PLAIN Talk

THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING ©

Ten Hallmarks of Children Who Succeed in School

By Craig T. Ramey, Ph.D. and Sharon L. Ramey, Ph.D.

Editor's note:
We are extremely grateful to Sharon and Craig Ramey for giving us permission to reprint four chapters from their book, Going To School. This newsletter is the second of a four part series. Going to School and its companion book, Right From Birth, are available in the A+ store on CDL's website at www.cdl.org.

The past decade has seen real research breakthroughs in understanding how children adjust during the early years of school. Researchers now take into account how complicated children's lives are and how many forces shape success in school, including intergenerational education, family values, peer culture, the media, expectations for children's success, teacher effectiveness, parental involvement in children's learning, and children's own natural competencies and motivation to do well.

The results of these new studies are more accurate. They also are far more useful to parents, showing concrete ways in which they can promote their children's well-being.

Current research indicates that *no one factor accounts for children's success in school and learning - not even a high level of intelligence*. On the contrary, *many factors foster success, including a child's cumulative supports and experiences, and the influence of parents, family, and school*. Further, even children who succeed in school go through ups and downs, including how much they like school, how hard they try, and how well they perform. The new

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 2.*

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CDL's Mission

To improve the life chances of all children, especially those at high risk, by increasing school success.

CDL's Goal

To help all children learn to higher levels and apply their knowledge toward good ends.

CDL's Objective

Activate and achieve sweeping systemic change in the way children are taught.

CDL's Core Belief

All children are born with an innate desire to learn, all children can learn to higher levels, and all children deserve equal opportunities to a solid education.

CDL's Vision

The very special uniqueness of every child will be identified, respected, honored, and celebrated.

Call To Action

Only an informed public can make informed decisions that lead to clear and focused action that will ensure a solid and equitable education for all children. When you have finished reading this newsletter, please share it with a teacher, a parent, another professional who works with children, or a community/business leader.

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Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 1.

findings can help every parent, whether their child needs major assistance or a helping hand to weather a bump in the road.

Research also shows the profound and lasting impact of the family on a child's success in school. *Families affect success as much as schools or teachers.* Nearly every hallmark of children who do well in school is completely under parental control or heavily affected by what parents do.

During the past 25 years, our research and that of others consistently show some characteristics common to children who succeed. Recent studies have given these findings more weight and a clearer focus. Each hallmark shows up repeatedly in studies on different types of children in different parts of the country. They are not limited to cut-and-dried differences in children's intelligence or temperament when they start school. Rather, they are *dynamic processes that can be positively influenced by parents.*

THE TEN HALLMARKS OF CHILDREN WHO SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

Editor's note:
We have included in this newsletter The Ten Hallmarks ***on a separate page that we encourage you to put on your refrigerator door as a constant reminder of what you can do to help your child succeed in school.***

1. **They are eager to learn.**
2. **They ask lots of questions, and they ask for help.**
3. **They work hard and know that their effort matters.**
4. **They have well-developed social and emotional skills.**
5. **They are good at assessing their skills.**
6. **Their parents are role models for learning.**
7. **Their parents promote learning by "natural" teaching at home.**
8. **Their family routines support doing well in school.**
9. **Their parents are effective at setting and maintaining limits.**
10. **Their schools have high expectations for student achievement, support teacher development, and communicate frequently with parents about their children.**

Parents should be encouraged by these hallmarks and the findings that *there are many different paths to success.*

- Many children, especially boys, have been "late bloomers."
- Other children, often girls, have shied away from some difficult subjects, such as math and science, because the teachers and children underestimated their capabilities and/or the importance of learning these subjects.

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 3.*

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 2.

- Some other children seem to lack real passion for school, neither failing nor soaring during the early years. Yet later in life, something or someone brings out their skills, builds their motivation, and enables them to flourish.

The following explains why and how each hallmark works, and how each can be shaped in a strong and lasting way by parents.

1. They Are Eager to Learn.

These children are curious. They love to explore and typically have been encouraged to learn *right from birth*. By the time they enter school, they usually know a lot because learning has been so much fun. For them, learning is associated with many positive emotional and social experiences - neither boring accelerated learning programs nor repetition with materials that are not challenging.

Such children typically have many interests, and some can become passionately (or stubbornly) interested in one or a few things that they really "get into" for some period. Rarely have these children been criticized in their efforts to learn. Neither have their parents structured all their learning experiences for them.

Parents seldom need to stimulate a very young child's interest in learning new facts, new words, new ideas, and new ways to do things. The challenge is to keep from dampening this remarkable and vital quality. Some parents inadvertently become overly protective or cautious. They may worry that their child's curiosity will lead to harm or may be interpreted by others as impolite - "too nosy" or "too forward." Other parents may routinely ignore or discount their child's interest in the world. They may even provide harsh treatment in response to a child's desire to do something new or spend more time learning or exploring.

Clearly, parents can't promote their children's curiosity and interests full-time. It would be too demanding and unfair to others in the family. But parents should ask themselves, "Do I let my child know that I value exploration and learning? Do I encourage and allow (in a safe and responsible way) my child to discover how things work, look, sound, smell, feel, and taste? When I restrict my child's natural curiosity, do I provide clear reasons that are readily understood, such as 'That is very dirty,' 'That is poisonous and will make you sick,' or 'That is sharp and can hurt you'? Do I give my child the freedom to make mistakes and to figure some things out on his own?"

To encourage your child to love learning:

Encourage your child to explore in a new setting. "Let's go find out about..." "I wonder what would happen if we..." "Let's look over here, too."

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 4.

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 3.

