



Middle school achievement now more on the student

Question of the Week: Monday, Aug. 30, 2010 United Feature Syndicate
I've always been involved in our kids' elementary classrooms. My older daughter, Anya, started middle school, and it's hard to communicate with five teachers! Plus, Anya says it's not "cool" for me to volunteer anymore. Shouldn't middle-school parents be involved more than ever?

Answer:

Stay connected, but do it differently than in elementary school. That's the message from Harvard professor Dr. Nancy Hall, co-author of "Families, Schools and the Adolescent" (Teachers College Press, 2009). Hall's research suggests that the activities you're used to -- overseeing homework completion, visiting school, attending events and volunteering -- do no harm but only moderately boost achievement.

Twice as effective in improving middle-school performance, says Hall, are the things you do at home to encourage what Hall calls "academic socialization."

These include setting clear expectations for Anya's academic achievement and communicating them frequently; discussing different learning strategies, ways to study and organize work so that she knows how to switch gears if she gets stuck on one path; helping her connect what she's learning in school with things she's interested in outside the classroom.

Focus her on future goals. Discuss how to prepare for high school opportunities such as trips, service clubs, internships or AP courses. Discuss careers she might be thinking about, and put her in touch with people who can guide her. For example, if she wants to be a vet, show her that success requires strong science, math, organizational and communications skills, as well as a love of animals. Encourage her to interview vets on their high school and college choices and to volunteer in an animal shelter.

Middle school is the time for parents to shift responsibility for academic success to their children, says Joe Bruzzese, former middle school teacher and author of a terrific book, "A Parent's Guide to the Middle School Years" (Celestial Arts, 2009).

While it is important for you to establish a relationship with Anya's teachers, Bruzzese

advises making it her responsibility to do a "two-minute" check in every few weeks. "Adolescents yearn for independence," says Bruzzese, and these informal progress reports put them in charge of talking with their teachers about their progress.

The "check in" goes like this: Anya tells her teacher she'd like to discuss how she's doing in class. She asks when is a good time to talk. Middle school teachers' schedules are tightly packed, so advise her to be politely persistent.

Bruzzese suggests she begin the conversation by asking, "Am I missing any assignments or projects? How can I improve my grade in your class? How can I challenge myself in this quarter?"

The two-minute check-in yields several benefits, says Bruzzese. Anya will gain insight and information and show her teachers she's ready to be responsible for her schoolwork. As teachers anticipate these informal conversations, they'll give more detailed, ongoing feedback. You and Anya will avoid "progress report" shock when each period's report arrives.

Best of all, says Bruzzese, they demonstrate Anya's genuine interest in school. "Teachers love to work with students who show a passion for learning."

Do you have a question about your child's education? E-mail it to Leanna@aplusadvice.com. Leanna Landsmann is an education writer who began her career as a classroom teacher. She has served on education commissions, visited classrooms in 49 states to observe best practices, and founded Principal for a Day in New York City.

Copyright 2010, United Feature Syndicate, Inc., Monday, Aug. 30, 2010