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## Whose kids? Our kids!

# Teens and school success

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One of the best indicators of teens' school performance is whether they feel connected to their schools. Feeling connected means that students have a sense that they belong and feel close to people, including teachers and other adults. Students who are attached to school also are involved in a range of school activities.

Besides being linked to greater school success, attachment to school is also associated with lower rates of sexual activity, fewer thoughts about or attempts at suicide, lower levels of violent behavior and reduced alcohol, cigarette and marijuana use.

### Parents make a difference!

Research shows children do better in school and have more positive attitudes about it when their parents are involved in school life. Many parents become less involved with school activities as their children move from elementary to middle school and on to high school. Yet teenagers clearly benefit when their parents show interest. There are many ways in which you can become involved in your child's school; the following gives some ways to start.

### Communicate with the school

One of the most important types of parent involvement is communication with your teen's teachers and other school officials. Just knowing teachers' names and subject areas is an important first step.

Make the family-teacher connection early in the school year and before any problems arise. Take advantage of school open houses or parent-teacher conferences. Ask teachers specific questions about what information is covered, the teacher's expectations for students, what you can do to support both the teacher and your child, and the opportunities you will have for future communication.

It is your right (and responsibility) to contact your teen's teachers. This can be especially effective when you have a compliment or good news to share and makes it easier to deal with any problems that may occur later on. Build a partnership with teachers so your teen sees you working with teachers, not against them.

### Support your teen in school activities

One way that students become connected and committed to school is by taking part in extra-curricular activities and sports. Encourage your child to join school activities. Many young people find they have talents in areas outside of the classroom and need only encourage-

ment and support to develop them. Ask your teen's teachers to encourage your child to become more involved in school activities. If your teen is already

involved, show your support by attending school concerts, games, forensic meets or other events.

### Expect success

When parents set high expectations for their children's school performance, teens are more likely to meet those expectations. And when

teens work toward their "personal bests" in school, they are less likely to become depressed or involved in harmful violent, sexual or drug-related behaviors (remember though, "personal best" doesn't mean perfect).

Children whose parents expect them to make school a priority are much more likely to do well in school. Students whose parents expect them to attend college are more likely to do so; youth whose parents do not have college expectations are more likely to end their educations after high school.

### Volunteer in the school

For some parents, volunteering in the school is a way to stay connected. Before volunteering, ask your teen how he or she would feel about your presence in the classroom. Don't be surprised if your teen is not as receptive as he or she was in elementary school.

There are many other volunteer roles for parents. Schools are often in need of chaperones for field trips and other outings, as well as tutors for students who need extra help. Parents can assist

"They don't care how I do in school, just so I go. So what's the point in trying?"

—8th grader

"My parents have no clue what school is like for me. I bet they couldn't even tell you who my teachers are."

—10th grader

at school sporting events and other activities as timekeepers, ticket-takers, concession stand workers or drivers. Parents can be excellent resources for career classes if they talk to students about their jobs. And parents can also serve on committees for special projects, help select educational materials or assist in budget matters. Other opportunities exist in parent groups, such as PTA/PTO, music boosters or athletic boosters.

### Involve both parents

Mothers are more likely than fathers to be involved in their children's schools. Yet research shows that children do better when both parents are involved. In fact, young people are more likely to get "A's," participate in extracurricular activities and enjoy school if their fathers are involved. Whether parents live together or not, young people are less likely to repeat a grade, or be suspended or expelled from school if their fathers participate in their school life.

### Encourage involvement in leadership opportunities

Many schools offer programs for older students to serve as tutors to younger children. Mentoring programs are another opportunity for teens to connect with school. Being a "big buddy" to an elementary student may be just the role some youth need to feel valued. Teachers often are interested in having a student assistant who helps in lower level classes and with special class projects.



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## "Do's" to help your teen in school

- ✓ Set high expectations for school success. Help your teen set reasonable goals and work towards them. Tell teens that you believe in their abilities and that is why you expect success.
- ✓ Recognize your teen's academic accomplishments. Don't assume that because your teen is maturing, they don't want or need attention from you. Sometimes, teens are pressured not to excel by peers, or to "just get by." You can offset negative expectations with positive recognition.
- ✓ Create a positive home environment that encourages learning. Keep learning resources handy. These can be as simple as a dictionary and educational books from the library and as elaborate as a computer with an encyclopedia software program. If possible, designate a study place where seating is comfortable and lighting is bright.
- ✓ Establish quiet time every night for studying, reading or writing. Keep the time period consistent (for example from 7 to 8 p.m. each evening). Have everyone in your family participate to show the importance you, as an adult, place on lifelong learning.
- ✓ Monitor the number of hours your teen works during the school year. Studies find 9th and 10th graders' school performance suffers when they work 15 or more hours per week; the same holds true for 11th and 12th graders when they work 20 or more hours per week.
- ✓ Be especially supportive of your teen during transitional times; for example, when they first enter junior high, high school or move into a new school district. Talk with school administrators about school policies regarding discipline, homework and behavior. Meet with teachers and visit the school.
- ✓ Keep a calendar that lists school events, projects and activities as well as dates of family events. This communicates to your teen that school is a family priority and helps you schedule future activities.
- ✓ Monitor your teen's school attendance.
- ✓ Use TV wisely; that is, limit teens' viewing and help select educational programs. Watch and discuss shows with your child.
- ✓ Know how and where your kids spend free time (especially after school). Encourage your teen to be involved in productive activities when not in school, rather than "hanging out" for large amounts of time.