"Maybe someone can show us how to..." "Let's see what this feels like..."

Guide your child's behavior if the setting is one where certain types of exploration are not appropriate (touching things at a museum or picking up delicate objects in someone's home; reaching out to animals at a zoo or even on the street; going up to a stranger to ask a question that is too personal). Rarely does this guidance require that exploration stop. Rather, it is a matter of redirecting curiosity in appropriate ways.

Exploring is fun, and has great lifelong survival value. Many fields of human endeavor are advanced by adults' curiosity, desire to explore, and eagerness to learn. Scientists and explorers, adventurers and inventors, great political leaders, teachers, and the best parents all love to learn and keep on exploring.

Don't overlook familiar settings. The everyday world contains surprises, too. At home or outside, be sure to point out things that can be looked at, used, or thought about differently. Notice something that previously was unnoticed (a shadow on a wall, the shape or color of something, how two things that seem different are really alike in some way). Ask your child to point out something to you, so you can learn from your child. Such reciprocity - that we can learn from each other - is a great lesson for your child. You, too, will benefit.

As parents ourselves, we know that cherishing and protecting this hallmark can at times be burdensome, especially when we are tired or rushed. Vigilance over an eager child can be demanding. Curiosity takes time to follow, and children rarely like being rushed, interrupted, or thwarted repeatedly. But these years will fly by, and seldom will you regret allowing yourself to just "go with the flow" a bit more often. Curiosity can sometimes lead to trouble, but mostly it leads to lots of learning and fun.

2. They Ask Lots of Questions, and They Ask for Help.

They ask questions to help them learn more, move ahead, and avoid confusion or mistakes. They are not afraid to ask for help or seek more information in order to do something that is important or interesting, although sometimes they want to do something or solve a problem "all by myself."

Asking good questions is one of the most efficient ways for a child to gain information. Knowing the when, how, what, why, and who of questioning is a skill that children should increasingly master during the early childhood years.

Asking the right question at the right time can spare a child lengthy or boring trial-and-error efforts in solving a problem or learning something new. Good question-asking can also save a child needless embarrassment. Moreover, teachers view children who ask good questions as interested, motivated to learn, and eager to be cooperative and socially skilled. Asking the right questions is a sign of intelligence.

Research shows that some parents encourage "compliance without questioning" (old-fashioned "blind obedience") when it comes to teachers or other figures of authority. Very young children who are taught never to question authority often interpret this to mean that they should not question the teacher at all. Unfortunately, teachers and children's peers often judge these children as passive, disinterested, or not very bright. Usually, more highly educated parents promote questioning in their children, especially encouraging them to ask for help and explanations.

To encourage your child to ask questions and ask for help:

Respond positively at home to questioning and provide help when it's needed. Children who receive answers, directions, and help at home - offered with warmth, encouragement, and useful specificity - naturally expect that their teachers also will be good providers of information. In school, however, children will need to make some adjustments in asking questions, conforming to the rules about how and when to ask questions, such as raising their hands, waiting their turn, and listening to questions other children ask.

Balance is needed here, too. Your answers and help should encourage your child's learning, not replace it. Don't be over-helpful. But don't let frustration get out of hand.

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 5.

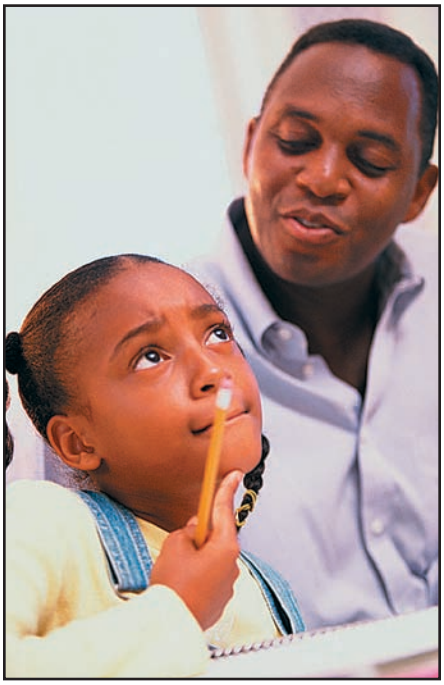
Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 4.

Questioning to Aid Reading Comprehension

The organizing and learning potential of questioning are further shown by Dr. Ann Brown of the University of California at Berkeley, a scientist who works with children who have difficulty with reading comprehension.

Although these children often can read the words correctly, they may have difficulty extracting the meaning, the sequence of events, or the larger theme from a story or essay. Studies show that these children can be taught to use questions to aid their understanding. For example, when they read, they ask themselves questions every few paragraphs, such as, "What is the most important thing happening? Who did it? What came before and after? Are there any words I do not understand?" Such strategic questioning helps the child monitor understanding of new material. Children then selectively seek information or guidance as needed from adults.

We know that asking lots of questions improves a child's memory, probably because the child is actively engaged. When children want to know something, and then receive an answer, they are far more likely to remember the answer than if they hear the information passively. Good teachers usually let children ask lots of questions because they understand the importance of the child's initiative in the learning process. Older children can even learn to ask themselves questions silently when a teacher is presenting new materials. Very often, the flow of the teacher's presentation will quickly answer the child's question. This process enhances the child's learning.



Although asking lots of questions is a hallmark of children who do well in school, there are exceptions. Sometimes a child will be shy in a new situation, such as at the beginning of a year with a new teacher, or when a stranger comes into the classroom. At other times, a child may feel like trying to get an answer without help. There is no reason to be concerned about these situations as long as the child is generally willing to seek help when needed.

