

# HOW PARENTS CAN HELP THEIR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT WITH THEIR LEARNING

*Whilst parents are often involved in their teenager's sporting, musical or dramatic activities, parental support on the sidelines of their adolescent child's studies can also be beneficial, particularly to academic performance. Research shows that children are more likely to succeed if parents are involved in their learning. Hendersen and Mapp (2002) found that 'the more families support their children's learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education'.*

## **Strategies for Parents to help their secondary school aged students achieve their potential:**

- **WORK ENVIRONMENT**

The obvious logistical support is providing a quiet, open space with few distractions for working at home. Involve your student in creating this space. Workspace tools for effective learning include a desk, ergonomic chair, a noticeboard and good lighting, as well as a shelf or drawers for folders, reference books and non-essential work. Spending time to discuss options, alternatives and reasons for establishing a dedicated work area is valuable.

- **BREAKFAST**

Importantly students need to start the day with a nutritional breakfast, as this will increase energy, attention, concentration and memory, particularly if the breakfast includes grains, fibre, protein and is low in sugar. Parents can facilitate this good start to the day as part of the daily routine. Similarly, nutritious snacks and lunch will enable the student to remain more focused throughout the day.

- **ORGANISATION**

A calendar for each term should be created and displayed near your student's desk and in prominent thoroughfares in the home, such as the kitchen. The calendar or term planner should include: all co-curricular and social activities, as well as assignment, assessment or test dates. This helps the student see the big picture of commitments and not simply a weekly or daily version as school diaries or digital devices usually allow. The student, and parent, can clearly see when heavy workload periods occur, and social activities can be tailored to ensure work has a priority. It's a good idea to sit down with your student every couple of days to discuss the schedule ahead, when the work can be slotted in, and how a parent could help by reducing family commitments, or by setting boundaries with social engagements. Regularly sitting down to discuss workloads and tasks due, reviewing activities and schedules can help students learn to be more productive and organized.

- **FILING SYSTEMS**

Master folders should be set up for each subject at home, so after each topic is completed the notes can be placed in appropriate categories. This also gives students somewhere to file completed tests and assignments. Most students carry their current notes to school each day, but naturally as the term and year progresses it's impossible (and risky if misplaced) to have all worknotes in one folder. Students may also need help organising the files on their computers and devices (although it is likely that many students know more about this than their parents!).

- **ROUTINES**

Helping your student to establish routines can add an element of calm to each day. Simple routines such as having the school bag packed and uniform ready before going to bed each night, can eliminate unnecessary angst in the morning. A useful addition to the evening schedule is to determine the next afternoon's program: when homework and daily revision will be done around co-curricular activities, dinner etc. This can give a clear direction when your student comes home each day. Some students find that having regular times set aside for schoolwork each day helps them to develop a routine of working. Other students will need to make a plan each afternoon as their schedule changes each day.

- **TIMETABLE**

Know your student's timetable, so it's easy and relevant to ask "What were you doing in Science today?" A specific question can often open a conversation where your student not only shares but, in doing so, reinforces what was learned which increases memory (and understanding) of the lesson.

- **SUBJECTS**

Know your student's subjects, and become aware of the topics covered each year in those subjects. 'Improved educational outcomes result from a genuine interest and active engagement from parents' (OECD 2011), so knowing the topics could allow parents to expose students to different dimensions of the subject through film, books, contemporary issues, the Internet, exhibitions, travel etc. Students appreciate, perhaps subconsciously, that the parent is truly interested in their learning and *what* they are learning. Some schools will give students a course outline and the state's educational body will also have a website where parents should be able to access the syllabus (what will be taught) for each subject.

- **ASSIGNMENTS**

A helpful strategy is to keep abreast of when assignments are given. Talking to your student about assignment expectations, drawing out their understanding of the topic, criteria and parts of the assignment can instill a deeper appreciation. It's good to probe and ask more about the assignment topic with questions, as this could give your student other perspectives, and once more, help the student feel the parent has a real interest in learning. When planning the workload for an assignment, parents can help break the work into chunks or parts. This can reduce the sense of the overwhelming enormity of the task and the task can be broken into manageable parts, which are then scheduled to be done into the calendar or diary.

- **TESTS**

Similarly, parents can help students prepare for tests by quizzing them, asking for concepts to be explained or helping write practice tests. Explain to your student that memory and understanding can increase if the brain is using multiple processes to use information, such as writing, reading, speaking, drawing or singing! When tests are returned, focus on what was achieved and note concepts to revise. If students know parents are not solely focused on the grade, but also on the process, and that tests (and assignments) are tools to learn, intrinsic motivation can develop.

- **CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

There comes a time in secondary school when some co-curricular activities need to be cut for a period of time, as academic demands increase or the student is juggling too much. It's unlikely students will initiate severing an activity so it's generally up to parents. Students, like adults, can give more to an activity when there is time, and academic work needs to be one of the main priorities during the school terms. Parents will often be the first to notice when their student is over-loaded (and it varies for each individual), when school work is rushed or dismissed, when their student is tired or out-of-sorts, when they have no "downtime" on weeknights. Everyone needs *some* downtime, even if it is only for an hour of escapist freedom.

- **TECHNOLOGY**

Parents need to be the "bad cop" when it comes to limiting computer games, or other digital device activity. It is advisable that devices are not in bedrooms when students go to bed. However, rather than dictating the rule, parents should talk about the need for solid, sufficient sleep for the brain to re-wire neural pathways to consolidate the day's learning. Lack of sleep can lead to reduced concentration and attention span, delayed response time, and decreased short-term memory. Rules for technology (including TV viewing) should be developed together if possible so there is agreement about the approach.

- **COMMUNICATION WITH THE SCHOOL**

It's now fully acknowledged that together, parents and teachers play a dual role in educating students, so it's vital to maintain open communication with the school. It's important for parents to keep abreast of school information conveyed through newsletters, school portals, emails and so on, as it's not uncommon for a student to miss information at school. This allows parents to flag or discuss with their student what the school is offering, advising or sharing. For example: a newsletter may alert parents to additional "maths tutorials" offered before school, or "homework help sessions" after school. This reinforces again that the parent *is* interested in their student's learning. It is equally important for parents to advise the school of extraneous issues happening at home, as this would give teachers an understanding of atypical behaviour, work ethic, concentration etc. An illness or death in the family (including a family pet), parent absence for more than a fortnight, or challenging issues on the home front, are examples of when parents should contact the school. Moderated assignments, extensions on homework, or relaxed detentions could result, and allow the student to resume their learning journey without additional stress. However secondary school students also need to gain skills and strategies to deal with life's variables, and to become independent, confident problem solvers. So it's also important for parents to give students opportunities to manage issues at school themselves. Parents should not approach the school to "fix" every minor problem, such as a student missing a page in an exam which lowered his grade, or a student feeling they had been maligned by a peer. Both these instances are life-lessons to learn from or solve, so parents should encourage students to approach teachers themselves when needed.

*The strategies above should be developed with the child, and hopefully will be independently adopted by the student when they reach their final years at school. It's worthwhile noting that each point is related to the child's learning, as this sends a very positive message that the parent is engaged and interested in the learning process.*

[OECD 2011] PISA in Focus, (2011). *What can parents do to help their children succeed in school?*. [online] Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/49012097.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jan. 2015].

[Henderson and Mapp 2002] Henderson, A. & Mapp, K. (2002). A new wave of evidence. The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). Available: <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jan 2015]