



The WCPA News

12125 Woodcrest Executive Drive, Suite 110 St. Louis, MO 63141
Website: WCPASTL.COM Phone (314) 275-8599 Email: wcpa@sbcglobal.net

Volume 7, Number 1

Fall, 2005

ENDING HOMEWORK BATTLES FOREVER: TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO BECOME SELF-MOTIVATED

By Mary Fitzgibbons, Ph.D.

In our last newsletter, Mike Mahon and I discussed the issue of Locus of Control and its relation to how children are motivated. We believe that our present society constantly reinforces children to respond to external motivators rather than to develop an internal sense of motivation. This is an internal sense that our rewards come from the accomplishment obtained when we achieve those goals that we have set for ourselves. We call this an internal locus of control.

An internal locus of control can be defined as the belief that one is the author of his or her own fate. It is learned from freely making choices and taking responsibility for those choices. Through responsible action and accountability for those actions, we learn to attribute the cause of success or failure internally. Consequently, we develop a sense of power and responsibility for our actions and are further able to learn from these experiences. On the other hand, when a person functions out of an external locus of control, he will attribute his success to luck or fate, i.e. events outside of himself over which he has no control. For example, does a student believe that an "A" on a test is the result of luck and happenstance or the product of his hard work and study?

One of the main reasons that a child may be referred to our office is because he or she is not succeeding in school. In many cases, both parents and teachers are more concerned about the student's failing grades than the student. Thus we have the parent of a Junior in high school still calling the guidance counselor for progress reports because her son Joey isn't doing well and his present GPA will never get him into the college that Joey (and more probably his mother) may want. However, Joey's mother, Emily, has been asking for progress reports every year since seventh grade. And Joey's work still hasn't improved. She has now come to the point where she promises to pay Joey for every grade he raises on his next report card.

Or we have Maggie, who is in sixth grade. Homework time has become the scene of a nightly battleground. Maggie should be able to complete her work in approximately an hour. But every night it's the same scenario. Maggie sits at the dining room table so that her parents can better check on what she is doing. Her mother, Grace, finds herself reminding Maggie that she has to continue working as she watches Maggie dawdle and play with her pencil. One hour becomes two, and when Grace asks if Maggie is finished yet, Maggie complains that she doesn't understand the assignment. Frustrated, Grace sits with Maggie until the homework is completed. Grace dreads this time of day and so does Maggie. And rightly they should.

What's wrong with these pictures? Very simply, Emily and Grace have assumed the responsibility for Joey's and Maggie's work. It is no longer the students' work; it has become the parents' work. Neither parent wants her child to

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Mandatory Parent Education Successful

Back to school – an exciting and busy time. For us at WCPA, part of this excitement comes from being asked to present a series of talks to the parents of 9th and, now, 6th graders. For those who may not be familiar, the Archdiocese of St. Louis makes it mandatory for the parents of 6th and 9th grade students to attend a presentation promoting effective parenting skills and the prevention of substance abuse. We have been presenting these meetings for three years at the 9th grade level and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. The focus of the upcoming 6th grade meetings involves what to expect during early adolescence and effective strategies for parents that can significantly improve this challenging time in life. As an organization, we are proud to be a part of such a proactive, comprehensive, and timely parent education process.

While the feedback from these meetings has been tremendously supportive, it is important to think of these meetings as a necessary first step. It is vital for these messages to be reinforced throughout the school year. For more information about the presentations discussed in this article or how to continue to emphasize these messages within your school community year-round, please call Michael Mahon or Amy Maus at WCPA.

Anxiety Treatment Group to Begin

Anxiety is our natural response to any real or imagined threat, and strikes all of us at various times throughout our lives. It is when anxiety begins to interfere with one's regular functioning that it is considered a disorder. Among children and adolescents, anxiety disorders are extremely common, occurring in as many as 1 in every 10 individuals. These disorders can often lead to excessive absences from school, lowered grades, strained social relations, lack of self-esteem, substance abuse and behavioral acting out, and more severe problems with anxiety in adulthood. In addition, other mental health issues, particularly depression, often accompany anxiety.

