

Back to School

A guide for parents of high school students



Ask Uncle Mike Books

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For Parents

School and Family Life

Back to School

Whether their summer was jam-packed with activities or filled with complaints about being bored with nothing to do, kids often have a tough time making the back-to-school transition.

Battling the Butterflies

As with any new or potentially unsettling situation — like starting school for the first time or entering a new grade or new school — allow kids time to adjust. Remind them that everyone feels a little nervous about the first day of school and that it will all become an everyday routine in no time.

Emphasize the positive things about going back to school, such as hanging out with old friends, meeting new classmates, buying cool school supplies, getting involved in sports and other activities, and showing off the new duds (or snazzy accessories if your child has to wear a uniform).

It's also important to talk to kids about what worries them and offer reassurance: Are they afraid they won't make new friends or get along with their teachers? Is the thought of schoolwork stressing them out? Are they worried about the bully from last year?

Consider adjusting your own schedule to make the transition smoother. If possible, it's especially beneficial for parents to be home at the end of the schoolday for the first week. But

many working moms and dads just don't have that flexibility. Instead, try to arrange your evenings so you can give kids as much time as they need, especially during those first few days.

If your child is starting a new school, contact the school before the first day to arrange a visit. And ask if your child can be paired up with another student, or "buddy," and if you can be connected with other new parents. This will help both of you with the adjustment to new people and surroundings. Some schools give kids maps to use until things become more familiar.

To help ease back-to-school butterflies, try to transition kids into a consistent school-night routine a few weeks before school starts. Also make sure that they:

- get enough sleep (establish a reasonable bedtime so that they'll be well-rested and ready to learn in the morning)
- eat a healthy breakfast (they're more alert and do better in school if they eat a good breakfast every day)
- write down the need-to-know info to help them remember details such as their locker combination, what time classes and lunch start and end, their homeroom and classroom numbers, teachers' and/or bus drivers' names, etc.
- use a wall calendar or personal planner to record when assignments are due, tests will be given, extracurricular practices and rehearsals will be held, etc.
- have them organize and set out what they need the night before (homework and books should be put in their backpacks by the door and clothes should be laid out in their bedrooms)

Although it's normal to be anxious in any new situation, a few kids develop real physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches, associated with the start of school. If you're concerned that your child's worries go beyond the normal back-to-school jitters, speak with your child's doctor, teacher, or school counsellor.

Back-to-School To-Do's

Parents themselves can be a little nervous about the first day of school, especially if they're seeing their little one off for the first time or if their child will be attending a new school.

To help make going to school a little easier on everyone, here's a handy checklist:

What to wear, bring, and eat:

Does the school have a dress code? Are there certain things they can't wear?

Will kids need a change of clothes for PE or art class?

Do your kids have a safe backpack that's lightweight, with two wide, padded shoulder straps, a waist belt, a padded back, and multiple compartments?

Do kids know not to overload their backpacks and to stow them safely at home and school?

Will your kids buy lunch at school or bring it from home? If they buy a school lunch, how much will it cost per day or per week? Do you have a weekly or monthly menu of what will be served?

Have you stocked up on all of the necessary school

supplies? (Letting kids pick out a new lunchbox and a set of pens, pencils, binders, etc., helps get them geared up for going back to school.)

Medical issues:

Have your kids received all necessary immunizations?

Have you filled out any forms that the school has sent home, such as emergency contact and health information forms?

Do the school nurse and teachers know about any medical conditions your child may have, particularly food allergies, asthma, diabetes, and any other conditions that may need to be managed during the school day?

Have you made arrangements with the school nurse to administer any medications your child might need?

Do the teachers know about any conditions that may affect how your child learns? For example, kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be seated in the front of the room, and a child with vision problems should sit near the board.

Transportation and safety:

Do you know what time school starts and how your kids will get there?

If they're riding the bus, do you know where the bus stop is and what time they'll be picked up and dropped off?

Do you know where the school's designated drop-off and pick-up area is?

Are there any regulations on bicycles or other vehicles, such as scooters?

Have you gone over traffic safety information, stressing the importance of crossing at the crosswalk (never between parked cars or in front of the school bus), waiting for the bus to stop before approaching it, and understanding traffic signals and signs?

If your child walks or bikes to school, have you mapped out a safe route? Does your child understand that it's never OK to accept rides, candy, or any other type of invitation from strangers?

What About After School?

Figuring out where kids will go after school can be a challenge, especially if both parents work. Depending on a child's age and maturity, you may need to arrange for after-school transportation and care.

It's important for younger kids and preteens to have some sort of supervision from a responsible adult. If you can't be there as soon as school's out, ask a reliable, responsible relative, friend, or neighbour to help out. If they're to be picked up after school, make sure your kids know where to meet you or another caregiver.

Although it might seem like kids who are approaching adolescence are becoming mature enough to start watching themselves after school, even kids as old as 11 or 12 may not be ready to be left alone.

If your kids or teens are home alone in the afternoons, it's important to establish clear rules:

Set a time when they're expected to arrive home from school.

Have them check in with you or a neighbor as soon as they get home.

Specify who, if anyone at all, is allowed in your home when you're not there.

Make sure they know to **never** open the door for strangers.

Make sure they know what to do in an emergency.

To ensure that kids are safe and entertained after school, look into after-school programs. Some are run by private businesses, others are organized by the schools themselves, places of worship, police athletic leagues, YMCAs, community and youth centres, and parks and recreation departments.

Getting involved in after-school activities:

- offers kids a productive alternative to watching TV or playing video games
- provides some adult supervision when parents can't be around after school
- helps develop kids' interests and talents
- introduces kids to new people and helps them develop their social skills
- gives kids a feeling of involvement
- keeps kids out of trouble

Be sure to look into the child-staff ratio at any after-school program (in other words, make sure that there are enough adults per child) and that the facilities are safe, indoors and out. And kids should know when and who will pick them up

when school lets out and when the after-school program ends.

Also, make sure after-school commitments allow kids enough time to complete school assignments. Keep an eye on their schedules to make sure there's enough time for both schoolwork and home life.

Helping Teens Take Charge of Their Health Care

Preparing kids for independence and adulthood brings many challenges for parents — teaching teens to drive, negotiating later curfews, researching colleges, discussing tough topics, to name just a few.

Among these hurdles is helping teens start managing their own health care. It can be hard to let go — after all, mom and dad have been handling the doctors' appointments, prescriptions, immunizations, and countless other medical concerns since their kids were born.

But it's important to guide teens toward taking on this responsibility. After all, parents won't always be around to manage their children's health care — and in most cases, once their kids become adults, legally they won't be allowed to.

And keep in mind that the decisions made in the teen years about things like alcohol, drugs, healthy eating, exercise, sex, and smoking can have long-term consequences — even if teens feel invincible. Becoming more invested in their own health care lets teens learn more about and understand the potential outcomes of choices they make now.

At what age are teens able to start taking some control? It can vary: factors like a teen's maturity level, health issues, and ability to keep track of the details all play a role, as does a parent's willingness to relinquish control.

So, how can parents start handing over the reins? It can begin by talking about medical topics in age-appropriate ways

with their kids; for instance, discussing medications they take and why, or teaching kids with chronic conditions ways to help care for their medical equipment. Maybe your teenage son or daughter is ready to handle filling and refilling his or her own prescriptions.

It's important for moms and dads to let their adolescents have some private time to talk with the health care provider. During puberty and the teen years, kids are likely to have questions or issues that they're not comfortable discussing with a parent in the room. (But be assured that a doctor who feels that a patient who might be at risk for self-harm or harming another will alert a parent.)

If you think your child might need additional help with teen issues, consider having your son or daughter meet with an adolescent medicine specialist. These doctors not only are well-versed in the care of teens' physical health problems but also have additional training in helping their patients deal with risky behaviours and mental health concerns.

It's also wise to talk about health insurance and medical records to older teens. Although young adults can stay on their parents' plan until age 26 under the health care reform bill, many will be on their own well before that — and eventually all will have to know how to navigate the insurance system and keep track of their records.

Creating a Reading-friendly Home

A home filled with reading material is a good way to help kids become enthusiastic readers. What kind of books should you have? Ask your kids about their interests. If they're too young to have a preference, your local librarian can offer suggestions about age-appropriate books.

Here are some other tips:

Keep a varied selection. Collect board books or books with mirrors and different textures for babies. Older kids will enjoy variety: fiction, nonfiction, and poetry plus dictionaries and other reference books.

Kids can understand stories they might not be able to read on their own. If a more challenging book interests your child, make it something to read together. Younger kids can look at illustrations in books and ask questions as they follow along.

And don't limit reading material to books. Kids might also enjoy:

- magazines (for kids)
- audio books
- postcards from relatives
- photo albums or scrapbooks
- newspapers
- comic books
- the Internet

Keep reading material handy. Keep sturdy books with other toys for easy exploration. Books near the changing table and high chair can be helpful distractions for younger kids at appropriate moments. Plastic books can even go in the bathtub. Keep books next to comfy chairs and sofas where you cuddle up so you can read after feedings and naps.

Create a special reading place. As kids grow, keep age-appropriate books and magazines on shelves they can reach in their favorite hangouts around the house. Make these shelves appealing and keep them organized. Place some of the books with the covers facing out so they're easy to spot. Put a basket full of books and magazines next to their favorite places to sit. Create a cozy reading corner, and encourage kids to use it by setting up "reading corner time" each day.

Keep it appealing. Make sure reading areas have good lighting. Change the materials often — add seasonal books, rotate different magazines, and include books that relate to what kids are interested in or studying in school. Decorate the corner with your child's artwork or writing. Place a CD or tape player nearby for audio books.

Encourage kids to create the reading. Set up a writing and art center and encourage kids to make books, posters, or collages that they decorate with their own pictures and writing. Kids love to read things they've written themselves or to share their creations with family and friends.

Think About Atmosphere

Other ways to encourage kids to read:

Give your child quiet time every day to read or write.

Limit time kids spend in front of a screen (including TV, computer, and video games) to help ensure that they have time for reading.

Read together. Offer to read a book aloud, or ask your child to read to you from a favorite magazine. Make a habit of sitting together while you each read your own books, sharing quiet time together.

Everyday Reading Opportunities

Finding time to read is important to developing literacy skills for all kids. And there are many easy and convenient ways to make reading a part of each day — even when it's tough to find time to sit down with a book.

Finding the Reading Moments

Car trips, errands, and waits in checkout lines and the doctor's office are all opportunities for reading. Keep books or magazines in your car, diaper bag, or backpack to pull out whenever you're going to be in one place for a while. Even if you can't finish a book, read a few pages or discuss some of the pictures. Encourage older kids to bring favorite books and magazines along wherever you go.

Other reading moments to take advantage of throughout the day:

- in the morning, before breakfast or getting dressed

- after dinner, when kids are relaxed
- bath time (with plastic, waterproof books)
- bedtime

Reading opportunities are everywhere you go. Read signs aloud to your baby while you're driving. Ask your preschooler to "read" pictures on boxes at the store and tell you about them. And have older kids tell you what's on the shopping list.

Even routine tasks around the house, like cooking, can provide reading moments. With younger kids, read recipes aloud; ask older kids to help by telling you how much flour to measure. Give your child a catalog to read while you look at the mail. Ask relatives to send your child letters or e-mail and read them together.

Even when you're trying to get things done, you can encourage reading. If your child complains of boredom when you're cleaning, for instance, ask him or her to read aloud from a favorite book to you while you work. Younger kids can tell you about the pictures in their favorite books.

And make sure kids get some time to spend quietly with books, even if it means bypassing or cutting back on other activities, like time in front of the TV or playing video games.

Most important, be a reader yourself. Kids who see their parents reading are likely to join them and become readers, too!

Finding the Right Read

Books make great gifts for kids, but it's not always easy to find reading material that fits a child's interests, maturity, or reading level. Before you set off to the bookstore or library, here are some guidelines.

Babies and Toddlers

Until kids are about 2 years old, think tactile and short. Thick board books with bright colors; bold, simple pictures; and few words are ideal. These books may include interactive elements, such as parts that move, items that invite touching, and mirrors.

Books with different textures, fold-out books, or vinyl or cloth books also are appropriate for babies and toddlers. Books that can be propped up or wiped clean are excellent choices. Look for books about bedtime, baths, or mealtime or about saying hello or goodbye, especially if they're illustrated with photos of children. And if peek-a-boo is your little one's favorite game, books with flaps are a perfect choice.

Many older toddlers (2- and 3-year-olds) start to understand how reading works and will love repetitive or rhyming books that let them finish sentences or "read" to themselves. From colors to numbers to how to get dressed, older toddlers love books that reinforce what they are learning every day. And if you have a budding ballerina or animal enthusiast on your hands, look for books about these (or other) passions.

Preschoolers

Around the time kids are 3 or 4, they start to enjoy books that tell stories. Their increasing attention spans and ability to understand more words make picture books with more

complicated plots a good choice. Stories with an element of fantasy, from talking animals to fairies, will spark their imagination, as will books about distant times and places.

Try nonfiction books about a single topic of interest that the child likes. Since many kids this age are learning the alphabet and numbers, books with letters and counting are ideal. Those dealing with emotions, manners, or going to school can help kids navigate some of the tricky transitions that happen during this time.

School-Age Kids

For kids entering school and starting to read, look for easy-to-read books with vocabularies they know so that they can read them independently. Many book publishers indicate the reading level of books on the cover and may include a key to help you understand those different levels. You can also choose books that are above a child's reading level to read aloud.

Look for books that relate to kids' interests but also encourage exploration of new interests through reading about unfamiliar subjects. For example, if a child is interested in cowboys, look for books that talk about the days of the old west, what cowboys are like today, or historical fiction set in the 19th century.

Kids of All Ages

All kids love to giggle, so books of silly poems, jokes, or songs are sure to be a hit. Collections of fairy tales, children's stories, poetry, or nursery rhymes offer a wide variety within a single book. Wordless books with imaginative illustrations can be fun even for kids who know how to read. Looking at pictures and creating a story develops imagination and broad

thinking.

And don't forget the books and stories you loved as a child. Chances are, you had good reasons to love them — and your child will, too.

Helping Reluctant Readers

For many kids, reading just doesn't come easily. Some kids have difficulty connecting letters and their corresponding sounds. Others have yet to discover that special enchanting story that grabs the imagination and shows just how fun reading can be. For all kids, though, being at ease with letters, their sounds, and words is an important foundation for learning throughout life.

Here are a few simple ways to help kids become eager readers:

Start with your child's picks. Comics or joke books may not be your first choice to cultivate literacy, but they can motivate kids to read.

Don't worry that these texts may not be substantial enough. They can play important roles in helping kids understand some fundamentals, like how events take place in a sequence and stories are laid out. They also help build vocabulary and show that books can be visually appealing. Once your child becomes comfortable with the experience of reading, you can encourage other literature selections with a variety of challenging content.

Read and reread and reread. Many kids reach for the same books over and over again. That's OK. Through repetition kids can master the text and eventually sail through it with ease and confidence. Each new reading of the book may also help them understand it just a little better. And that positive experience may inspire them to give new books a try.

Read aloud. By reading aloud, you can help build your child's

vocabulary, show that you enjoy reading for fun, and help your child connect sounds with letters on the page. Above all, reading aloud provides together time that you'll both enjoy. And it doesn't have to end once kids get older. The comfort of a parent's voice and undivided attention is something kids never outgrow.

Create opportunities to read and write beyond the pages. Provide kids with many rewarding chances to read every day. Write notes and leave them on a pillow, in a lunchbox, or in a pocket. Ask friends and relatives to send postcards and letters. Leave magnetic letters and words on the refrigerator, and you may find kids spontaneously creating words, sentences, and stories. On road trips or errands, play word games that strengthen language skills. You might try "I Spy" ("I spy something that starts with an 'a' ...") or games where you pick a category like "food" and then everyone has to name foods that begin with a certain letter. Kids often like reading signs seen while you're on the road, like those on restaurants.

Get help if you're worried. If you're concerned about your child's ability or willingness to read, don't wait to get help. Consult with your child's doctor or teacher. If they share your concern, they may be able to suggest resources to help your child become an eager reader.

Your Child's Handwriting

Before you read this article, quickly write the answer to this question: What is your favourite color?

This might've seemed like an automatic and mindless task, but your body and mind had to work closely together to complete a series of steps in the right order. You had to pick up a pen or pencil, hold it steady, remember what color you wanted to use as an answer, think about what letters appear in the word and in what order, move your wrist and hand in the right way to shape the letters, follow what you wrote with your eyes, and apply the proper amount of pressure to the paper.

Learning to Write

Even though we do it every day, writing is one of the most complex tasks that humans engage in, involving both motor and critical-thinking skills. It's not surprising that learning to write is a process that takes years to complete. It also happens in order, with each skill building on the last.

As with reading, kids are aware of writing from infancy, especially when they're exposed to it regularly. By being read to and seeing you write, your child begins to understand at a very young age that written words have meaning.

It's only a matter of time before kids start trying to create words on their own. All children start writing by scribbling, an activity most toddlers enjoy. To do it, they must use coordination to hold the crayon, keep the paper still, and apply enough pressure to make a mark on the paper.

As time goes on, with lots of practice, they'll start to realize

that not only can they make marks to create a pattern, but by repeating the same movements, they can make the pattern again.

Practicing Writing

At around 3 or 4 years old, kids may start to practice writing, and included among the scribbles may be recognizable letters. For example, you may notice your child writes all of the letters of his or her name in a seemingly random way on different parts of the piece of paper. That's because kids learn to write individual letters before they learn how to put them together to form a word.

As they continue to read and develop an understanding of how words work, kids start to understand how to group letters into words. Between kindergarten and first grade, most learn to put letters together into words and will use these words to label pictures that they draw. Kids this age usually use only capital letters and will not include spaces between words. They will also use "invented spelling," writing words with no vowels (for example, BBYDLL for baby doll).

