

It's a simple concept. Studies show that students who are taught the most effective way to study get more out of school. They get higher grades. They gain worlds of self-confidence. But most of all, they realize early on that learning can be interesting, that knowledge in one area builds on another, and that hard work pays off.

Organization, time management, and memory aids are all important parts of good study habits—but reading (and listening) are the single most important activities associated with studying. Only about 20 percent of the population are really good listeners, but a student spends 80 percent of his or her day listening.

Without effective, efficient reading skills and listening strategies, study time is like "doing time"—the concentrating is on when can I get out of here, not what do I need to learn.

If your child is putting in time but getting nowhere fast, ask yourself these questions:

- Does he need help reading words in the textbook or knowing what they mean?
- Does she have difficulty picking out the main idea and then supporting it with details?
- Does he seem to forget what was just read, have trouble remembering the assignment, or what the teacher said?
- Does she have trouble seeing patterns in what's being learned, drawing conclusions, or synthesizing things?
- Does he wait until the last minute and then cram?

Here are 12 smart steps for developing good study habits—some for your child and a few for you.

STEP 1: Encourage productive study time. First, your child should review the day's assignments, then allot the time necessary to complete them. Short periods of concentration of 15 to 25 minutes each, depending upon her attention span, with a brief break in between each are more productive than long stretches of time with constant interruptions.

Discuss with her not only the value of understanding the overall purpose of an assignment, but also how larger assignments might be broken down into a logical series of smaller parts. Don't do the planning for her. Your guidance will help her learn how to conduct future organization for herself.

STEP 2: Encourage goal-setting. Goals provide motivation. Successfully achieved, goals also provide plenty of self-confidence and self-esteem. Encourage your child to set short-, medium-, and long-range objectives in his studies.

The short-range goal might be the completion of study in time to participate in a desired activity later in the evening. Medium-range goals might have to do with achieving a specific grade on the next test or during the upcoming term, while long-term goals might include preparing for college

or a specific career. While he must establish his own goals, you should discuss them with him. Goals must be realistic and memorable, yet challenging enough to cause growth.

STEP 3: Encourage information organization. On a weekly basis, your child should review the information learned from assignments. A regular review provides an additional opportunity to reinforce previous class work to aid in retention. The process ensures that your child's learning will progress in manageable segments, and that she will be able to integrate the details of the daily assignments into a bigger picture. The weekly review should include a written summary of activities and highlights from memory to provide her with a valuable head start on test preparation.

STEP 4: Decide about the need for joint study. Joint study sessions with a classmate or friend might be appropriate in some limited situations with your specific approval. The telephone should be off limits during the session. Your child should explain clearly the need, and plan the session in advance.

STEP 5: Establish clear ground rules. What is your role as a parent? While studying is your child's responsibility, you should set the standards of the house, ranging from the level of quality you expect in his performance to the decibel level of the radio he might have turned on in his study area.

STEP 6: Interact and guide; don't nag. Your involvement with your child's studying should be more interactive than supervisory. As she works on an assignment, your part should be that of a coach. Let her talk through the assignment, perhaps explaining what she thinks needs to be done, what the answers are, and how she arrived at her conclusions. Ask for an explanation if you don't understand. However, you should participate only by guiding, helping to develop thinking skills.

Because homework is intended to reinforce class work, you will undermine its effectiveness if you do it for your child—most parents don't have that much patience, anyway. Ask direct questions; with such interaction he probably can solve any problems.

STEP 7: You needn't stand over your child every second. Homework is designed to build your child's independence. You should provide guidance when she needs it, then allow her to complete the study. If you're present at the time, she may not develop the incentive to work independently.

STEP 8: Consider your course of action if you disagree with homework assignments. Is your child objecting to a homework assignment, complaining that it's just so much busywork? You may want to call the teacher to discuss the problem. However, your objective should not be to insulate your child from work just because he has a negative opinion of it. Nor should you undercut or destroy the teacher's authority. Your child must learn that in real life, he will have to accept work or situations that he may not like or agree with—without your intercession.

STEP 9: Verify progress. To monitor progress, you should verify, not grill. Certainly you should keep up with your child's progress, but you can do that by generally discussing school and her subjects with her. Talk over upcoming topics, tests, projects, and events. Such dialogue is even more important if most of her studying occurs while you are at work.

STEP 10: Size up any problem; seek help if necessary. As a result of assessing your child's progress, you may see a need for some extra attention. He may require additional help in

augmenting his study habits, individualized attention to span a learning gap or to improve basic skills, or the incentive of an enriched curriculum to keep him interested and challenged. By investing time and money in solutions now, you will help overcome current problems before they grow, or provide the means to avoid future difficulties.

STEP 11: Reward progress and well-done studying. When your child fulfills studying responsibilities properly, you should reward her. It's a good way for you to reinforce your standards of quality. And while success is its own reward, your child has earned a special privilege. Just as importantly, she has earned your praise as well.

STEP 12: Sometimes you might have to let your child face the consequences of his actions—or lack thereof. Despite it all, your child may not complete an assignment on time, or may not exercise the discipline required to pass up a ball game in the backyard to complete a book report. He may fail a test, or even an entire course. You need to let go, rather than protect him, by letting him face the consequences which may include the loss of privileges, flunking and repeating the course. This, too, is part of education.

Once good habits are established, they're easy to maintain. The secret is the regularity of routine. Good study and time management habits last a lifetime. Proper study skills offer long-term benefits because they depend upon and develop self-motivation—both traits are valued in college and in the workplace.

Jill Noland is the director of Sylvan Learning Center.

Original publication date: 09/18/1995 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon