

SUCCESS AT SCHOOL

GOAL TENDING

Academic Coaching Made Easy

To help your child become a winning student, take a page from an athletic coach's game plan.

ELEMENTARY
through
HIGH SCHOOL



Children and teens with ADHD encounter more than their share of academic challenges. Consequently, parents tend to become heavily involved in their children's academic lives. Let's look at three common scenarios.

■ Johnny leaves his vocabulary list at school nearly every week. His dad gets frustrated, but drives him hurriedly back to school before the doors close—because he doesn't want his son to fail his weekly spelling test.

■ Mary can't stay focused on the increased amounts of homework she is assigned now in fifth grade, so her

mother agrees to spend the entire evening sitting near her, reading a magazine.

■ Eric has lots of tests and projects now that he is in high school, and he has to juggle these with basketball practice. To make sure he keeps track of everything he needs to do, his mom lays out a weekly schedule every Sunday night and posts it on the refrigerator.

How should parents lend support?

As well-intentioned as we may be in helping our kids grapple with complex school-related problems, these

efforts help only in the short run. Children need to develop their own thinking skills; as long as we agree to do the thinking for them, they won't. And so they may *never* learn critical academic skills, like how to plan, problem-solve, and stay focused.

If we let go and allow our children to handle difficult situations on their own, there's no guarantee that they will learn from their mistakes. Typically, things get worse. It's not uncommon for parents to end up either arguing with or begging their children to do the work—or just doing the work for them.

At what point should you step in to help your child? And to what extent? It's not always easy to tell. But if we emulate the techniques used by athletic coaches—and stay out of the game—we can teach our kids to manage their academic responsibilities on their own.

Making the transition from involved parent to academic coach can be challenging. It will require fighting the temptation to “fix” your child's struggles and learning to manage the conflict that could arise between you.

Let's see how a coaching approach might help Johnny, Mary, and Eric overcome their academic problems.

Johnny: The Forgetful Student

Instead of fixing Johnny's problem by driving him back to school, his dad should help Johnny make a plan to remember to bring home his vocabulary list. Dad could suggest that Johnny use a sign on his notebook to remind himself about his list, for example, and have Johnny rehearse putting the list in his homework folder and the folder in his backpack when the bell goes off.

Dad should involve Johnny in developing the plan by asking questions like, “What do you think would help you remember to put the list in your folder?” or “On the occasions when you *do* remember, how do you do it?”

Once the plan is in place, Johnny's dad should make it clear to Johnny that he will no longer drive him back to school when he forgets his list. Johnny and his dad might agree upon a system that rewards him when he remem-

bers to bring home his vocabulary list—and subjects him to consequences when he forgets.

Mary: The Inattentive Student

Mary's mom needs to give her daughter a pep talk about the importance of being able to do one's work without the help of a monitor. Mary must see that doing her work on her own is an important goal. Mary's mom may need to push her beyond her comfort zone so she can learn how to manage her own inattention. Mom should ask what assignments Mary feels she is ready to tackle on her own, and for which assignments she feels she still needs someone nearby.

Mary should be encouraged to experiment and figure out what helps her keep her mind on her work. Is the kitchen table really the best place to tackle homework assignments? Would it be better to work in total silence, or have some background noise? What types of thoughts could Mary focus on to keep her mind on her work? Maybe

Stay on the Sidelines

You never see a baseball coach up at bat or a basketball coach shooting hoops—it's not their job. Similarly, it's not your job to solve your child's academic problems.

Your job is to offer encouragement—and prodding—as needed. Celebrate your child's accomplishments and good grades. When he doesn't do well on a test or project, talk about what he might have done differently. Help him set goals, figure out how to stay motivated, and reflect on his efforts when the work is done.

Just don't get in the game yourself.

Mary's mom could offer to stop by at certain times to see how things are going. Self-knowledge and self-management will serve Mary well as she goes on to middle school, where the workload will be even greater.

Eric: The Disorganized Student

Eric's mom should help Eric hone his planning and self-management skills. On Sunday evenings, she should partner with him to look at the week ahead and lay out a plan. She can ask him all the questions that she used to ask herself when she made his schedule for him.

At first, Eric's mom should guide the planning step-by-step. Then he might try his hand at making the week's schedule, using the list of questions that he and his mom come up with. The skills Eric learns from this process will be invaluable. ▲

By THERESA E. LAURIE MAITLAND, Ph.D., interim director of the Learning Disabilities Services program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Coaching resources

The Learning Coach Approach: Inspire, Encourage, and Guide Your Child Toward Greater Success in School and in Life, by Linda Dobson (Running Press)

Coaching College Students with ADHD: Issues and Answers, by Patricia Quinn, Nancy Ratey, and Theresa Maitland (Advantage)