3. They Work Hard and Know That Their Effort Matters.

Children who succeed in school believe success depends on their own work and skill - not on luck or someone else's actions.

At first, almost all children try to do their best. If they are adequately stimulated and challenged, this will mean some hard work on their part. Unfortunately, some children come to believe that doing well in school is not under their control. These children ascribe problems in the classroom to others or to bad luck. Researchers call this the "locus of control," and their findings can help you and your child.

Locus of control represents a continuum along which individuals perceive that they have a greater or lesser effect on what happens in their lives. Research shows that children who have been encouraged to work hard and have been helped by adults to succeed in the task at hand know their efforts count because they have seen the results time and again. Children who don't get this encouragement don't learn the importance of hard work and sustained attention.

Research also shows that children who have had lots of cause-and-effect learning experiences in their preschool years are more likely to believe that their own efforts make a big difference. Cause-and-effect learning teaches children that their actions produce predictable results, from the toddler's experience of a jack-in-the-box that pops up when the handle is cranked, to stacking a tower of blocks so they do not fall down, to turning a page in a book to see new pictures and continue the story.

In contrast, children who have had far fewer of these learning opportunities are more likely to think that doing well in the classroom is influenced by how much the teacher likes them, how lucky they are, or whether they are having a good day. These children do not link their own behavior and concentrated effort to how much they learn and how well

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 6.

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 5.

they do. In turn, these children don't do as well in school.

To encourage your child to work hard and know that effort matters:

Notice and praise your child for extra effort. Reinforce good behavior when your child takes extra time to do a task well or really concentrates. The ability to sustain interest and activity on a focused task is one of the most important general skills that teachers want children to have.

There are many opportunities at home for parents to allow children to practice this. Cake batters need to be stirred a lot (maybe a few hundred strokes or three minutes with an electric mixer) in order to rise properly. Children's ability to draw something (a house, a person, an animal, an airplane) often gets better after practicing more than once. Learning patience for some things that cannot be rushed (waiting for a painting to dry, listening to the middle of a story before you can know the end) is part of this as well.

Following two-, three-, and four-step instructions is another great "at home" activity that will help your child at school. It builds a child's power to follow a sequence which requires paying attention and remembering. Such practice can be done with building structures, gathering things for an activity, or just as a game unto itself. (Get the object, put it above/below, inside/outside, or in front of/behind. Then say or do something, such as clap your hands, turn around, or repeat a word.)

A note of caution: your child does not have to work hard at everything. Some things will come more naturally, and sometimes children will be tired or less motivated to work hard. So encourage your child, but don't overdo it. Also, sometimes children will say that something is easy when it isn't. There's no reason to worry as long as there are no adverse consequences.

Sometimes children refrain from doing their best for fear that they will not succeed. Be gentle in encouraging your child. Use humor to teach that everyone fails at times, and that the point is to keep trying. We know that "The Little Engine that Could" story is told to children in many cultures and in many languages for a reason. The little engine was able to do the nearly impossible because it was convinced that sustained effort would win the day.

As your child gets older, you will want to start to teach that simply trying the same thing over and over again is rarely an effective strategy in itself. You will also help your child judge which tasks are possible and which aren't. This is closely related to Hallmark No. 5 that children have good appraisal of their own skills, including their strengths and weaknesses.

Provide many types of cause-and-effect learning experiences. This need not involve expensive toys. Play simple card games that require the use of strategy (like "Go Fish"). Put together puzzles. Household chores and simple activities are great, too. Conduct simple science experiments at home (there are lots of books and kits to help with this). Remember that learning social cause-and-effect relationships counts, too. Be generally consistent in your parenting. The most powerful cause-and-effect learning occurs within the context of social relationships as your child learns which behaviors cause what type of reaction from you and others.

4. They Have Well-Developed Social and Emotional Skills.

These are essential to learning and to getting along well with people, especially teachers and classmates. Children who do well in school also get along well with others. They usually like their teachers and many of their classmates, and these feelings are reciprocated. Qualities such as consideration, sharing, being cooperative, waiting one's turn, following classroom rules (most of the time, anyway), and being able to have fun all count a lot in the early years.

When children have severe school adjustment problems, there is almost always difficulty in both the academic and social arenas. Of course, even well developed social skills in a five- or six-year-old are far from the adult version of "ideal." Good teachers and parents definitely know this!

Many teachers have a well-defined set of consequences for certain transgressions - ones that children can describe and usually seek to avoid. These can include time-outs and procedures, such as receiving a yellow or red light, losing special privileges in the classroom, or not getting stickers or a colorful stamp on a card. These techniques are more useful with younger children, who require external and tangible evidence of consequences, than they are with older children, who have a more developed internal sense of right and wrong.

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 7.*

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 6.

The harsher, old-fashioned ways of disciplining students for transgressions, such as placing a child in a corner with a dunce hat, verbally berating a child, or physically striking a child, are now recognized as highly ineffective and even counterproductive. These techniques may have scared other children, perhaps preventing further transgressions, but they also served to disengage some children, and to lead all too many students to see teachers as mean-spirited and unforgiving, rather than as caring adults committed to children's true learning.

To encourage your child's social and emotional development:

Provide positive, responsive, and consistent parenting. This is the best way, for parents to promote good social an emotional skills. Start early. Model good social behavior and positive emotional coping. It's hard to teach your child anger management and self-control when you lose your temper and let your emotions dominate over reasonable actions. For encouragement and advice as you fine-tune your parenting skills, keep seeking expert advice and talk with other parents (including your own).

