



School Performance Problems

There are many reasons for teens to underperform at school, including a lack of motivation to do well, problems at home or with peers, poor work habits or study skills, emotional and behavior problems, learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, mental retardation or below average intelligence and other medical problems, including anxiety and depression. Also keep in mind that children with sleep problems, such as obstructive sleep apnea, or inadequate sleep, can have problems in school, usually secondary to attentional problems and daytime sleepiness.

It is important to find the reason for your child's poor performance, especially if he/she is failing, and come up with a treatment plan so that he/she can perform up to his/her full potential. Another reason to get your child help is that doing poorly in school can easily lead to problems with low self-esteem, behavior problems and depression.

It is sometimes difficult to figure out if a child's problems at school are caused by their other medical problems, such as depression, or if these other problems began because of their poor school performance. Children who do poorly at school may be under a lot of stress, and will develop different ways to cope with this stress. Some may externalize their feelings, which can lead to acting out and behavior problems or becoming the class clown. Other children will internalize their feelings, and will develop almost daily complaints of headaches or stomachaches. A thorough evaluation by an experienced professional is usually needed to correctly diagnose children with complex problems.

When you realize your child has a problem at school, you should schedule a meeting with her teacher to discuss the problem. Other resources that may be helpful include talking with the school psychologist or counselor or your Pediatrician.

Motivation

Even if your child has normal or above average intelligence, without a desire or motivation to succeed at school, it is unlikely that he/she will do well. There are many reasons for children to have a lack of motivation, including parental expectations that are set too high or too low, social problems, including difficulties at home or at school, and behavior problems.

To help your child develop a positive attitude and motivation toward working hard at school you should:

- Give your child praise and rewards for doing something well or working hard toward a difficult or challenging problem. Help build self confidence by avoiding frequent criticism and praising hard work.
- Communicate with your child about school and ask him/her about his/her day to show that you are interested.
- Help him/her to find something that he/she has a skill or special interest in, such as music, sports, reading, etc.,
- Help your child to understand that success has a lot to do with how much time and effort you put into a task, and is not just about how smart or strong he/she is. Children who believe this are more likely to take on new challenges and work harder on difficult tasks.
- Set realistic goals and expectations for your children and set up consequences for not meeting these expectations and rewards or privileges for when he/she does. If your child is making C's, but is working hard at school and at doing his/her homework, then it may be unreasonable to expect him/her to make the honor roll. You should instead reward and praise his/her hard work and not punish him/her for not living up to your expectations.

Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities can affect how children listen, think, store, retrieve, write, read and communicate information or perform mathematical calculations, and can cause him/her to have a short attention span without having ADHD. It is common for children with ADHD to also have learning disabilities.

Among the ways that a learning disability can affect the way your child learns is by interfering with the input of information to the brain. This can be a visual perception disability, causing your child to reverse or rotate letters and numbers or to not be able to focus on specific letters and words on a page, or it can be an auditory perception disability, so that similar words sound alike and cause confusion or she may not be able to process words that she hears as fast as people are speaking them (auditory lag).

Learning disabilities can also cause problems with the integration of sensory information, or how the brain processes the sensory data that is sent to it. This can affect the information received from vision, touch, and balance and can affect your child's gross and fine motor skills. Specific integration disabilities include sequencing disabilities, in which your child confuses the sequence of words, letters, math problems, etc. They can also have abstraction, organizational, and memory (affecting visual vs. auditory & short term or long term memory) disabilities.

Children with learning disabilities can also have problems with the way that they output information. These output disabilities can affect the way they talk (language disability) or the way that they write or draw (motor disability).

Most children with learning disabilities have one or more of the above problems, affecting the way that they input, integrate or output information. These problems can cause them to have difficulty at school, but can also cause problems at home and when they play.

Some children with learning disabilities have always had trouble learning new things, while others do well in school at first, but then start to have problems in the fifth or sixth grade as school gets more difficult.

Children with learning disabilities may only have trouble with certain subjects, such as math or reading, and may do well in other classes. They will also have normal intelligence and may do well on standardized tests. Children with learning disabilities are often described as not performing up to their potential. There are tests that your school psychologist or pediatrician can do to look for certain learning disabilities so that a modified education plan can be developed.

The evaluation of children with possible learning disabilities usually includes an assessment of intelligence or an IQ test performed by a psychologist. This will help to determine your child's learning potential. Common IQ tests include the Wechsler and Stanford-Binet intelligence tests and the Kaufman Assessment Battery. These tests and your child's total and subset score will help to identify his/her strengths and weaknesses.

The different types of Wechsler tests include the WPPSI for pre-school age children and the WISC for school age children. The scores for the WISC will include a verbal, performance and full-scale IQ. Children with learning disabilities will usually have a 10-15 point difference between their verbal and performance IQ, and/or a 5-8 point difference in the subtest scores (subtest scatter).

Your child will also be evaluated with a standardized achievement test, to evaluate your child's performance in reading, writing, math and their general knowledge level. Their scores on these tests will be compared to other children in their grade level or of the same age.