Some of the visible signs of anxiety among children and adolescents include extreme and constant worry and tension that appears to be unrelated to the individual's life experience. Physical ailments, particularly stomachaches and headaches, typically accompany complaints of not feeling well, and usually have no physical basis. Another signal of anxiety is unrealistic, excessive fear of a specific situation or object. This often leads to avoidance of the designated trigger, and can severely interfere with one's daily functioning.

More recently, panic attacks have been reported by children and adolescents with increased frequency, characterized by extreme sweating, dizziness, strong heartbeat, and intense fear. As a result of a panic attack, the sufferer often then develops anticipatory anxiety, which is a fear of another attack and its accompanying discomfort. As a consequence, the student may refuse to leave the home or be separated from a parent.

A variety of treatments for anxiety disorders have been found effective. However, it is crucial that an anxiety disorder be detected and addressed soon after symptoms emerge. If a child is suspected of having an anxiety disorder, parents should be notified and advised to seek treatment. While cognitive-behavioral approaches are effective in treating some anxiety disorders, medications work well with others. Some anxiety disorders benefit from a combination of these treatments.

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fail. But neither one knows a solution to the problem. Joey and Maggie have also learned that they don't have to be responsible for themselves, since someone else will be more concerned than they. It seems reasonable that the answer is to put the responsibility of the schoolwork back where it belongs – on Joey and Maggie. But how do we do this?

First of all, as long as Emily and Grace feel responsible, Joey and Maggie won't have a need to be accountable. In their eyes, the problem doesn't belong to them; it belongs to someone else. While parents should have expectations that their children succeed and these expectations should be made clear to their children, it is really the child's task to be accountable for his/her work. For example, parents have the responsibility to provide a time and a place for their children to do their work. The time and place should be consistent. At this point it is up to the child to know what work has to be done and it is up to the child to complete it. Help can be given by parents but only occasionally. We cannot help our children to become autonomous and independent but allow them to remain dependent upon us whether we are the parent or teacher. Homework is their task, not ours, and it allows them the opportunity to learn responsibility, autonomy, perseverance, time management, self-initiative, self-reliance and resourcefulness. These are the components that the child needs to become permanently successful.

When a student has internalized these characteristics (i.e. made them his own,) he is developing an internal locus of control. That is, his success or failure comes from within himself. It does not depend upon another. With this internalization comes the unique sense of inner satisfaction that one receives knowing that she has done her best. I have found what I consider to be a very successful way of working with students to improve motivation. If it involves academics, I go through the following steps:

- I ask the student to be very specific with me about his grades. (What grade did he actually receive in each subject?)
- What grade is he capable of receiving in each subject? (I have yet to find the student who doesn't say he is capable of earning A's or B's.)
- What grade does he want in each class? (He now needs to identify his own goals.)
- What is he going to have to do to obtain this grade? (Again he is going to have to be **very** specific about his plan to do better. Saying that he will try harder isn't acceptable. He must give me the means by which he is going to improve his grades.)
- Is that what he really wants to do? Does he really want the A that he says he is capable of earning? (He has now made the commitment.)
- I ask the parents to remove themselves from the homework process, with the exception of providing the time and place. Removing themselves means that they need to become somewhat detached, in that they are realizing that this is his work and not theirs. This means that they also realize that the methods they have used in the past are not working. I also tell the student that I am asking his parents to disassociate themselves from his work. I have had many students say that this is not what they want because they want to be able to depend upon their parents.
- Periodically, I will ask the student how he is doing again in each class. I have found that if the parent is truly able to give up the well-meaning but misguided responsibility for the child's work, there is a positive change in a relatively short period of time.
- When the student begins to see the changes for himself, knowing that they came about through his own efforts, it creates a positive reinforcement so that he continues to do well because **he feels the inner satisfaction that we all feel when we do what we are supposed to do.**

As teachers, we must recognize that if children are really going to succeed we have to allow this process to occur. Every time we encourage parents to take control of their child's academic work, we delay helping the child develop an internalized sense of responsibility that could result in lifelong success.