Explain good behavior. It's important to talk with your child about school rules, what pleases (as well as irritates) teachers, and how to get along with other children. As your child grows, there will be obvious advances in the ability to understand social rules, the feelings of others, and the consequences of social transgressions. You can guide this process wonderfully.

However, be prepared for the inevitable. Almost all children will have their share of spats, outbursts, disappointments, frustrations, and fears related to things happening at school. There will be notes from your child's teacher (or other school personnel) telling you about these at one time or another. As one world-class first-grade teacher once told us, "You wouldn't want to have a child who *never* gets a red light. Such a child would not be normal or very much fun!" View these ups and downs in the social realm of school for what they are - first-rate teaching and learning opportunities.

Basic Social and Emotional Skills

For first graders:

- **Showing helpfulness toward peers when they ask for help.**
- **Agreeing to take turns with another child.**
- **Listening quietly to the teacher when instructions are given or a story is read.**
- **Being able to work alone on a task (assigned or self-initiated) without distracting others.**
- **Waiting to be called on to ask or answer questions in a group situation.**
- **Being able to control one's emotions (most of the time) when frustrated or treated unfairly by others.**
- **By age six or seven, being adept in finding constructive ways to show negative emotions, even though it is unlikely that children can or should entirely hide them.**
- **Expecting clear and timely consequences, both positive and negative, that are linked to their social behavior.**

For third graders:

- **Knowing a lot about the value of "being a good person" and "doing what is right," for more than just immediate, tangible rewards or avoidance of punishment.**
- **Offering help to a peer or teacher, even when it is not requested.**
- **Suggesting ways to solve a social conflict or to settle a disagreement, even when not instructed to do so.**
- **Expressing spontaneous empathy and concern when someone else is hurt, rejected, disappointed, or confused.**
- **Being able to show joy when someone else wins or succeeds.**
- **Expressing a desire to do something thoughtful, and sometimes doing this independently or at considerable expense to themselves (giving up money saved from their allowance, staying home to make or do something for someone rather than going out to play).**
- **Being interested in reading biographies about the lives of other people, which often convey important lessons about the social-emotional side of life.**

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 8.

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 7.

5. They Are Good at Assessing Their Skills.

Children who succeed in school generally do not vastly over- or underestimate their academic abilities. This ability to accurately appraise [one's own] skills and level of understanding is essential to the learning process.

The ability to evaluate one's own skills and level of understanding *with reasonable accuracy* will be valuable in many situations beyond the classroom. This serves as the basis for strong, positive self-esteem, the type that is grounded in a child's actual accomplishments, rather than the type based on wishful thinking, or derived from empty compliments that imply "you're great" no matter how well you really do.

The area of self-appraisal has typically been studied by measuring children's self-esteem. The results show that children who do poorly in school do not necessarily have low self-esteem. To the contrary, many children who perform below grade level actually think they are just as capable as others. Conversely, children with proven high academic achievement may rate themselves as only moderate or moderately high. Perhaps these children have set very high standards for themselves.

This research indicates that the young children who overestimate their skills and successes usually do so for three reasons. First, the child may be unable to correctly assess his or her own performance. Second, the child may be trying to deny, disguise, or compensate for a sense of failure. Third, the child's self-esteem may not be closely connected to actual behavior in the school setting. Research has not yet adequately resolved which explanation or combination of factors is at work here.

Parents and educators don't always agree on the role of competition in school and in life. Some people believe that individuals thrive under competitive conditions, and this can bring out the best in a person. Others view competition as unduly stressful or distracting, taking away some of the intrinsic motivation to achieve. Yet others value cooperation and a selflessness that may seem at odds with individual competitiveness.

Unfortunately, researchers have not yet looked at children's competitiveness and cooperation over a long period of time, and they have not related childhood competition and cooperation to adult levels of achievement and personal life satisfaction. Perhaps a balance of competitive and cooperative skills, as well as individual goal-setting, will best prepare your child for the future.

Without question, there are ample opportunities to use cooperative and competitive skills in constructive ways in the classroom, just as there are times when an excess of one or the other will be inappropriate or ineffective.

To encourage your child's self-assessment abilities:

Have an ongoing dialogue about your child's self-appraisal. This is one of the most effective strategies for helping children know how much they know or whether they are realistic judges of their own classroom behavior and achievements. This technique of self-monitoring allows a child to stop at the right times to try to find out more, or to clear up things that are confusing. For example, a child who is taught how to think about what is happening while he is learning new things will be able to:

- ask himself questions, in the same way a teacher or parent might, to see if he understands
- rehearse or practice new things he has learned, even without prompting from an adult
- give himself a "grade" on his mastery of a new skill or his grasp of a new idea to see whether he needs to work on it and improve
- ask the teacher (or you) questions that make it clear what is confusing to him or what he wants to check so that the adult will become a more effective and responsive participant in the learning process.

Praise your child for specific behavior and specific achievements. This is an invaluable way to help your child acquire a realistic and positive sense of self. For the most part, base your praise on your child's progress compared to an earlier period, rather than making comparisons with other children.