Eventually, with practice and formal schooling, kids learn what are called the conventions of print — writing from left to right, the difference between uppercase and lowercase letters, how to put spaces between words, and how to use correct spelling in most instances.

As kids get older and develop more motor control, their handwriting becomes smaller and neater. Between second and fourth grade, kids learn to write in cursive and will apply the conventions of handwriting automatically.

Importance of Handwriting

Even as we move to a society driven by keyboards, kids still need to learn to write by hand. Handwriting is so much more than simply putting letters on a page; it is a key part of learning to read and communicate. In fact, experts think that developing writing skills reinforces reading skills and vice versa.

In order to read, a child needs to understand that letters stand for sounds and that the sounds are put together to make words. Learning to write letters is an important part of this understanding.

When preschoolers start imitating the letters that they see around them, they show that they understand the connection between the sounds they hear and the words they see on the page. When kindergartners use "invented" spelling, they're practicing writing words the way they sound, which helps them as they learn to read. When first-graders use words to create a poem or write about an experience, they're experimenting with language and sharing their stories with those around them.

As kids grow older and start to use a keyboard, the motor control and communication skills they've gained through handwriting will help them become more successful writers because they'll know how to transfer their thoughts into words.

Handwriting is also important because kids are required to use it daily in school from kindergarten on. Children who struggle with the mechanics of handwriting may have trouble taking notes or tests or completing their schoolwork. This can affect both their self-esteem and their attitude toward school.

Encouraging Handwriting

An important part of helping kids develop early literacy skills is giving them chances to practice. As soon as your child is old enough to scribble (as early as 1 year old for some kids) offer some fat, chunky crayons or markers and a big piece of paper and let him or her experiment.

As your child grows older, create a special art center with lots of paper (you can bring scrap paper home from work or save junk mail) and many different kinds of art supplies like markers, crayons, colored pencils, and paint and brushes.

You can even encourage your child to practice writing and drawing while you're outside, providing sidewalk chalk or a bucket of water and a brush to "paint" on the pavement. The more practice kids get using their hands in this way, the more they'll develop the muscles, skills, and coordination necessary for forming letters.

As your child enters school and starts practicing writing there, continue to find ways to practice at home too. Suggest writing letters and thank-you notes to friends and family. Ask for help writing a list or recipe. Buy a notebook to use as a journal and suggest that your child spend time at the end of each day writing in it.

If your child's handwriting continues to be messy and hard to read even after formal instruction at school, try these tips:

Help your child take it slow. Many kids struggle with writing because they try to do it quickly. Encourage your child to take time to form the letters carefully.

Explain that mistakes happen. Teach your child how to use an eraser.

Reinforce proper letter formation. Find out from your child's teacher how he or she should be forming letters, and then encourage your child to practice writing using those patterns. Using lined paper can be helpful.

Make sure the pencil is properly positioned. Ideally your child will use what is called a tripod grasp. This means the pencil should rest near the base of the thumb, held in place with the thumb, index, and middle fingers. Plastic pencil grips sold at office supply stores may help if your child has trouble holding a pencil properly.

Expose your child to lots of words. You can do this by reading regularly together, pointing out words that surround you (such as street signs or product labels), and by hanging up examples of your child's writing around the house.

It is important for all kids, even those who struggle to write, to practice using their handwriting. It is also certainly OK to have them start practicing keyboarding skills, even at a young age. But unless an occupational therapist recommends it, kids should not use a computer with a keyboard to complete schoolwork that their peers are completing by hand.

Signs of Handwriting Problems

Kids develop at different rates, and just like adults, handwriting varies greatly among them. Some kids have trouble learning the direction letters go in; others struggle to write neatly or use cursive writing.

Sometimes writing problems can be a sign of other issues such as developmental delay or learning disabilities. Often these problems have multiple symptoms, with writing being only one component.

Conditions that can affect a child's ability to write include:

- memory problems that prevent a child from remembering spelling, grammar, or punctuation rules
- language problems that cause difficulty with word pronunciation, spelling, and sentence structure
- visual or sequential ordering problems that cause uneven spacing of words, and inability to make lists or put ideas in order
- dysgraphia, a neurological disorder characterized by writing difficulties (such as distorted letters or misspellings) regardless of reading ability
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Children who have special needs also may have trouble learning to write.

Signs that a child may need additional assistance with learning how to write include:

- a very awkward pencil grip
- illegible handwriting
- difficulty forming letters

- an inability to concentrate and complete writing tasks
- avoiding writing
- many misspelled words
- letters or words that don't follow correct sequence
- incorrect placement of words on the page
- uneven spacing between letters
- a large gap between spoken language and writing ability
- an exceptionally slow and difficult time writing

If your child is struggling with writing, you may choose to have him or her assessed by an occupational therapist. This can help you determine if your child needs actual therapy and tutoring or just some additional writing practice at home.

Learning to read and write is key to success at school and in life. So whether you work together to make a book or spend time on the weekend writing letters to Grandma, when you write with your child, you help him or her develop important skills.

Helping Kids Deal with Bullies

Each day, 10-year-old Seth asked his mom for more and more lunch money. Yet he seemed skinnier than ever and came home from school hungry. It turned out that Seth was handing his lunch money to a fifth-grader, who was threatening to beat him up if he didn't pay.

Kayla, 13, thought things were going well at her new school, since all the popular girls were being so nice to her. But then she found out that one of them had posted mean rumors about her on a website. Kayla cried herself to sleep that night and started going to the nurse's office complaining of a stomachache to avoid the girls in study hall.

Unfortunately, the kind of bullying that Seth and Kayla experienced is widespread. In national surveys, most kids and teens say that bullying happens at school.

A bully can turn something like going to the bus stop or recess into a nightmare for kids. Bullying can leave deep emotional scars that last for life. And in extreme situations, it can culminate in violent threats, property damage, or someone getting seriously hurt.

If your child is being bullied, there are ways to help him or her cope with it on a day-to-day basis *and* lessen its lasting impact. And even if bullying isn't an issue right in your house right now, it's important to discuss it so your kids will be prepared if it does happen.

What Is Bullying?

Most kids have been teased by a sibling or a friend at some point. And it's not usually harmful when done in a playful, friendly, and mutual way, and both kids find it funny. But when teasing becomes hurtful, unkind, and constant, it crosses the line into bullying and needs to stop.

Bullying is intentional tormenting in physical, verbal, or psychological ways. It can range from hitting, shoving, name-calling, threats, and mocking to extorting money and treasured possessions. Some kids bully by shunning others and spreading rumors about them. Others use email, chat rooms, instant messages, social networking websites, and text messages to taunt others or hurt their feelings.

It's important to take bullying seriously and not just brush it off as something that kids have to "tough out." The effects can be serious and affect kids' sense of self-worth and future relationships. In severe cases, bullying has contributed to tragedies, such as school shootings.

Why Kids Bully

Kids bully for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they pick on kids because they need a victim — someone who seems emotionally or physically weaker, or just acts or appears different in some way — to feel more important, popular, or in control. Although some bullies are bigger or stronger than their victims, that's not always the case.

Sometimes kids torment others because that's the way they've been treated. They may think their behaviour is normal because they come from families or other settings where everyone regularly gets angry, shouts, or calls names. Some popular TV shows even seem to promote meanness —

people are "voted off," shunned, or ridiculed for their appearance or lack of talent.

Signs of Bullying

Unless your child tells you about bullying — or has visible bruises or injuries — it can be difficult to figure out if it's happening.

But there are some warning signs. Parents might notice kids acting differently or seeming anxious, or not eating, sleeping well, or doing the things they usually enjoy. When kids seem moodier or more easily upset than usual, or when they start avoiding certain situations, like taking the bus to school, it might be because of a bully.

If you suspect bullying but your child is reluctant to open up, find opportunities to bring up the issue in a more roundabout way. For instance, you might see a situation on a TV show and use it as a conversation starter, asking "What do you think of this?" or "What do you think that person should have done?" This might lead to questions like: "Have you ever seen this happen?" or "Have you ever experienced this?" You might want to talk about any experiences you or another family member had at that age.

Let your kids know that if they're being bullied — or see it happening to someone else — it's important to talk to someone about it, whether it's you, another adult (a teacher, school counsellor, or family friend), or a sibling.

Helping Kids

If your child tells you about a bully, focus on offering comfort and support, no matter how upset you are. Kids are often reluctant to tell adults about bullying because they feel

embarrassed and ashamed that it's happening, or worry that their parents will be disappointed.

Sometimes kids feel like it's their own fault, that if they looked or acted differently it wouldn't be happening. Sometimes they're scared that if the bully finds out that they told, it will get worse. Others are worried that their parents won't believe them or do anything about it. Or kids worry that their parents will urge them to fight back when they're scared to.

Praise your child for being brave enough to talk about it. Remind your child that he or she isn't alone — a lot of people get bullied at some point. Emphasize that it's the bully who is behaving badly — not your child. Reassure your child that you will figure out what to do about it together.

