

Back-to-School Tips for Kids Who Are Struggling

 childmind.org/article/back-to-school-tips-for-kids-who-are-struggling

The first day of a new school year always feels like a new start. New school supplies, new classes, new teachers, new hopes and, if you're anything like I was, a brand new chance to screw up.

I have ADHD, and in high school I was undiagnosed and barely scraping by academically. Every semester I'd start off full of optimism and big hopes for academic success. This, I'd tell myself, was going to be "The One." The One where everything changes, when I turn my act around, when I start — and stay — on the right foot. The. One.

If you're the parent of a child with ADHD or a learning disability you can probably guess what happened next.

When you've got high hopes but no plan for how to achieve them, things tend to go off the rails pretty quickly. It never took long for The One to become just another one. Another year of barely keeping my head above water.

It wasn't until after I was diagnosed that things began to change. Once I understood *why* I was struggling, I was able to start creating strategies to address my problems — instead of just hoping that wanting things to change *really* badly would somehow be enough. Turning things around took a lot of hard work, understanding my strengths and weaknesses, learning how to ask for (and accept) support, facing difficulties instead of avoiding them, and learning how to be a little less hard on myself. It's not easy but it is doable, and the rewards last long after school's out.

Here are some steps you can take to help your child lay the groundwork for an (actually) good start this year.

Be specific about learning challenges

When you have ADHD or a learning disability, the difficulties it causes often feel baffling, unmanageable and inevitable: *The teacher has been talking for an hour and I have no idea what she said. How does everyone else know!?* Or: *All the other kids are already done with the quiz! Why is this taking me so long?*

Without understanding it can be easy for kids to disappear down a rabbit-hole of self-loathing: *I'm such a screw-up.* Or simply write the subject off: *I'll never get it anyway, so why bother?*

When it comes to learning disorders, knowledge is power. Helping your child understand his learning difference — not just what it is, but the specific ways it affects him both in and out of school — is the bedrock of success. For example:

- If your child gets off track easily or has problems with impulsivity, “studying” with friends might not be the best way for him to prepare for tests. Agree that this year he’ll study in a dedicated quiet place at home and see his buddies afterwards.
- If your daughter is easily overwhelmed by large projects, look at her syllabus together and make a plan to break daunting assignments down into smaller, more manageable pieces.
- If she’s struggled with a particular subject, add support and planning from the start, rather than waiting until she’s falling behind.

Make organization a priority

Disorganization and poor time management: twin agents of chaos and destruction. Nothing pushes a new semester off course faster than lost assignments, forgotten backpacks and late arrivals. If your child struggles with organization, help her be proactive. Discuss with her organizational challenges and choose some realistic strategies for tackling them. Here are some tips to help you get started.

Talk about what to do when things don’t go as planned

“Everything is going to be perfect this year,” I’d tell myself. “*Perfect.*” Unfortunately, in real life things are very rarely perfect, and as soon as I inevitably fell short of the impossible goal I’d set, I gave up. Being able to recover and move forward from a mistake is one of the most important skills kids can learn.

- **Discuss what she’ll do if she misses an assignment or starts to fall behind.** This could include staying behind to talk to her teacher about extra credit, reaching out to the school’s resource center, or agreeing to refocus her efforts on getting a good grade on a major test or project that can pull her grade back up.
- **Address avoidance.** When and if things do start to slide, many kids fall back on the time-honored strategy of “If-I-ignore-it-maybe-it’ll-just-go-away.” Of course, avoiding scary assignments or the gut-punch of a bad grade may feel better in the moment, but in the end it leads to disaster. Help your child face his fears in a healthy way by setting up regular check-ins and giving him positive feedback for being honest and proactive. “I’m so glad you told me your paper is late! I know you were worried about it. Let me help you get it done.”

- **Turning something in is *always* better than nothing.** Kids are often embarrassed to turn in assignments that are late, unfinished or just not that great. But a zero (or many zeros) in the grade book is far, far more damaging than a C. Make an agreement at the start of the year that your child will turn in his assignments no matter what. For younger kids, or those that need a little extra incentive, you could add a reward: “If you get all your assignments in this semester, you can get the Mario game once school ends.”
- **Help her learn to manage mistakes in a healthy way.** Slipping up is upsetting, especially when a kid’s confidence is already shaky. It can be easy to slide into self-recrimination, or feel like it’s not worth it to keep trying. Take care to validate her feelings — she may be frustrated, sad or worried about disappointing you — and let her know you appreciate her telling you about the problem. Then quickly change the focus to how she’ll move forward and what she’ll do to avoid similar problems in the future.

Set up morale boosters

Figuring out how to achieve and sustain academic success is a long process, and there are bound to be moments when your child’s self-esteem takes a beating. Creating some things to look forward to can help bolster a kid’s self-image and take some of the pressure off when things get rough.

- Make sure your child has time to just relax. Don’t go overboard on extracurriculars.
- When she does participate in extracurriculars, encourage her to find activities where she has the chance to excel. A little success can go a long way towards building (and protecting) confidence.
- Plan a few specific events your child can look forward to that have nothing to do with school: Sleeping over at a friend’s house, going on a trip, getting a brand-new video game and having a day to just play. Having something good on the horizon can help make rough patches feel less consuming.

Don’t surprise kids with questions about school

When kids have a history of failure, conversations about school can be fraught. Questions like “Did you turn in your report?” or “How did the math test go?” may read as criticism or leave kids feeling upset and rattled. Avoid ambushing kids with questions about school when they’ve just gotten off the bus. Instead, agree on times when you’ll talk about what’s going on and what they need to do.

- Validate your child’s feelings by acknowledging that school is a hard topic for everyone. “I know this isn’t easy to talk about — how can I help?”

- Keeping conversations regular and predictable will help normalize them and make them more productive. And by setting boundaries around school discussions, you'll be able to preserve peace and positive family time even when things aren't going great academically.

Give kids space to try, and fail, and try again

Whenever you can, try to empower your child to take charge of his own needs. Whether that's setting up his backpack for school the night before, arranging a study-session or asking a teacher for help when he's struggling with an assignment, giving him the reins (within reason) will communicate your confidence in his abilities and enable him to practice being independent.

That said, some kids need more scaffolding than others. Some, especially those who struggle with mental health conditions like depression or anxiety, may benefit from greater parental oversight. Assess where your child is realistically and move forward in the way that makes the most sense for your family.

Finally, after all these years what I've learned is that there's no cheat code, no "perfect" way to do better. It's hard work, but work that pays off, both at school and long after.

Rae Jacobson is a writer and content engagement specialist at the Child Mind Institute.