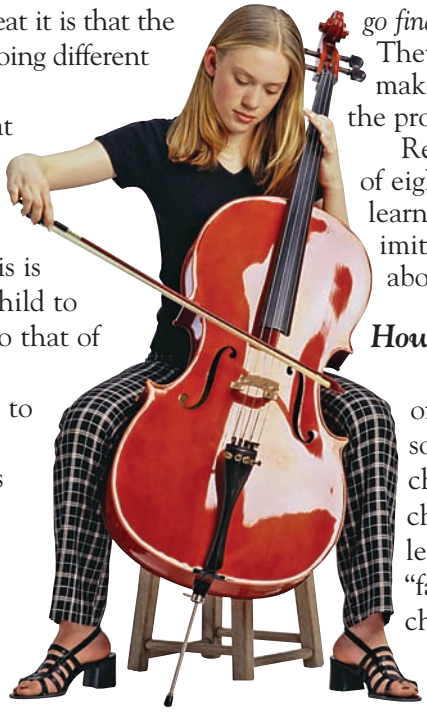
Explain that differences among children are normal. Sometimes comparisons with other children may be appropriate and constructive. In the classroom, children see proof of such differences every day in the work placed on the wall, in who can answer what types of questions, and in the teacher's praise and guidance. They also see differences in non-academic settings, including during gym and recess

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 9.*

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 8.

times. Talking about differences, and how great it is that the world is filled with people who are good at doing different kinds of things, is reassuring to a child.

Talk with your child about the fact that there are differences among children in how well they do things. Tell your child, "Most children are really good at some things and not as good at other things. This is true for grownups, too." This allows your child to begin to see his own behavior in relation to that of others without feeling superior or inferior.



Such comparisons need not contribute to unhealthy competition, but can help children assess their own skills. Differences are not limited, of course, to academic achievement, since children differ just as much in their physical growth and appearance, musical and artistic talents, athletic skills, leadership abilities, and friendship skills. Talk about your own feelings, especially when you were the same age, about being good in some areas and not so good in others.

6. Their Parents Are Role Models for Learning.

Success is said to breed success. When it comes to parents and children, this often is true. Why? Is it just a case of good genes? We think this is only part of the answer. To a great extent, children do learn from what they experience directly. Learning to learn begins at home.

Children who succeed in school have parents who are actively engaged in reading, acquiring new skills, and taking on new challenges. If children see their parents eagerly and actively learning, reading daily, talking about wanting to learn more about some topics, and even making mistakes and benefiting from these, then children are more likely to feel comfortable in taking on new challenges themselves. Learning is a way of life - not just something that happens in a classroom.

Interestingly, many well-informed parents are the *least* reluctant to say, "I don't know," or "I was wrong" and *then go find the correct answer* to a child's question. They also are willing to admit that they, too, make mistakes. How could it be otherwise in the process of learning (and parenting)?

Remember, that for children under the age of eight, two of the most important ways of learning are through observation and imitation. Your child is likely to learn a lot about learning if you set an example.

How to set a good learning example:

Learn together. Interestingly, parents often are stimulated to learn more about some things because of the questions their children ask, the interests and talents their children show, and what their children are learning at school. This leads to a type of "family learning," in which parents and children are engaged in discovery together.

When parents get interested in a new subject, start a new hobby, or discover a new fact, they can share this with their child. Children can become mini-experts in a remarkable range of topics - some useful, some just fun. This can lead to amusing examples of very young children who can discuss details of a sport, the real estate or stock markets, cooking and dining, clothing, politics, or the history of a particular place in the world long before they really understand what they are saying.

Thomas Alva Edison: A Role Model for Lifelong Learning

Thomas A. Edison's life was a tribute to a passionate love of learning, exploration, and discovery. His insights into his own success are refreshing and informative. When asked about the secret of his remarkable successes, he often offered these two observations: "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration" and "There is no substitute for hard work."

Even as a boy he is reputed to have loved to experiment and learn things on his own. He was persistent in both discovery and invention, fortunately for all of us who rely on the electric light bulb, recording devices, and a host of other discoveries he made. As he doggedly pursued one quest, he received admonishment not to feel like a failure. His widely quoted response was: "Why, I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work" - a great approach for children and adults alike.

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 10.*

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 9.

7. Their Parents Promote Learning by "Natural" Teaching at Home.

These parents communicate often with the school, and they arrange extra learning opportunities when their children have special interests or need extra help. This is the best kind of parent involvement in a child's learning, and such involvement is central to a child's success in school.

Such involvement begins at home. Parents are, after all, their children's first teachers. The best teaching by parents often occurs in the course of everyday activities. For an infant, this includes talking during care taking activities, naming foods when eating, pointing to something interesting to look at or touch, and listening to sounds in unexpected places. For a toddler, learning extends to interactive sessions with books and storytelling, singing songs, and playing simple turn-taking games. By the time your child is preparing to go to school, more school-like learning often has begun, including counting, naming the letters of the alphabet, recognizing shapes and colors, and being able to tell ways things are similar or different.

Research literature strongly endorses the value of children having early successes in learning. As a child acquires new skills and knowledge, she is more prepared to go on to the next stage of learning in that same area. This leads a child to become more expert. This has many inherent rewards for a child who already is eager to learn. Further, the more early success a child has, the more likely she will be to tackle increasingly difficult tasks.

In contrast, children who have many early failures are likely to be wary of new learning situations and may seem less interested in trying to learn something challenging. This is true for all children, even those who are capable and highly intelligent. As a parent-teacher, you can help to ensure that your child's learning experiences have a high ratio of successes to failures by your support and participation.

Just as important, parents need to make sure that their children are exposed to more and more challenging and complex activities, so that they neither lose interest and grow bored nor are stunted in their development. J. McVicker Hunt of the University of Illinois, a prominent theorist in human intelligence, wrote eloquently about this as "the problem of the match." That is, the match must be right between the child's level of understanding or thinking about the world and the learning opportunities presented to the child.

How to promote natural teaching at home:

Bring school subjects into home life. When your child is in school, you can reinforce and expand school based learning by bringing it into your home life. Help your child to recognize different coins and know their value. Pin up word labels or practice new songs or poems. Write something together, like a story about what your child is studying in class. Talk about the seasons, holidays, nature, and feelings.