Sometimes an older sibling or friend can help deal with the situation. It may help your daughter to hear how the older sister she idolizes was teased about her braces and how she dealt with it. An older sibling or friend also might be able to give you some perspective on what's happening at school, or wherever the bullying is happening, and help you figure out the best solution.

Take it seriously if you hear that the bullying will get worse if the bully finds out that your child told. Sometimes it's useful to approach the bully's parents. In other cases, teachers or counsellors are the best ones to contact first. If you've tried those methods and still want to speak to the bullying child's parents, it's best to do so in a context where a school official, such as a counsellor, can mediate.

Many states have bullying laws and policies. Find out about the laws in your community. In certain cases, if you have

serious concerns about your child's safety, you may need to contact legal authorities.

Advice for Kids

The key to helping kids is providing strategies that deal with bullying on an everyday basis and also help restore their self-esteem and regain a sense of dignity.

It may be tempting to tell a kid to fight back. After all, you're angry that your child is suffering and maybe you were told to "stand up for yourself" when you were young. And you may worry that your child will continue to suffer at the hands of the bully.

But it's important to advise kids not to respond to bullying by fighting or bullying back. It can quickly escalate into violence, trouble, and someone getting injured. Instead, it's best to walk away from the situation, hang out with others, and tell an adult.

Here are some other strategies to discuss with kids that can help improve the situation and make them feel better:

Avoid the bully and use the buddy system. Use a different bathroom if a bully is nearby and don't go to your locker when there is nobody around. Make sure you have someone with you so that you're not alone with the bully. Buddy up with a friend on the bus, in the hallways, or at recess — wherever the bully is. Offer to do the same for a friend.

Hold the anger. It's natural to get upset by the bully, but that's what bullies thrive on. It makes them feel more powerful. Practice not reacting by crying or looking red or upset. It takes a lot of practice, but it's a useful skill

for keeping off of a bully's radar. Sometimes kids find it useful to practice "cool down" strategies such as counting to 10, writing down their angry words, taking deep breaths or walking away. Sometimes the best thing to do is to teach kids to wear a "poker face" until they are clear of any danger (smiling or laughing may provoke the bully).

Act brave, walk away, and ignore the bully. Firmly and clearly tell the bully to stop, then walk away. Practice ways to ignore the hurtful remarks, like acting uninterested or texting someone on your cell phone. By ignoring the bully, you're showing that you don't care. Eventually, the bully will probably get bored with trying to bother you.

Tell an adult. Teachers, principals, parents, and lunchroom personnel at school can all help stop bullying.

Talk about it. Talk to someone you trust, such as a guidance counsellor, teacher, sibling, or friend. They may offer some helpful suggestions, and even if they can't fix the situation, it may help you feel a little less alone.

Remove the incentives. If the bully is demanding your lunch money, start bringing your lunch. If he's trying to get your music player, don't bring it to school.

Reaching Out

At home you can lessen the impact of the bullying. Encourage your kids to get together with friends that help build their confidence. Help them meet other kids by joining clubs or sports programs. And find activities that can help a child feel confident and strong. Maybe it's a self-defense class like karate or a movement or other gym class.

And just remember: as upsetting as bullying can be for you and your family, lots of people and resources are available to help.

5 Ways to Bully-proof Your Child

Did you know that 25% of public schools report that bullying among kids occurs on a daily or weekly basis? And that 1 in 5 high school students report being bullied in the past year?

The good news is that because bullying has made national headlines, schools and communities (and even celebrities) are taking a strong anti-bullying stance.

You can do your part at home, too. Here are five smart strategies to keep kids from becoming targets — and stop bullying that has already started:

Talk about it. Talk about bullying with your kids and have other family members share their experiences. If one of your kids opens up about being bullied, praise him or her for being brave enough to discuss it and offer unconditional support. Consult with the school to learn its policies and find out how staff and teachers can address the situation.

Remove the bait. If it's lunch money or gadgets that the school bully is after, you can help neutralize the situation by encouraging your child to pack a lunch or go to school gadget-free.

Buddy up for safety. Two or more friends standing at their lockers are less likely to be picked on than a child who is all alone. Remind your child to use the buddy system when on the school bus, in the bathroom, or wherever bullies may lurk.

Keep calm and carry on. If a bully strikes, a kid's best defense may be to remain calm, ignore hurtful remarks, tell the bully to stop, and simply walk away. Bullies thrive on hurting others. A child who isn't easily ruffled has a better chance of staying off a bully's radar.

Don't try to fight the battle yourself. Sometimes talking to a bully's parents can be constructive, but it's generally best to do so in a setting where a school official, such as a counsellor, can mediate.

Helping Homework

Love it or hate it, homework is a very important part of school. To help kids get back into the scholastic swing of things:

Make sure there's a quiet place that's free of distractions to do homework.

Don't let kids watch TV when doing homework or studying. Set rules for when homework and studying need to be done, and when the TV can be turned on and should be turned off. The less TV, the better, especially on school nights.

If your kids are involved in social media, be sure to limit the time spent on these activities during homework time.

Keep text messaging to a minimum to avoid frequent interruptions.

Never do their homework or projects yourself. Instead, make it clear that you're always available to help or answer any questions.

Review homework assignments nightly, not necessarily to check up, but to make sure they understand everything.

Encourage kids to:

develop good work habits from the get-go, like taking notes, writing down assignments, and turning in homework on time
take their time with schoolwork

ask the teacher if they don't understand something
To ensure kids get the most out of school, maintain an open channel of communication with the teachers by e-mailing or talking with them throughout the school year to discuss your kids' academic strengths as well as weaknesses.

Most of all, whether it's the first day of school or the last, make sure your kids know you're there to listen to their feelings and concerns, and that you don't expect perfection — only that they try their best.

Tip Ten Homework Tips

Kids are more successful in school when parents take an active interest in their homework — it shows kids that what they do is important.

Of course, helping with homework shouldn't mean spending hours hunched over a desk. Parents can be supportive by demonstrating study and organization skills, explaining a tricky problem, or just encouraging kids to take a break. And who knows? Parents might even learn a thing or two!

Here are some tips to guide the way:

Know the teachers — and what they're looking for.

Attend school events, such as parent-teacher conferences, to meet your child's teachers. Ask about their homework policies and how you should be involved.

Set up a homework-friendly area. Make sure kids have a well-lit place to complete homework. Keep supplies — paper, pencils, glue, scissors — within reach.

Schedule a regular study time. Some kids work best in the afternoon, following a snack and play period; others may prefer to wait until after dinner.

Help them make a plan. On heavy homework nights or when there's an especially hefty assignment to tackle, encourage your child break up the work into manageable chunks. Create a work schedule for the night if necessary — and take time for a 15-minute break every hour, if possible.

Keep distractions to a minimum. This means no TV, loud music, or phone calls. (Occasionally, though, a phone call to a classmate about an assignment can be helpful.)

Make sure kids do their own work. They won't learn if they don't think for themselves and make their own mistakes. Parents can make suggestions and help with directions. But it's a kid's job to do the learning.

Be a motivator and monitor. Ask about assignments, quizzes, and tests. Give encouragement, check completed homework, and make yourself available for questions and concerns.

Set a good example. Do your kids ever see you diligently balancing your budget or reading a book? Kids are more likely to follow their parents' examples than their advice.

Praise their work and efforts. Post an aced test or art project on the refrigerator. Mention academic achievements to relatives.

If there are continuing problems with homework, get help. Talk about it with your child's teacher. Some kids have trouble seeing the board and may need glasses; others might need an evaluation for a learning problem or attention disorder.

Helping Your Teen with Homework

During the high-school years, homework gets more intense and grades start to matter more.

At the same time, teens face a lot of other big changes. They're adjusting to the physical and emotional effects of puberty, while busy social lives and sports commitments gain importance, and many also take part-time jobs.

Parents can play a crucial role in helping teens handle these challenges and succeed in school by lending a little help, support, and guidance, and by knowing what problems demand their involvement and which ones require them to hang back.

Setting Up Shop

Make sure your teen has a quiet, well-lit, distraction-free place to study. The space should be stocked with paper, pencils, a calculator, dictionary, thesaurus, and any other necessary supplies. It should be away from distractions like TVs, ringing phones, and video games.

Your teen may prefer to retreat to a private space to work rather than study surrounded by parents and siblings. Grant that independence, but check in from time to time to make sure that your teen hasn't gotten distracted.

If your teen needs a computer for assignments, try to set it up in a common space, not in a bedroom, to discourage playing video games, chatting with or emailing friends, or

surfing the Internet for fun during study time. Also consider parental controls, available through your Internet service provider (ISP), and software that blocks and filters any inappropriate material.

Find out which sites teachers are recommending and bookmark them for easy access. Teach your teen how to look for reliable sources of information and double-check any that look questionable.

A Parent's Supporting Role

When it comes to homework, be there to offer support and guidance, answer questions, help interpret assignment instructions, and review the completed work. But resist the urge to provide the right answers or complete assignments.

It can be difficult to see your kids stressed out over homework, especially when there's a test or important deadline looming. But you can help by teaching them the problem-solving skills they need to get through their assignments and offering encouragement as they do.

