

# Student Success: How to Help Your Child

## *A Primer for Parents*

***There has to be a partnership between teachers and parents for students to succeed.***

**A**dventist education is both a bargain and a good investment, but it isn't cheap. Parents work hard to pay the tuition, and in return, expect their children both to get a good education and to be brought closer to God and to eternal life.

This is a fair expectation. Unfortunately, some students don't do as well as everyone would like. Why is that? It's easy to blame teachers, and sometimes teachers are the problem. More often, though, the problem is the students. What the students are depends to a large extent on what the parents have made of them.

After teaching college English classes for 25 years and reading papers by some 1,500 students, I have a pretty good idea of what students know and don't know, and why. I've also come to realize that the education debate is blaming the wrong culprits.

Parents want their children to do well, they say, but they expect teachers to do all the work and achieve miracles. That's not the road to success! There has to be a partnership between teachers and parents for students to succeed.

Learning problems are most common when parents prefer entertainment to lifelong learning. When parents neglect their duty by not teaching children to love learning and not giving them time to learn, teachers are condemned to providing remedial education, rather than expanding horizons and fostering excellence.

### **What Can Parents Do?**

Our children's minds are gifts from God. We should aid in their development so they can bring Him glory. This process takes time. Yet time is scarce for today's children because they have been allowed to fill their lives with things that steal their time.

**By Ed Christian**



If parents give their children time and point them toward productive ways of using that time that help them discover the joy of learning for learning's sake, they will excel. Many of the differences among students are due less to variations in intelligence than to different attitudes toward learning.

The following solutions may sound pretty extreme, and children will accept them best if parents begin early, but they really do work, and late is better than never. They require parents' time and attention, but they're cheap. If children are worth our money, aren't they worth our time, as well?

#### So What Can Parents Do?

First, get rid of the television, or at least limit its use. An hour or two

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weekly is plenty, even for preschoolers and even for parents. Choose nature or history programs on PBS, or educational videos. The fast pace and superficiality of most ads and programs dull the mind. Perhaps you are

saying, "But television is an important part of my life! What's wrong with relaxing in the evening?" Relaxing is good, but it can be done in more useful ways. Try reading together, hobbies, taking nature walks, and just talking with your kids.

Second, get rid of the video games. The excitement exhausts children and makes them think everything else is boring. Children who are used to searching a screen for objects to zap find it very difficult to quietly read a book. I've had students argue that playing video games increases manual dexterity, but they'd get more useful manual dexterity working in the garden or building something.

Third, limit computer use to educational games, writing, or learning to type, and even then not more than an hour or two a day. Chat rooms and Web surfing have little to do with learning and can introduce children

to dangerous people and ideas. The computer is a wonderful tool, but it can also be a great waste of time.

Sit down with your children and show them how to use computer search engines to find answers to an amazing number of questions. When a question arises at the dinner table, say, use the computer to find the answer. In a few hours, students can learn more about a topic than anyone they know. (Of course, you'll need to help them recognize reliable Web sites, or they'll also learn a lot that isn't true. Also, many Web sites are quite superficial.)

#### Athletics or Education?

Fourth, consider whether you should encourage your children to watch or participate in sports. When we watch sports on TV we aren't getting any exercise, and neither are our children. Playing sports is fun and healthy (barring injuries), but it eats up study time and can leave students too exhausted or excited to study. Running or walking a few miles or shooting hoops for half an hour are fine, but the competition of team sports is wasted time and effort. It can also develop bad attitudes.

Most of my weakest students have been high school athletes. They argue that high school rules for participating in sports (generally a C average) kept them in school. They also claim that sports taught them the value of cooperation. If we want children to learn to cooperate, however, we'd do better to suggest the school choir or band than the football team.

A lot of students participate in athletics because this helps them gain their parents' admiration. Dads, especially, often live vicariously through their children's triumphs and urge them to go farther than the young athletes actually want to go. This can lead to resentment and can ruin parent/children relationships for young people who don't excel at sports.

Athletics also give students a way to become heroes; everybody loves a winner. But the chance of making a



living as an athlete is nearly as low as that of winning the lottery. Sports are not a good investment of time and money, and they take time away from academics and personal devotions.

**S**ome Adventist schools see intervarsity sports as a good way to attract students, and perhaps they are. Students may see their athletic ability as a method of opening doors to scholarship money for college. However, spending 20 hours a week or more practicing and playing any sport makes it difficult to find enough time

for studying. Athletes may be able to do enough studying to get decent grades, but it will be much harder for them to go beyond the basics and do the sort of deeper studying that leads to excellence.

#### Book Worms

Fifth, buy books; visit libraries; have books and magazines in the house. When toddlers see their parents reading, they decide reading must be fun. It may be that your children are having a hard time learning to read because you yourself haven't developed a habit of reading.