Parents often will be asked by teachers to help at home in specific ways. Even when you aren't, make it a regular routine to incorporate school topics into everyday life. Just be sure that your role as "parent-teacher" does not undermine spontaneity, flexibility, and just having fun "hanging out" together. Not every moment has to be a learning moment!

Spend time with other families with children the same age as yours. You will see how other parents teach, and you may get new ideas for your own family. Parents who incorporate teaching in the natural flow of events seem to do things like categorize, label, define words, offer synonyms and antonyms, tell stories that make points come alive, ask children questions that are fun to answer, and ask questions themselves ("I wonder how far away the moon is?" "What really makes leaves fall in autumn?" "Why do

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 11.

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 10.

dogs wag their tails so much?" "Why does sodium bicarbonate fizz?").

Parent-teachers often seem like magicians to their children, because they can demonstrate things that seem phenomenal. Pour a cup of water into two different size glasses and see how different it looks! Take water and transform it into ice (and vice versa). Take a cup of water and boil it away (almost)!

For parents who are not skilled in home science experiments, crafts projects, or in writing books, there are dozens of books and kits that make it easy to do some pretty impressive things. Any parent can quickly learn to create a mini-volcano that overflows or make ink that becomes invisible. Building with blocks, assembling a rocket, putting together puzzles (from easy ones to the more complex jigsaw and three-dimensional ones), also are natural teaching opportunities. Assemble your own book by hand or on the computer. Do some origami. Each activity will lead to great learning.

Communicate with your child's school. The best way to do this is to stay in touch with your child's teachers. This can include in-person conversations, written notes, attending parent events, and reading the newsletters sent home by teachers. In the coming years, we anticipate that technology will continue to revolutionize our daily forms of communication. Teachers and principals in some schools already are using e-mail messages, bulletin boards, and web pages as a means of communicating with parents. This is just the beginning.

Encourage extracurricular activities. These can be valuable assets in your child's overall education. The hours after school and the long summer weeks for those in a traditional school-year program also are vitally important to children's overall rate of learning and development. Research shows that children who do not participate in organized programs or activities during these hours do not continue to extend their school-based learning as much as those children whose parents help to arrange for the extra learning experiences.

Your child might take lessons (music, dance, science, drama), participate in sports, attend community school programs (such as tumbling, foreign languages and art classes for children) and enroll in religious education. Playgroups can provide a wonderful way to enrich a child's early school program. Look into creative ways that you and other parents can rotate responsibility in planning what the group does.

At summer camp (day camps are increasingly available for very young children) your child may learn to swim, take arts and crafts classes, learn the words, and tunes to lots of new songs, and go on field trips. In the process, there is a lot of teaching and learning, all in a very enjoyable setting. Children who attend show the clear benefits of participating in high-quality summer programs, even when there isn't an explicit educational curriculum or focus.

Once again, however, don't overdo. Avoid over-programming your child or yourself. You both need "down" time and relaxation. You also need time when creative ideas and free-flowing thoughts can occur.

Playgrounds for Learning and Friendships

We know a group of parents whose children attended the same preschool who decided to create their own Saturday Morning Playgroup. The parents have continued this for five years, and plan to keep on going as long as they can. Children and parents alike have benefited immensely. Parents take turns planning an activity (about once every seven weeks) and are responsible for getting the details to everyone else. Although the children are now in first and second grade, scattered across different elementary schools, the special friendships among children and parents have been sustained. They go to lots of different places, have tried a remarkable number of new activities, have learned an enormous amount over the years, and enjoyed every minute of it.

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 12.

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 11.

8. Their Family Routines Support Doing Well in School.

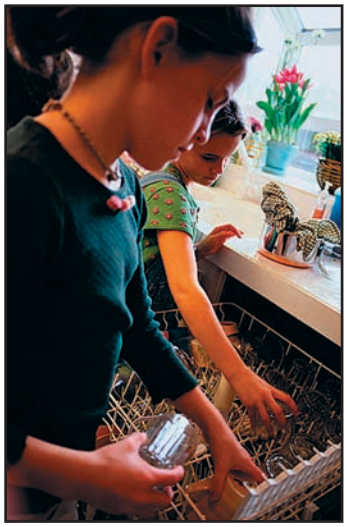
Families with good, workable routines also have children whose school performance is better. Family routines do not refer just to daily happenings, but extend to patterns of visiting with the extended family, socializing with friends, and recreation. Fortunately, many cultural and personal preferences can come into play in setting up good family routines.

Family routines matter a lot to young children. They provide children with order and a certain amount of predictability. Good routines also are grounded in children's developmental needs and balanced with those of the entire family. Remember that routines are general patterns of behavior and need not be rigid. For example, when establishing and maintaining family routines, think of the seasons of the year - how nice it is to take advantage of an unpredictably early spring or perfect snowfall or long autumn - as well as the hours of each day.

Young children clearly benefit from sufficient regular sleep - usually at least 10 hours each night. Bedtime routines and a regular time for getting ready for sleep are particularly helpful for young children. These can be coordinated with the daily necessities of tooth-brushing, bathing, and reading a book together, along with time for hugging, reflecting on the day, and having special thoughts or prayers before closing one's eyes. As in all other areas of development, there are individual differences. Some children do quite well with less sleep, and a few may need more.