More tips to help make homework easier for your teen:

Plan ahead. Regularly sit down with your teen to go over class loads and make sure they're balanced. If your teen has a particularly big workload from classes, you may want to see if you can shuffle the daily schedule so that there's a study hall during the day or limit after-school activities. Teachers or guidance counsellors might have some perspective on which classes are going to require more or less work.

Establish a routine. Send the message that schoolwork is a top priority with ground rules like setting a regular

time and place each day for homework to be done. And make it clear that there's no TV, phone calls, video game-playing, etc., until homework is done and checked.

Instill organization skills. No one is born with great organizational skills — they're learned and practiced over time. Most kids first encounter multiple teachers and classrooms in middle school, when organization becomes a key to succeeding. Give your teen a calendar or personal planner to help get organized.

Apply school to the "real world." Talk about how what teens learn now applies outside the classroom, such as the importance of meeting deadlines — as they'll also have to do in the workplace — or how topics in history class relate to what's happening in today's news.

Homework Problems

Especially in the later grades, homework can really start to add up and become harder to manage. These strategies can help:

Be there. You don't have to hover at homework time, but be around in case you're needed. If your son is frazzled by geometry problems he's been trying to solve for hours, for instance, suggest he take a break, maybe by shooting some hoops with you. A fresh mind may be all he needed, but when it's time to return to homework, ask how you can help.

Be in touch with school. Maintain contact with guidance counsellors and teachers throughout the school year to stay informed, especially if your teen is struggling. They'll keep you apprised of what's going on at school and how to help your teen. They can guide you to

tutoring options, offer perspective on course load, and provide guidance on any issues, such as dyslexia, ADHD, or vision or hearing difficulties. You can also be kept in the loop about tests, quizzes, and projects.

Don't forget the study skills. Help your teen develop good study skills — both in class and on homework. No one is born knowing how to study and often those skills aren't stressed in the classroom. When you're helping your teen study for a test, for instance, suggest such strategies as using flashcards to memorize facts or taking notes and underlining while reading.

Encourage students to reach out. Most teachers are available for extra help before or after school, and also might be able to recommend other resources. Encourage your teen to ask for help, if needed, but remember that in school kids are rewarded for knowing the right answers, and no one likes to stand out by saying that they don't have them. Praise your teen's hard work and effort, and ask the guidance counsellor or teachers for resources for support if you need them.

Don't wait for report cards to find out that there are problems at school. The sooner you intervene, the sooner you can help your teen get back on track.

Learning for Life

Make sure your teen knows that you're available if there's a snag, but that it's important to work independently. Encourage effort and determination — not just good grades. Doing so is crucial to motivating kids to succeed in school and in life.

With a little support from parents, homework can be a positive experience for teens and foster lifelong skills they'll

need to succeed in school and beyond.

Getting Involved at Your Child's School

Whether their kids are just starting kindergarten or entering the final year of high school, there are many good reasons for parents to volunteer at school. It's a great way to show your kids that you take an interest in their education, and it sends a positive message that you consider school a worthwhile cause.

Many schools now have to raise their own funds for activities and supplies that once were considered basic necessities, and parent volunteers are essential to organizing and chaperoning these fundraising events and other school activities.

Reasons to Get Involved

Parent volunteers offer a huge resource and support base for the school community while showing their kids the importance of participating in the larger community.

Not only will the school reap the benefits of your involvement — you will, too. By interacting with teachers, administrators, and other parents on a regular basis, you'll gain a firsthand understanding of your child's daily activities. You'll also tap into trends and fads of school life that can help you communicate with your kids as they grow and change (all without intruding on their privacy or personal space).

Even if you haven't been involved in the past, it's never too late to start. In fact, it may be more important than ever to get involved when kids reach secondary school. Some parents may experience "volunteer burnout" by the time their kids enter high school or decide that the schools don't need them

as much then. Many parents who volunteered a lot of time during their kids' elementary years return to full-time careers by the time their kids are teens, so there's often a shortage in the secondary schools.

Finding the Right Opportunity

One of the best starting points for getting involved is a parent-teacher conference or open house. These are usually scheduled early in each school year, and are a great opportunity to approach your child's teachers or principal about volunteer involvement.

If you have something to offer, or if you just want to help out in whatever way you can, discuss the possibilities with teachers, who might arrange something with you personally or direct you to a department head or administrator who can answer your questions and make suggestions. It's also a good idea to join the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or parents' advisory council.

Here are just some of the ways a parent volunteer can help:

- act as a classroom helper
- mentor or tutor students
- help children with special needs
- volunteer in a school computer lab
- help organize, cater, or work at fundraising activities such as bake sales or car washes
- act as a lunchroom or playground monitor
- help to plan and chaperone field trips, track meets, and other events that take place away from the school
- help to plan and chaperone in-school events (dances, proms, or graduation ceremonies)
- organize or assist with a specific club or interest group

(if you have an interest in an activity that isn't currently available to students, offer to help get a group started — for example, a chess club or cycling team)

- assist coaches and gym teachers with sports and fitness programs or work in the school concession stand at sporting events
- help the school administrators prepare grant proposals, letter-writing campaigns, or press releases or provide other administrative assistance
- attend school board meetings
- work as a library assistant or offer to help with story time or reading assistance in the school library
- sew costumes or build sets for theatrical and musical productions
- work with the school band or orchestra or coach music students individually
- help out with visual arts, crafts, and design courses and projects
- hold a workshop for students in trade or technical programs
- spend some time with a specific club or interest group (ask the teacher who sponsors the group)
- volunteer to speak in the classroom or at a career day, if you have a field of expertise that you'd like to share
- supervise or judge experiments at a science fair

Remember that not everyone is suited for the same type of involvement — you may have to "try on" a number a few activities before you find something that feels right. If you're at a loss for how you can help, just ask your child's teacher, who will likely be glad to help you think of something!

Questions to Ask

When you offer to help out, find out how much of a time commitment is expected and if it will be ongoing. Are you going to repair the costumes for the spring musical or will you be expected to keep the drama department's supplies in good condition year-round? Are you chaperoning a track meet or coaching the whole season?

Be sure to ask if any financial costs are associated with your volunteer activities. If you're chaperoning a field trip, for example, find out if you'll be required to pay for transportation and admissions costs. Ask if you'll need to transport students in your own vehicle or if a school bus will be provided.

If you're organizing or helping out with an activity that will take place off the school grounds, be sure to find out if there are any specific school regulations you need to keep in mind or any liability issues you should consider.

Getting Started

Here are a few tips to keep in mind when signing up to volunteer:

Make it clear before you begin just how much time you're willing to volunteer. Even stay-at-home parents don't have an unlimited amount of time to volunteer — many parents have other activities and interests, as well as other kids to care for. Don't be afraid to say **no** if you're being asked to do more than you feel comfortable with — just try to say it early enough so that someone else can be found to take your place, because many trips and activities can't be taken unless the school has a certain number of chaperones

or supervisors.

Start small. Don't offer to coordinate the holiday bake sale, the band recital, and a swim meet all at once. If you've taken on too much, find out if you can delegate some duties to other interested parents.

Don't give your child special treatment or extra attention when you're volunteering at the school.

Follow your child's cues to find out how much interaction works for both of you. Most kids enjoy having their parents involved, but if yours seems uncomfortable with your presence at the school or with your involvement in a favorite activity, consider taking a more behind-the-scenes approach. Make it clear that you aren't there to spy — you're just trying to help out the school.

Get frequent feedback from the teachers and students you're working with.

Find out what's most and least helpful to them, and ask what you can do to make the most of the time you spend on school activities. It's important to keep the lines of communication open among teachers, administrators, students, and volunteers, and to be flexible and responsive as the needs of the students and the school change.

Remember that volunteering not only benefits your kids, but will enrich the classroom, the whole school, and the entire community by providing students with positive interaction, support, and encouragement.

And don't underestimate the students — you may feel that what you have to offer might not interest them or might be above their heads, but you'll probably be pleasantly surprised. You'll help build skills, confidence, and self-esteem that will last beyond their school days.

Help Your Child to Get Organized

Most kids generate a little chaos and disorganization. Yours might flit from one thing to the next — forgetting books at school, leaving towels on the floor, and failing to finish projects once started.

You'd like them to be more organized and to stay focused on tasks, such as homework. Is it possible?

Yes! A few kids seem naturally organized, but for the rest, organization is a skill learned over time. With help and some practice, kids can develop an effective approach to getting stuff done.

And you're the perfect person to teach your child, even if you don't feel all that organized yourself!

Easy as 1-2-3

For kids, all tasks can be broken down into a 1-2-3 process.

Getting organized means a kid gets where he or she needs to be and gathers the supplies needed to complete the task.

Staying focused means sticking with the task and learning to say "no" to distractions.

Getting it done means finishing up, checking your work, and putting on the finishing touches, like remembering to put a homework paper in the right folder and putting

the folder inside the backpack so it's ready for the next day.