To complete the evaluation for a learning disability, your child may also require a medical exam by her pediatrician and a mental health evaluation.

ADHD

Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder will usually have a short attention span and are easily distracted, and may also be hyperactive and impulsive. These symptoms are usually noticed before she is seven years old and occur in more than one setting, for example both at home and at school.

Typical symptoms of hyperactivity include being fidgety or on the go, always moving some part of their body, swinging their legs, tapping their fingers, or rocking their chair,

etc. Children with ADHD may also have a short attention span, mainly because they are very easily distracted and have hard time focusing on things and staying on task. They may, however be able to focus on something that they are really interested in, or on activities that are always changing, such as playing video games. Being impulsive, children with ADHD may also do and say things without really thinking about them and without considering the consequences of their actions.

There are different types of ADHD. Children with ADHD who have a short attention span, hyperactivity and who are impulsive are said to have a combined type of ADHD. Children may also have inattentive ADHD, with just the short attention span, or a predominantly hyperactive/impulsive ADHD with just the hyperactivity and/or impulsivity.

It is important to remember that ADHD is not the only medical condition that can cause the above symptoms. Children with anxiety, depression or a learning disability can also have a short attention span and be hyperactive and/or impulsive.

Your Pediatrician or school psychologist can interview and test your child for ADHD and come up with a treatment plan to help him/her succeed.

Improving School Performance

After discussing your child's school performance with his/her teachers or other professionals and ensuring that he/she doesn't have a learning disability or other medical problems that is causing him/her to perform poorly, some steps that you can take to help him/her do better include:

- Become actively involved in your child's schoolwork, by talking with his/her teachers, reviewing homework, and helping with study strategies.
- Develop a daily study routine for after school, during which he/she can study and do his/her homework.
- Help him/her become better organized:
 - Use clear directions.
 - Use colors, heading size or highlighting to help important concepts stand out.
 - Vary the type of activities to keep him/her interested.
- Consider getting a tutor at school or a private tutor to help boost performance.
- Prepare a quiet environment for him/her to do his/her homework, without the distraction of a TV, stereo or siblings.
- Make sure that he/she has enough time to complete his/her homework and that he/she isn't too involved in extracurricular activities or an afterschool job.
- For children with below average intelligence, learning disabilities or ADHD, be an advocate for your child by making sure that the school is providing the proper education modifications to help him/her succeed.
- Avoid creating a power struggle over homework and school performance. If there is already a power struggle and your child's grades are worsening as he/she

is becoming more defiant about school work, you can try and withdraw yourself from the conflict by making your child responsible for her performance. Make time available for him/her to do his/her schoolwork by limiting television or video game use. You may also want to provide incentives or rewards for improved school performance and removing other privileges, such as phone or car use, until his/her grades improve.

School Strategies

There are many classroom modifications that can be put in place to help improve school performance, memory and attention, impulse control, organization, and self esteem. You should discuss implementing these techniques with your child's teachers.

- Improving memory and attention span:
 - Seat the child in an area with the least amount of distractions, near the teacher if possible. Consider using a study carrel, especially for independent work and keep his/her work area uncluttered.
 - Make instructions clear and unambiguous.
 - Keep oral instructions brief and repeat them at least once.
 - Consider providing written instructions and directions to supplement oral instructions.
 - Use visual aids.
 - Break up instructions, assignments and homework into small steps.
 - Improve reading comprehension by teaching him/her to underline key words or topics with a highlighter.
 - Improve listening comprehension by teaching him/her to take notes of key concepts.
 - Provide special signals or cues to remind him/her to get back on task.

- Improving organizational skills:
 - Establish a daily checklist of assignments.
 - Keep a special notebook in which he/she can record homework assignments, project or report due dates, and test schedules.

- Improving productivity:
 - Divide work sheets and assignments into sections.
 - Reduce the amount of homework and written class work, especially repetitive assignments such as math problems and spelling words that he/she can do accurately.
 - Vary the type of activities that he/she is doing.
 - Vary the way that material is presented.
 - Provide one on one instruction or small groups to introduce major concepts.

- Improving performance:
 - Provide extra time to complete assignments and tests.
 - Consider providing oral testing instead of or in addition to written tests.

- Remind the student to slow down.
- Give extra weight to the content of an assignment when grading, and do not take off points for poor handwriting or minor spelling errors.

- Protecting self esteem:
 - Avoid humiliating children who perform poorly in front of the other children.
 - Give positive feedback when he/she stays on task, pays attention or works hard at an assignment.
 - Find things that he/she has special interest or strength in and encourage him/her to do these activities.

- Improving behavior and impulse control:
 - Provide special signals or cues when he/she is beginning to misbehave.
 - Give clear expectations of what behaviors are expected in the classroom.
 - Be consistent in your expectations and in the consequences for misbehavior.

The information obtained in this document can be found at
<http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/Adolescent/schoolperformance.html>