Eating at regular times - often with family members taking the time to visit and enjoy one another - contributes to everyone's physical and psychological well-being. This is most important during the weekday routines as weekends afford more variety. Remarkably, our research on families reveals that many important family functions occur during mealtimes, and that this is a great time for information exchange. Great dinners can be the stuff of great lifelong memories. Unfortunately, our research shows far too many adults have unpleasant memories because their parents missed the opportunity to make mealtimes special and enjoyable events.

In some ways, it seems ironic that routines can be, in fact, freedom-granting. Certainty that important things will be taken care of frees family members to do other things. The routine minimizes having to negotiate or figure out what's what every single day. It also can create ease, harmony, and pleasure in the daily activities of family life. Routines need not be followed strictly to be effective. Rather, they represent the typical backbone of managing family life.



Organizing the house to help with your child's schoolwork and keeping information readily at hand also are important. To our knowledge, however, no one has studied this aspect of family life over time or in adequate detail.

To set and maintain good routines:

Maintain home life schedules and routines as much as possible. These routines should include sleeping, meals, errands, housework, television, and recreation. Don't forget socializing with other relatives and friends, as well.

Support your child's learning. If your child has homework, set up a special place (or two) where he can work with as little distraction as possible. Make sure the space is equipped with needed supplies.

9. Their Parents Are Effective at Setting and Maintaining Appropriate Limits.

There are many books on how to discipline your child, and with good reason. When children are not well-behaved, they create problems for everyone - parents, teachers, and other children. There are, however, some very important principles - not just opinions - about what comprises effective parental discipline for young children.

This is not a book about discipline, and we will only touch on the subject to give you an overview of what the best research and observation on the subject show.

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 13.*

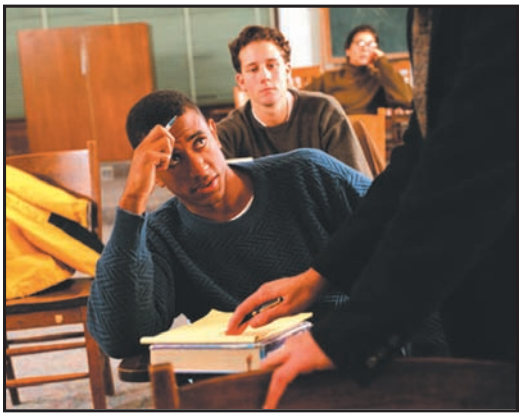
Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 12.

Starting in the second year of life, you can set consistent limits and offer clear guidelines to your child about what is acceptable and desirable behavior. With each passing year, the demands for appropriate behavior increase, but so does your child's maturity. Although all children misbehave sometimes, and seem to "test the limits" at other times, children actually prefer to be well-behaved.

Parents who are skilled in setting and maintaining limits usually have spent time thinking, planning, and agreeing on what matters the most to them and what is appropriate to teach their child at each age. They are neither overly restrictive nor too permissive. They are not harsh in their techniques. Neither are they lax or highly variable. The most effective parents (that is, the ones with the best-adjusted children) are comfortable and confident in setting limits, but are not dictatorial or overly strict.

Three disciplinary styles have been identified by Dr. Diana Baumrind of the University of California at Berkeley: *authoritative*, *authoritarian*, and *permissive*. Authoritative parents have repeatedly been shown to be the most effective with their children. Children whose parents use authoritative disciplinary approaches are shown to be inquisitive and exploratory, self-reliant and self-controlled, and happy and content.

Authoritative parents exert control in a supportive and encouraging manner. They are firm in their discipline, but rational, telling children the reasons why something must be done or not done. Authoritative parents are warm and receptive, but they follow through and understand the value of guiding their children's behavior in ways that are appropriate for the child's age.



Less effective are parenting styles that are authoritarian - too rigid and too cold - and permissive - too lax and indifferent.

The word "authoritarian" means favoring complete obedience or subjection to authority, exercising complete or almost complete control over the will of another. When parents exert authoritarian discipline, they discount their child's needs and individuality, and in the process show little or no concern for their child. Authoritarian parents typically exert control over their children in a detached and cold manner. They also tend to be less responsive, less encouraging, and less likely to explain why they are exerting control. Very often, these parents treat all children in the family alike, even when the children's ages, temperaments, and activities might better be handled with different rules.

The authoritarian approach is *not* highly effective, because short-term control of the child is gained through fear and force, and the child often feels rejected, discounted, or abused in ways that weaken, rather than strengthen, the child-parent relationship. Children subjected to authoritarian discipline are more likely to become distrustful, withdrawn or aggressive, and discontent. The child's behavior is likely to extend to the school situation, especially because very young children see teachers as parent substitutes, and expect their teachers to behave like their parents.

At the other end of the spectrum, permissive discipline fails to provide adequate guidelines and rules for a child. Although permissive parents may be warm, their children are much less likely to learn self-control or self-reliance, and they tend to explore less. Having little or no experience with a positive authority figure, these children are not well-prepared for the expectations that are present in most good schools.

10. Their Schools Have High Expectations for Student Achievement, Support Teacher Development, and Communicate Frequently With Parents About Their Children.

The literature on effective schools continues to grow. Many schools are being re-structured. They are also providing continuing professional development for teachers and staff. And they are adopting improvements in the early elementary school curriculum based on good scientific evidence.

However, several principles have emerged about what really matters in producing high levels of student achievement. Three of the most important are that the school have high expectations for student achievement,

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 14.*

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 13.

invest in teacher development, and communicate with parents.

High expectations: What do high expectations mean, and how are these shown? In effective schools, expectations are not just an externally imposed set of goals, nor are they unrealistic. Rather, teachers and the principal embrace and endorse these expectations. Most of all, they show their expectations clearly through their behavior. They treat the students with respect, encourage students to strive for higher levels of accomplishment, and have plans to ensure that all children succeed in learning.