Once kids know these steps — and how to apply them — they can start tackling tasks more independently. That means homework, chores, and other tasks will get done with increasing consistency and efficiency. Of course, kids will still need parental help and guidance, but you probably won't have to nag as much.

Not only is it practical to teach these skills, but knowing how to get stuff done will help your child feel more competent and effective. Kids feel self-confident and proud when they're able to accomplish their tasks and responsibilities. They're also sure to be pleased when they find they have some extra free time to do what they'd like to do.

From Teeth Brushing to Book Reports

To get started, introduce the 1-2-3 method and help your child practice it in daily life. Even something as simple as brushing teeth requires this approach, so you might use this example when introducing the concept:

Getting organized: Go to the bathroom and get out your toothbrush and toothpaste. Turn on the water.

Staying focused: Dentists say to brush for 3 minutes, so that means keep brushing, even if you hear a really good song on the radio or you remember that you wanted to call your friend. Concentrate and remember what the dentist told you about brushing away from your gums.

Getting it done: If you do steps 1 and 2, step 3 almost takes care of itself. Hurray, your 3 minutes are up and

your teeth are clean! Getting it done means finishing up and putting on the finishing touches. With teeth brushing, that would be stuff like turning off the water, putting away the toothbrush and paste, and making sure there's no toothpaste foam on your face!

With a more complex task, like completing a book report, the steps would become more involved, but the basic elements remain the same.

Here's how you might walk your child through the steps:

1. Getting Organized

Explain that this step is all about **getting ready**. It's about figuring out what kids need to do and gathering any necessary items. For instance: "So you have a book report to write. What do you need to do to get started?" Help your child make a list of things like: Choose a book. Make sure the book is OK with the teacher. Write down the book and the author's name. Check the book out of the library. Mark the due date on a calendar.

Then help your child think of the supplies needed: The book, some note cards, a pen for taking notes, the teacher's list of questions to answer, and a report cover. Have your child gather the supplies where the work will take place.

As the project progresses, show your child how to use the list to check off what's already done and get ready for what's next. Demonstrate how to add to the list, too. Coach your child to think, "OK, I did these things. Now, what's next? Oh yeah, start reading the book" and to add things to the list like finish the book, read over my teacher's directions, start writing the report.

2. Staying Focused

Explain that this part is about **doing it** and sticking with the job. Tell kids this means doing what you're supposed to do, following what's on the list, and sticking with it.

It also means focusing when there's something else your child would rather be doing — the hardest part of all! Help kids learn how to handle and resist these inevitable temptations. While working on the report, a competing idea might pop into your child's head: "I feel like shooting some hoops now." Teach kids to challenge that impulse by asking themselves "Is that what I'm supposed to be doing?"

Explain that a tiny break to stretch a little and then get right back to the task at hand is OK. Then kids can make a plan to shoot hoops after the work is done. Let them know that staying focused is tough sometimes, but it gets easier with practice.

3. Getting it Done

Explain that this is the part when kids will be **finishing up** the job. Talk about things like copying work neatly and asking a parent to read it over to help find any mistakes.

Coach your child to take those important final steps: putting his or her name on the report, placing it in a report cover, putting the report in the correct school folder, and putting the folder in the backpack so it's ready to be turned in.

How to Start

Here are some tips on how to begin teaching the 1-2-3 process:

Introduce the Idea

Start the conversation by using the examples above and show your child the kids' article *Organize, Focus, Get It Done*. Read it together and ask for reactions. Will it be easy or hard? Is he or she already doing some of it? Is there something he or she would like to get better at?

Get Buy-In

Brainstorm about what might be easier or better if your child was more organized and focused. Maybe homework would get done faster, there would be more play time, and there would be less nagging about chores. Then there's the added bonus of your child feeling proud and you being proud, too.

Set Expectations

Be clear, in a kind way, that you expect your kids to work on these skills and that you'll be there to help along the way.

Make a Plan

Decide on one thing to focus on first. You can come up with three things and let your child choose one. Or if homework or a particular chore has been a problem, that's the natural place to begin.

Get Comfortable in Your Role

For the best results, you'll want to be a low-key coach. You can ask questions that will help kids get on track and stay

there. But use these questions to prompt their thought process about what needs to be done. Praise progress, but don't go overboard. The self-satisfaction kids will feel will be a more powerful motivator. Also, be sure to ask your child's opinion of how things are going so far.

Start Thinking in Questions

Though you might not realize it, every time you take on a task, you ask yourself questions and then answer them with thoughts and actions. If you want to unload groceries from the car, you ask yourself:

Q: Did I get them all out of the trunk? A: No. I'll go get the rest.

Q: Did I close the trunk? A: Yes.

Q: Where's the milk and ice cream? I need to put them away first. A: Done. Now, what's next?

Encourage kids to start seeing tasks as a series of questions and answers. Suggest that they ask these questions out loud and then answer them. These questions are the ones you hope will eventually live inside a child's head. And with practice, they'll learn to ask them without being prompted.

Work together to come up with questions that need to be asked so the chosen task can be completed. You might even jot them down on index cards. Start by asking the questions and having your child answer. Later, transfer responsibility for the questions from you to your child.

Things to Remember

It will take time to teach kids how to break down tasks into steps. It also will take time for them to learn how to apply

these skills to what needs to be done. Sometimes, it will seem simpler just to do it for them. It certainly would take less time.

But the trouble is that kids don't learn how to be independent and successful if their parents swoop in every time a situation is challenging or complex.

Here's why it's worth your time and effort:

Kids learn new skills that they'll need — how to pour a bowl of cereal, tie shoes, match clothes, complete a homework assignment.

They'll develop a sense of independence. Kids who dress themselves at age 4 feel like big kids. It's a good feeling that will deepen over time as they learn to do even more without help. From these good feelings, kids begin to form a belief about themselves — "I can do it."

Your firm but kind expectations that your kids **should** start tackling certain jobs on their own send a strong message. You reinforce their independence and encourage them to accept a certain level of responsibility. Kids learn that others will set expectations and that they can meet them.

This kind of teaching can be a very loving gesture. You're taking the time to show your kids how to do something — with interest, patience, love, kindness, and their best interests at heart. This will make kids feel cared for and loved. Think of it as filling up a child's toolbox with crucial life tools.

Staying Safe Online

The Internet can be a wonderful resource for kids. They can use it to research school reports, communicate with teachers and other kids, and play interactive games. Kids who are old enough to punch in a few letters on the keyboard can literally access the world.

But that access can also pose hazards. For example, an 8-year-old might do an online search for "Lego." But with just one missed keystroke, the word "Legs" is entered instead, and the child may be directed to a slew of websites with a focus on legs — some of which may contain pornographic material.

That's why it's important to be aware of what your kids see and hear on the Internet, who they meet, and what they share about themselves online.

Just like any safety issue, it's wise to talk with your kids about your concerns, take advantage of resources to protect them, and keep a close eye on their activities.

Internet Safety Laws

A US federal law, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), was created to help protect kids online. It's designed to keep anyone from obtaining a child's personal information without a parent knowing about it and agreeing to it first.

COPPA requires websites to explain their privacy policies on the site and get parental consent before collecting or using a child's personal information, such as a name, address, phone number, or Social Security number. The law also prohibits a

site from requiring a child to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or participate in a contest.

But even with this law, your kids' best online protection is you. By talking to them about potential online dangers and monitoring their computer use, you'll help them surf the Internet safely.

Online Protection Tools

Online tools are available that will let you control your kids' access to adult material and help protect them from Internet predators. No option is going to guarantee that they'll be kept away from 100% of the risks on the Internet. So it's important to be aware of your kids' computer activities and educate them about online risks.

Many Internet service providers (ISPs) provide parent-control options to block certain material from coming into a computer. You can also get software that helps block access to certain sites based on a "bad site" list that your ISP creates. Filtering programs can block sites from coming in and restrict personal information from being sent online. Other programs can monitor and track online activity. Also, make sure your kids create a screen name to protect their real identity.

Getting Involved in Kids' Online Activities

Aside from these tools, it's wise to take an active role in protecting your kids from Internet predators and sexually explicit materials online. To do that:

Become computer literate and learn how to block objectionable material.

Keep the computer in a common area, not in individual bedrooms, where you can watch and monitor its use.

Share an email account with your child so you can monitor messages.

Bookmark kids' favorite sites for easy access.

Spend time online together to teach your kids appropriate online behaviour.

Forbid your child from entering private chat rooms; block them with safety features provided by your Internet service provider or with special filtering software. Be aware that posting messages to chat rooms reveals a user's email address to others.

Monitor your credit card and phone bills for unfamiliar account charges.

Find out what, if any, online protection is offered by your child's school, after-school center, friends' homes, or anyplace where kids could use a computer without your supervision.

Take your child seriously if he or she reports an uncomfortable online exchange.

Forward copies of obscene or threatening messages you or your kids get to your Internet service provider.

Many sites use "cookies," devices that track specific information about the user, such as name, email address, and shopping preferences. Cookies can be disabled. Ask your Internet service provider for more information.

Basic Rules

Set up some simple rules for your kids to follow while they're using the Internet, such as:

Follow the rules you set, as well as those set by your Internet service provider.

