

HOMWORK - WHO'S JOB?

by Tim Jordan, M.D.

Well, it's back to school time, and for parents, that means more quiet times at home and maybe even more personal time, but it also means trying to get kids to bed earlier on school nights, getting lunches made before the last second dash to the bus, waking kids up in the mornings (who are used to) their summertime schedule of late morning sleep-ins. And in most homes, it means re-waging the war against homework (the homework monster). How many of us have spent minute per miserable minute nagging, cajoling, bribing, punishing, begging, screaming, threatening and de-moralizing our children about this treasured of all American Institutions: homework. Well, I'm here today to give you perhaps a different perspective on homework; And learning that, hopefully, will take the fight and bite out of this whole issue.

First of all, what if we decided, as parents, that it was no longer our job to "make" kids do anything, including homework, but instead created a more democratic, cooperative environment at home, and turned more and more responsibility over to our kids. This might look like sitting down with our children and letting them know that their homework was their responsibility. And going a step further, their motivation for learning and achieving success at school was their responsibility, not ours. This would mean that we were no longer willing to bribe kids with privileges, etc. for good grades, nor were we willing to nag, threaten, scream, punish or de-moralize them if they weren't doing well or weren't getting to their homework. Kids know what the natural consequence is for not turning their work in. They might get a zero or have to stay in for recess to do it, etc. I want us as parents to come from a belief that says that children love to learn, they love to face a learning task, work at it, maybe struggle, and then finally succeed on their own, feeling the satisfaction of a job well done!

Love of learning is no different than the excitement and joy we saw on our children's faces when we pulled them to standing on our laps at four months, when we watched them take their first steps on their own, when they were finally able to climb all the way to the top of the slide by themselves and slide down, or the first time they rode their two-wheelers with the training wheels off. When we interfere at their learning process by nagging, bribing, threatening, "making" them, etc., we actually are interfering in the process of children being internally motivated to learn in school. We don't need to teach kids to be intrinsically motivated to learn; they've had that all along. We need to stay out of their way so we don't give them other reasons not to want to learn - such as:

- ?it's more important to show you that you can't make me do anything
- ?it's more important to engage you in power struggles and get you all keyed up
- ?it's more important to get even with you for other things you've done to me, etc.

If kids are given responsibility for their learning and do poorly, be sure there is no learning problem, and also be aware of any mischief in your relationship with them, such as patterns of power struggles or revenge.

Sooo, this school year, I'd like to suggest that we all, parents and teachers and children, form cooperative partnerships wherby kids really are given responsibility for their homework and their motivation at school and we see our job is to support them, encourage them, and be invalued in their classroom and their school. The hard part is the letting go. The rewarding part is watching the power struggles melt away and seeing the excitement and love of learning return to our classrooms and our children's faces.