Many of my students claim they never read for pleasure, and quite a few say they have never read an entire book (in high school they cheated, borrowing notes and watching videos). Few of these students have parents who love to read.

For the price of a new computer, you can build a good reference library for your children. (Start with an old set of encyclopedias at an auction or library sale. That's what I did.) For the price of a cable TV subscription, you can buy several books a month. If you can't afford to buy new books, visit used bookstores and check out books from the public library.

Students who develop a habit of reading and have books in the house are seldom bored, so they are less likely to get into trouble. Children enjoy books about how things work, picture books about animals and nature, and biographies. If you can interest them in reading good stories about faithful Christians, you will also be encouraging their walk with God. But remember, they can't read these books unless you make room in their lives for reading.

**N**early every Sunday afternoon for the past decade, I've taken my children to lunch and then to the bookstore of their choice. They love it. They call it "going out for fun." Children love to peruse the great variety of books, and this also builds family closeness.

Sixth, read to and with your children. Start out by reading to your preschoolers, and encourage older children to read to you as their skills improve. For many years, either my wife or I read to our children nearly every night for half an hour or more. We still do so when we have a special book to share. If you choose books that are interesting but a little above your children's level, their interest will lift them higher. For example, most 10-year-olds aren't ready to read Charles Dickens' novels, but they will

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listen intently. Be sure to leave time to talk over the night's reading. This is a wonderful opportunity for discussing Christian ethics.

Such reading and listening helps students build a large working vocabulary and improve their grasp of geography, history, and social conditions. Reading a variety of good books ties together many fields in the context of a story, so it's easier for stu-



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dents to remember and use than facts memorized for an achievement test.

### **Grounded**

Seventh, keep your children home after supper. Little useful learning takes place in malls, restaurants, parties, street corners, or cars. The hours after supper should be reserved for study, reading, and family activities.

My developmental writing students tell me that in high school most of them could stay out until 11 p.m. on school nights and 1 a.m. on weekends. Top students don't do that. Parents who want their children to succeed shouldn't allow them out at night except, say, until 10 p.m. on Saturday nights.

Eighth, early to bed. Students who have read for several hours after supper often grow sleepy. If they're asleep by 9 or 10, they'll get plenty of sleep. Then they'll be alert in school and learn more. If they stay up reading, at least they're learning.

**N**inth, limit phone calls. Hours of telephone gossip are not educational. Do your children have their own phones? How many books could you buy with that money? My students argue that they acquire valuable social skills talking on the phone. Given that the majority of students are extroverts, they don't really need the practice. One does not find a positive correlation between the level of meaningful communication in a marriage and the number of hours spent gossiping on the phone in adolescence.

Tenth, cultivate a sense of wonder. If you are continually fascinated by



the world around you, you'll be inspired to share the excitement with your children. Such learning for the fun of it translates readily into high grades and SAT scores. Life is so wonderful, so amazing. There are always more things to learn, and learning is fun. Students who see life that way nearly always excel.

Eleventh, don't disparage academics or make jokes about "nerds." Nerds run the world and earn a com-

fortable living. Many of my students are first-generation college students who report that their parents are proud of them, yet also feel threatened by their growing knowledge. In unconscious ways, families often sabotage their children's success by complaining about the time invested in study. "You don't have time for your family anymore," they may say, or "You're getting too big for your britches." Involve yourself with your

children's schooling. Discuss with them what they're learning, and do some reading yourself to stay up to date.

#### **Home/School Cooperation**

The result of following these suggestions is a sort of informal home schooling that frees classroom teachers to do their best. Any parent can do it.

The neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson tells of growing up in a single-parent home in a Detroit ghetto. His mother demanded that her sons go to the library every week, check out a book, read it, write a report on the book, then read the report to her. Only years later did Carson realize that his mother was in fact illiterate.

Want your school to improve? This will happen automatically when

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parents start enrolling students who love to learn because the parents have made learning interesting and given the children time to learn by freeing them from extracurricular activities that rob them of that time.

**C**hildren, too, play an important role in improving their own learning. Studies have shown that self-motivated learners whose parents provide them with a rich learning environment in the home manage to learn quite a bit and succeed even in the worst schools. If they can succeed in the worst schools,

imagine what they can do in Adventist schools!

A pastor who read this manuscript mentioned to me that he found it disappointing because nearly every principle in it is already in Ellen White's books. How clever of him to notice! If we put these principles into practice, both our students and our schools will succeed. ☩



**Ed Christian** teaches English and biblical literature at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. His most recent book is *Joyful Noise: A Sensible Look at Christian Music*. He spent 18 years studying in Adventist schools. Teachers and educational administrators are encouraged to use or adapt this article as a handout for parents.