Never trade personal photographs in the mail or scanned photographs over the Internet.

Never reveal personal information, such as address, phone number, or school name or location. Use only a screen name. Never agree to meet anyone from a chat room in person.

Never respond to a threatening email or message.

Always tell a parent about any communication or conversation that was scary.

If your child has a new "friend," insist on being "introduced" online to that friend.

Chat Room Caution

Chat rooms are virtual online rooms where chat sessions take place. They're set up according to interest or subject, such as a favorite sport or TV show. Because people can communicate with each other alone or in a group, chat rooms are among the most popular destinations on the Web — especially for kids and teens.

But chat rooms can pose hazards for kids. Some kids have met "friends" in chat rooms who were interested in exploiting them. No one knows how common chat-room predators are,

but pedophiles (adults who are sexually interested in children) are known to frequent chat rooms.

These predators sometimes prod their online acquaintances to exchange personal information, such as addresses and phone numbers, thus putting the kids they are chatting with — and their families — at risk.

Pedophiles often pose as teenagers in chat rooms. Because many kids have been told by parents not to give out their home phone numbers, pedophiles may encourage kids to call them; with caller ID the offenders instantly have the kids' phone numbers.

Warning Signs

Warning signs of a child being targeted by an online predator include spending long hours online, especially at night, phone calls from people you don't know, or unsolicited gifts arriving in the mail. If your child suddenly turns off the computer when you walk into the room, ask why and monitor computer time more closely. Withdrawal from family life and reluctance to discuss online activities are other signs to watch for.

Contact your local law enforcement agency or the FBI if your child has received pornography via the Internet or has been the target of an online sex offender.

Taking an active role in your kids' Internet activities will help ensure that they benefit from the wealth of valuable information it offers without being exposed to any potential dangers.

What is ADHD?

Lisa's son Jack had always been a handful. Even as a preschooler, he would tear through the house like a tornado, shouting, roughhousing, and climbing the furniture. No toy or activity ever held his interest for more than a few minutes and he would often dart off without warning, seemingly unaware of the dangers of a busy street or a crowded mall.

It was exhausting to parent Jack, but Lisa hadn't been too concerned back then. Boys will be boys, she figured. But at age 8, he was no easier to handle. It was a struggle to get Jack to settle down long enough to complete even the simplest tasks, from chores to homework. When his teacher's comments about his inattention and disruptive behaviour in class became too frequent to ignore, Lisa took Jack to the doctor, who recommended an evaluation for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

ADHD is a common behavioural disorder that affects an estimated 8% to 10% of school-age children. Boys are about three times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with it, though it's not yet understood why.

Kids with ADHD act without thinking, are hyperactive, and have trouble focusing. They may understand what's expected of them but have trouble following through because they can't sit still, pay attention, or attend to details.

Of course, all kids (especially younger ones) act this way at times, particularly when they're anxious or excited. But the difference with ADHD is that symptoms are present over a longer period of time and occur in different settings. They impair a child's ability to function socially, academically, and

at home.

The good news is that with proper treatment, kids with ADHD can learn to successfully live with and manage their symptoms.

Symptoms

ADHD used to be known as **attention deficit disorder**, or **ADD**. In 1994, it was renamed ADHD and broken down into three subtypes, each with its own pattern of behaviours:

1. an inattentive type, with signs that include:

- inability to pay attention to details or a tendency to make careless errors in schoolwork or other activities
- difficulty with sustained attention in tasks or play activities
- apparent listening problems
- difficulty following instructions
- problems with organization
- avoidance or dislike of tasks that require mental effort
- tendency to lose things like toys, notebooks, or homework
- distractibility
- forgetfulness in daily activities

2. a hyperactive-impulsive type, with signs that include:

- fidgeting or squirming
- difficulty remaining seated
- excessive running or climbing
- difficulty playing quietly
- always seeming to be "on the go"
- excessive talking
- blurting out answers before hearing the full question

- difficulty waiting for a turn or in line
- problems with interrupting or intruding

3. a combined type, which involves a combination of the other two types and is the most common

Although it can be challenging to raise kids with ADHD, it's important to remember they aren't "bad," "acting out," or being difficult on purpose. And they have difficulty controlling their behaviour without medication or behavioural therapy.

Diagnosis

Because there's no test that can determine the presence of ADHD, a diagnosis depends on a complete evaluation. Many children and adolescents diagnosed with ADHD are evaluated and treated by primary care doctors including pediatricians and family practitioners, but your child may also be referred to one of several different specialists (psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists) especially when the diagnosis is in doubt, or if there are other concerns, such as Tourette syndrome, a learning disability, anxiety, or depression.

To be considered for a diagnosis of ADHD:

- a child must display behaviours from one of the three subtypes before age 7
- these behaviours must be more severe than in other kids the same age
- the behaviours must last for at least 6 months
- the behaviours must occur in and negatively affect at least two areas of a child's life (such as school, home, daycare settings, or friendships)

The behaviours must also not only be linked to stress at home. Kids who have experienced a divorce, a move, an illness, a change in school, or other significant life event may suddenly begin to act out or become forgetful. To avoid a misdiagnosis, it's important to consider whether these factors played a role in the onset of symptoms

First, your child's doctor may perform a physical examination and take a medical history that includes questions about any concerns and symptoms, your child's past health, your family's health, any medications your child is taking, any allergies your child may have, and other issues.

The doctor may also check hearing and vision so other medical conditions can be ruled out. Because some emotional conditions, such as extreme stress, depression, and anxiety, can also look like ADHD, you'll likely be asked to fill out questionnaires to help rule them out.

You'll be asked many questions about your child's development and behaviours at home, school, and among friends. Other adults who see your child regularly (like teachers, who are often the first to notice ADHD symptoms) probably will be consulted, too. An educational evaluation, which usually includes a school psychologist, may also be done. It's important for everyone involved to be as honest and thorough as possible about your child's strengths and weaknesses.

Causes of ADHD

ADHD is **not** caused by poor parenting, too much sugar, or vaccines.

ADHD has biological origins that aren't yet clearly understood.

No single cause has been identified, but researchers are exploring a number of possible genetic and environmental links. Studies have shown that many kids with ADHD have a close relative who also has the disorder.

Although experts are unsure whether this is a cause of the disorder, they have found that certain areas of the brain are about 5% to 10% smaller in size and activity in kids with ADHD. Chemical changes in the brain also have been found.

Research also links smoking during pregnancy to later ADHD in a child. Other risk factors may include premature delivery, very low birth weight, and injuries to the brain at birth.

Some studies have even suggested a link between excessive early television watching and future attention problems. Parents should follow the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) guidelines, which say that children under 2 years old should not have any "screen time" (TV, DVDs or videotapes, computers, or video games) and that kids 2 years and older should be limited to 1 to 2 hours per day, or less, of quality television programming.

Related Problems

One of the difficulties in diagnosing ADHD is that it's often found in conjunction with other problems. These are called coexisting conditions, and about two thirds of kids with ADHD have one. The most common coexisting conditions are:

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Conduct Disorder (CD)

At least 35% of kids with ADHD also have oppositional defiant disorder, which is characterized by stubbornness, outbursts of temper, and acts of defiance and rule breaking. Conduct disorder is similar but features more severe hostility and

aggression. Kids who have conduct disorder are more likely to get in trouble with authority figures and, later, possibly with the law. Oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder are seen most commonly with the hyperactive and combined subtypes of ADHD.

Mood Disorders

About 18% of kids with ADHD, particularly the inattentive subtype, also experience depression. They may feel inadequate, isolated, frustrated by school failures and social problems, and have low self-esteem.

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders affect about 25% of kids with ADHD. Symptoms include excessive worry, fear, or panic, which can also lead to physical symptoms such as a racing heart, sweating, stomach pains, and diarrhea. Other forms of anxiety that can accompany ADHD are obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette syndrome, as well as motor or vocal tics (movements or sounds that are repeated over and over). A child who has symptoms of these other conditions should be evaluated by a specialist.

Learning Disabilities

About half of all kids with ADHD also have a specific learning disability. The most common learning problems are with reading (dyslexia) and handwriting. Although ADHD isn't categorized as a learning disability, its interference with concentration and attention can make it even more difficult for a child to perform well in school.

If your child has ADHD and a coexisting condition, the doctor will carefully consider that when developing a treatment plan.

Some treatments are better than others at addressing specific combinations of symptoms.

Treating ADHD

ADHD can't be cured, but it *can* be successfully managed. Your child's doctor will work with you to develop an individualized, long-term plan. The goal is to help a child learn to control his or her own behaviour and to help families create an atmosphere in which this is most likely to happen.

In most cases, ADHD is best treated with a combination of medication and behaviour therapy. Any good treatment plan will require close follow-up and monitoring, and your doctor may make adjustments along the way. Because it's important for parents to actively participate in their child's treatment plan, parent education is also considered an important part of ADHD management.

