

### Short- and Long-Term Goals at Home and School

It is hard for parents to know when to help and when to wait. If third-graders cannot seem to start homework without a parent sitting next to them, should the parent sit next to them and help them get started? What if a seventh-grader is the one seemingly unable to get started? Is there a different strategy for the older child?

And how about friendship challenges? With very young children, we are very involved. We schedule play dates and talk with each other about how the interaction went. But if a parent of a middle school or high school student called another parent to talk about how their children were playing together it would probably not feel right.

The best way to understand this discrepancy is by considering the short- and long-term goals for our children. The short-term goals are the right now, today, this week, immediate goals. If they are not doing homework, what can we do to get them doing their homework? If they are unhappy as a result of a friendship matter, how can we help them get feel better? There is more flexibility with younger children to focus on the short-term.

With older children, we begin to look at the long-term. We know that our children will need to handle more and more of their life and their responsibilities on their own and we want to encourage them in every possible way. And here is where it gets tricky. *The strategy that works for the short-term may interfere with the long-term goals of independence and autonomy.* For example, with school work, one of the most important skills children need to learn is how to get started on their own. They have to know what is expected of them, when it is due and they have to have the needed materials in front of them. These steps come quite naturally to most of us but if we continue to provide this assistance after 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, we are inadvertently “robbing” our

children of practice opportunities. Just as we get better at what we practice, *children get better at what they practice and they don't get better at what we do for them.*

Schools wrestle with this issue as well. Technology has provided nearly instant updates on academic progress. Parents could practically know on a daily basis how their children are doing in school. No more waiting for report cards. And schools encourage parents to use this technology, to stay up on the progress and to intervene when things are not as they should be.

This makes sense for the short-term and it makes sense for schools to emphasize the short-term. Teachers want today's homework assignment turned in and they want students ready for tomorrow's test. And teachers and parents both want next week's report card to be a good one.

It is up to parents to know how to hear the advice offered by teachers, principals and schools. After 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade and especially during the middle school years, parents should be able to understand that the advice they are receiving from school is based on the school's emphasis on the short-term goals. It is the wise parent who can say "thank you" and choose to act differently ignore at the same time.

If your 7<sup>th</sup> grader's teacher advises you to be sure that your child studies for next week's test, you might want to consider the long-term goals of self-organization, self-motivation, and the development of a study work ethic. We can usually hover, nag, remind and reprimand and get them to do things our way and on our schedule, but we run the risk of interfering with the self-starting skills they will need in high school and college. And that kind of micro-managing parent often ends up with an estranged relationship with their children. Better to take a few breaths, expect them to be responsible for their academic career, hold them accountable after the fact if they are not, protect the connection and love them every step of the way.