

School Achievement for Disengaged Teens

School, like religion, is an area where a parent cannot force compliance. The only things you can insist on are attendance and passing grades. Anything else requires buy-in from the kid. You have to show them what's in it for them. Aside from casually monitoring their school work and providing whatever supports you can (only if they agree) such as your assistance, tutoring, help with study skills, etc., you'll need to step back and act detached. Otherwise the whole mess can backfire on you---badly.

On the positive side, school is a great place to develop interests, but the ultimate role that school plays is to help develop the teen's identity. And a teen will go through many identities before they figure out who they are and what they love to do.

On the other hand, school can feel like a battlefield for kids who've had attachment issues or trauma. They often haven't developed the academic skills they need and they're reluctant to ask for help. These kids need a lot more supports than they're usually given. Hurt kids also lack a future orientation, and many don't even think they have a future, so why care. At an age when it's normal to be confused over identity issues, an unsuccessful teen will feel it even more keenly.

So let's look at a few things parents should keep in mind regarding their teen and school performance.

- Rule 1. Don't get more invested in a teen's education than he is. (of course it's only natural that you chew on your nails behind closed doors!).
- Rule 2. Don't insist on academic excellence. That's up to the teen.
- Rule 3. It's vital to teach your teen why failing is not shameful. There's evidence that we learn more from our failures, so Teflon-coat your teen against seeing it as a reflection of him. Make lots of mistakes yourself, talk about them and *laugh!*
- Rule 4. Your ultimate goal is having a child who loves learning in areas that excite his interests. Make sure you find those interests. So take the pressure off. Many kids who don't do well in high school find their stride later. If we make school nothing more than a grind, we're showing them that learning is never fun.

Let's look at some parent/teen dialogues regarding school achievement.

Example of a **bad** conversation:

Teen: (throwing textbook across the room) I hate this stupid crap! Who the hell cares what the capital of Uzbekistan is! This sucks!

Parent: (looking grim and determined) **You never throw a book!** Go pick it up immediately. When I was a kid I had to walk 10 miles to borrow a book!

Teen: So? What's the big deal about a stupid useless book!

Parent: Get back to work. You know you have to get an A on this test to pull up your B grade from last semester. How are you going to get into MIT with a B?

Teen: What's the capital of Uzbekistan got to do with MIT? I'm never gonna use this stupid crap!

Parent: Listen kid, your mother and I have scrimped and saved since you were born so you could go to MIT to be a rocket scientist! Now memorize the capital of Uzbekistan! I'll accept nothing less than an A, or else!

Teen: You know what Dad? You can shove MIT! I don't want to be a rocket scientist, I wanna be a plumber. In fact, now that I think of it, I've always liked plumbers! You can spend your money on "plumber school!" How's that?

Parent: (about to go into convulsions) You are not! No son of mine is going to be a plumber!! Are you trying to humiliate me?

Teen: (crashing out the door) You're crazy! I am so outta here!

(Well, someone needs therapy and it isn't the teen.)

Let's try this again and notice the use of paradoxical parenting strategies:

Teen: (throwing textbook across the room) I hate this crap!

Parent: I can see that. What's up?

Teen: They want me to memorize the capital of Uzbekistan! Who gives a crap?! This stuff is so boring and useless! I'm never going to use this!

Parent: (Knowing that studies show most people forget what they learned in high school because of it's irrelevance) I agree. It is boring and useless.

Teen: (in shock) What! You agree with me? Then why do it?

Parent: Think of it as a game board. You've got to get to the end to get the prize.

Teen: Then what?

Parent: The prize is that you can go and learn about what you *really* like.

Teen: I cannot believe you agree with me that school is stupid and boring! My own Dad! You're kidding, right?

Parent: No I'm not. I really do agree with you. It's all a waste of time.

Teen: Well—maybe not all of it. I like math and my tech class is okay---

Parent: Oh yeah? What could you do with math and technology? Have you ever thought about it?

Teen: Yeah, a little. What would be really awesome is to design new apps. I have lots of ideas about technology. You know, I love stuff like that.

Parent: Awesome! Think about school this way; it's your ticket to get what you really want to do in your life.

Teen: Yeah, I guess. But I hate this crap about Uzbekistan.

Parent: (chuckling) I don't blame you. You won't be in high school forever, pal. Live with it for now.

Teen: Yeah, I guess so, but I really hate it.....Dad, what did you want to be when you were my age?

Let's compare the two conversations. What do you notice in each?

o get into MIT with a B?