For schools with established reputations for excellence, parents might assume that educators have high expectations for students. Do check this out. Schools, like all other social institutions and businesses, can have their ups and downs.

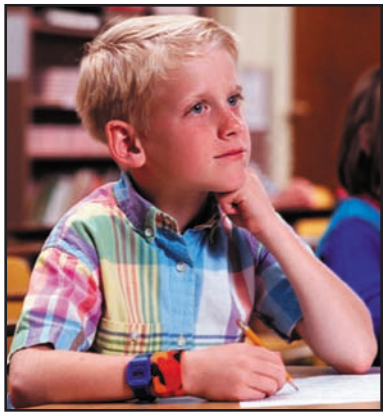
For example, the principal can exert a tremendous influence, for the students are just "smart," and may not actively convey high expectations to those in the classroom. Teachers in poorer schools may begin to believe that nothing can be done to change the situation. They may tend to blame the children's poor performance on external factors, especially if there are many children who come from homes with multiple challenges and few resources.

The good news is that there are numerous, recent examples of how principals and teachers can make a big difference and turn a school around. Check out the schools you are considering (or the school your child already attends) and see where things stand on expectations.

How to encourage high expectations for your child:

Make sure your child knows that *you* have high expectations. By praising your child's successes at home - in play, exploration, puzzle-solving, learning an instrument, whatever - you convey the important message that progress and achievement are important and that your child is capable of both. You also open up her world and her expectations of herself.

Teacher development: Another important factor is that your child's schools invest in teacher development and training. Strategic investment in the ongoing education of teachers, principals, and superintendents is an investment with a proven high yield. New teaching techniques, new teaching materials and technology, and new research findings need to be conveyed in a timely manner to those on the front line. Teachers need the time to keep up-to-date and to continue to refine their own professional skills.



Professional development activities often have an added benefit of giving teachers an opportunity to be with other teachers and to share information about what works or doesn't in their classrooms. We note that principal and superintendent professional development also is highly beneficial, and much more of this is needed.

How to encourage teacher development:

Tell the "powers that be" in your school that you support teacher development. Find out who the decision-makers are that affect your school's policies regarding teacher training. If professional development is inadequate in amount, quality, or content, write, call, fax, or e-mail those who can change things. Teachers should not be expected to do this all on their own time or at their own cost.

Communication with parents: An occasional progress report is not nearly enough communication in today's schools to keep you up on what's happening at school and with your child. This is especially true if your child is having difficulty in any area of school, academic or social. Your child's teacher can be a great help and ally in getting your child's school experience off to a great start and keeping it that way.

How to ensure good communication with your child's school and teachers:

Take the initiative. If your school doesn't have regular communications - meetings and telephone conversations with your child's teacher, written reports, parent-teacher conferences that are open to all parents - take

→ *Ten Hallmarks cont'd. on page 15.*

Ten Hallmarks cont'd. from page 14.

charge. Make the calls to your teacher, schedule the meetings yourself.

DO ALL "SUCCESSFUL" CHILDREN SHOW ALL OF THE HALLMARKS?

No one study has focused on all 10 "hallmarks" simultaneously or sought to evaluate how to increase all 10 to maximize children's positive outcomes. However, numerous studies over the years lend important support to these hallmarks as truly making a difference in the lives of young children.

Can children succeed in the absence of some of these hallmarks? Yes, to some extent. But each hallmark provides obvious advantages. The more advantages a child has, the greater the likelihood of success in school.

The major point is that nearly all of the hallmarks are determined, or profoundly affected, by families. It is parents (and the child's other caregivers) who shape children's eagerness to learn, encourage their questions and curiosity, teach the value of work and effort, guide social and emotional development, teach self-assessment, practice and promote learning, and maintain supportive routines and limits. This is why families have such a huge impact on a child's success in school. When you actively provide these foundations in your child's life, you also are promoting success when your child goes to school.

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Craig Ramey is a Distinguished Professor in Health Studies and the Founding Director, along with Sharon Ramey, of the Center on Health and Education. His research has focused on the effects of the early experience on children's intellectual and social competence. He developed and continues to lead the Abecedarian Project. He has also studied the effects of early intervention for premature, low birth weight children. Recently he completed a 31-site study mandated by Congress, known as the Head Start-Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project. Ramey serves actively as an advisor to many national initiatives in early childhood, including advising the First Lady Laura Bush on a series of parenting booklets and President Bush and his leadership team about the importance of early experience on brain and behavioral development. He has received many national awards, including the American Psychological Association Award for Exemplary Prevention Programs, the Howard Heflin Award for Contributions to World Health and Education (2000), the children's Advocate Award (2002) and was named to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's "Hall of Honor" (2003). Dr. Ramey is a member of the CDL Professional Advisory Board.

Sharon Ramey is the Susan Mayer Professor in Child and Family Studies and the Founding Director, along with Craig Ramey, of the Center on Health and Education. Her research has focused on the effects of the environment on behavior, including longitudinal studies of the effects of early experience on the development of children "at risk" for mental retardation and school failure; work on the behavioral effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol, nicotine, and cocaine; studies on the dynamic changes affecting American families; research on the social ecology of residential and educational settings for individuals with mental retardation; and a recent study on the transition to school, including 8,000 former Head Start children and families and 3,000 other classmates and their families. Ramey has received many national awards, including the Howard Heflin Award for Contributions to World Health and Education (2000), the American Association on Mental Retardation's Distinguished Research Contributions Award (2000), and the Children's Advocate Award (2002).

PLAIN Talk

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