Medications

Several different types of medications may be used to treat ADHD:

Stimulants are the best-known treatments — they've been used for more than 50 years in the treatment of ADHD. Some require several doses per day, each lasting about 4 hours; some last up to 12 hours. Possible side effects include decreased appetite, stomachache, irritability, and insomnia. There's currently no evidence of long-term side effects.

Nonstimulants represent a good alternative to stimulants or are sometimes used along with a stimulant to treat ADHD. The first nonstimulant was approved for treating ADHD in 2003. They may have fewer side effects than

stimulants and can last up to 24 hours.

Antidepressants are sometimes a treatment option; however, in 2004 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a warning that these drugs may lead to a rare increased risk of suicide in children and teens. If an antidepressant is recommended for your child, be sure to discuss these risks with your doctor.

Medications can affect kids differently, and a child may respond well to one but not another. When determining the correct treatment, the doctor might try various medications in various doses, especially if your child is being treated for ADHD along with another disorder.

Behavioural Therapy

Research has shown that medications used to help curb impulsive behaviour and attention difficulties are more effective when combined with behavioural therapy.

Behavioural therapy attempts to change behaviour patterns by:

- reorganizing a child's home and school environment
- giving clear directions and commands
- setting up a system of consistent rewards for appropriate behaviours and negative consequences for inappropriate ones

Here are examples of behavioural strategies that may help a child with ADHD:

Create a routine. Try to follow the same schedule every

day, from wake-up time to bedtime. Post the schedule in a prominent place, so your child can see what's expected throughout the day and when it's time for homework, play, and chores.

Get organized. Put schoolbags, clothing, and toys in the same place every day so your child will be less likely to lose them.

Avoid distractions. Turn off the TV, radio, and computer games, especially when your child is doing homework.

Limit choices. Offer a choice between two things (this outfit, meal, toy, etc., or that one) so that your child isn't overwhelmed and overstimulated.

Change your interactions with your child. Instead of long-winded explanations and cajoling, use clear, brief directions to remind your child of responsibilities.

Use goals and rewards. Use a chart to list goals and track positive behaviours, then reward your child's efforts. Be sure the goals are realistic (think baby steps rather than overnight success).

Discipline effectively. Instead of yelling or spanking, use timeouts or removal of privileges as consequences for inappropriate behaviour. Younger kids may simply need to be distracted or ignored until they display better behaviour.

Help your child discover a talent. All kids need to experience success to feel good about themselves. Finding out what your child does well — whether it's sports, art, or music — can boost social skills and self-esteem.

Alternative Treatments

Currently, the only ADHD therapies that have been proven effective in scientific studies are medications and behavioural therapy. But your doctor may recommend additional treatments and interventions depending on your child's symptoms and needs. Some kids with ADHD, for example, may also need special educational interventions such as tutoring, occupational therapy, etc. Every child's needs are different.

A number of other alternative therapies are promoted and tried by parents including: megavitamins, body treatments, diet manipulation, allergy treatment, chiropractic treatment, attention training, visual training, and traditional one-on-one "talking" psychotherapy. However, scientific research has **not** found them to be effective, and most have not been studied carefully, if at all.

Parents should always be wary of *any* therapy that promises an ADHD "cure." If you're interested in trying something new, speak with your doctor first.

Parent Training

Parenting a child with ADHD often brings special challenges. Kids with ADHD may not respond well to typical parenting practices. Also, because ADHD tends to run in families, parents may also have some problems with organization and consistency themselves and need active coaching to help learn these skills.

Experts recommend parent education and support groups to help family members accept the diagnosis and to teach them how to help kids organize their environment, develop problem-solving skills, and cope

with frustrations. Training can also teach parents to respond appropriately to a child's most trying behaviours with calm disciplining techniques. Individual or family counseling can also be helpful.

ADHD in the Classroom

As your child's most important advocate, you should become familiar with your child's medical, legal, and educational rights.

Kids with ADHD are eligible for special services or accommodations at school. Keep in touch with teachers and school officials to monitor your child's progress.

In addition to using routines and a clear system of rewards, here are some other tips to share with teachers for classroom success:

Reduce seating distractions. Lessening distractions might be as simple as seating your child near the teacher instead of near the window.

Use a homework folder for parent-teacher communications. The teacher can include assignments and progress notes, and you can check to make sure all work is completed on time.

Break down assignments. Keep instructions clear and brief, breaking down larger tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces.

Give positive reinforcement. Always be on the lookout for positive behaviours. Ask the teacher to offer praise when your child stays seated, doesn't call out, or waits his or her turn instead of criticizing when he or she

doesn't.

Teach good study skills. Underlining, note taking, and reading out loud can help your child stay focused and retain information.

Supervise. Check that your child goes and comes from school with the correct books and materials. Sometimes kids are paired with a buddy to can help them stay on track.

Be sensitive to self-esteem issues. Ask the teacher to provide feedback to your child in private, and avoid asking your child to perform a task in public that might be too difficult.

Involve the school counsellor or psychologist. He or she can help design behavioural programs to address specific problems in the classroom.

Helping Your Child

You're a stronger advocate for your child when you foster good partnerships with everyone involved in your child's treatment — that includes teachers, doctors, therapists, and even other family members. Take advantage of all the support and education that's available, and you'll help your child navigate toward success.

Talking with My Child about Serious Topics

I've noticed that the more sternly I speak to my kids — for example, after they've run into the street without looking — the more distraught they get. How can I make sure they understand the seriousness of certain situations without making them feel worse? - Zoe

As the saying goes, "Desperate times call for desperate measures." When your child's safety is at risk — whether he's run into the street, reached for an open flame, or gotten dangerously close to a pool — yelling, screaming, or crying out is a perfectly normal (and necessary!) response. After all, at that moment, you would do anything possible to get your child's attention and get him out of harm's way.

After an episode like this, it's natural for kids to cry — and for you to want to apologize. But the truth is, your kids are likely crying in response to the fear and urgency in your voice, not because you've been "too stern." At times like these, it's OK to comfort them without apologizing. Give your child a hug and say something like, "I know you're upset. But what you did was dangerous and I was scared that you were going to get hurt. You must never do that again." Punishing kids after an event like this is usually not necessary, since they've probably learned their lesson.

On the other hand, there are times when being too stern — like yelling regularly for minor offenses — can backfire. Kids can become immune to parents' overblown reactions and fail to take them seriously. If you feel yourself getting into this habit, take a deep breath before responding to your child's behaviour and ask yourself, "Am I about to overreact?" If so,

walk away for a few minutes and come back when you've calmed down.

In general, when it comes to disciplining kids, it's best to speak with a low, firm voice and to keep your focus on the behaviour, not the child. It's also helpful to use natural consequences whenever possible. That means if your child has thrown a toy, ask her to pick it up. If she's taken something from her sibling, ask her to return it. If she chooses not to comply, an age-appropriate timeout or other consequence should follow, despite tearful pleas. Consistency is the key to effective discipline, and giving in to a child's tears may inadvertently reinforce negative behaviour.

Developing Your Child's Self-esteem

Healthy self-esteem is like a child's armor against the challenges of the world. Kids who know their strengths and weaknesses and feel good about themselves seem to have an easier time handling conflicts and resisting negative pressures. They tend to smile more readily and enjoy life. These kids are realistic and generally optimistic.

In contrast, kids with low self-esteem can find challenges to be sources of major anxiety and frustration. Those who think poorly of themselves have a hard time finding solutions to problems. If given to self-critical thoughts such as "I'm no good" or "I can't do anything right," they may become passive, withdrawn, or depressed. Faced with a new challenge, their immediate response might be "I can't."

What Is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is similar to self-worth (how much a person values himself or herself). This can change from day to day or from year to year, but overall self-esteem tends to develop from infancy and keep going until we are adults.

Self-esteem also can be defined as feeling capable while also feeling loved. A child who is happy with an achievement but does not feel loved may eventually experience low self-esteem. Likewise, a child who feels loved but is hesitant about his or her own abilities can also develop low self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem comes when a good balance is maintained.

Patterns of self-esteem start very early in life. The concept of

success following effort and persistence starts early. Once people reach adulthood, it's harder to make changes to how they see and define themselves.

So, it's wise to think about developing and promoting self-esteem during childhood. As kids try, fail, try again, fail again, and then finally succeed, they develop ideas about their own capabilities. At the same time, they're creating a self-concept based on interactions with other people. This is why parental involvement is key to helping kids form accurate, healthy self-perceptions.

Parents and caregivers can promote healthy self-esteem by showing encouragement and enjoyment in many areas. Avoid focusing on one specific area; for example, success on a spelling test, which can lead to kids feeling that they're only as valuable as their test scores.

Signs of Unhealthy and Healthy Self-Esteem

Self-esteem fluctuates as kids grow. It's frequently changed and fine-tuned, because it is affected by a child's experiences and new perceptions. So it helps to be aware of the signs of both healthy and unhealthy self-esteem.

Kids with low self-esteem may not want to try new things and may speak negatively about themselves: "I'm stupid," "I'll never learn how to do this," or "What's the point? Nobody cares about me anyway." They may exhibit a low tolerance for frustration, giving up easily or waiting for somebody else to take over. They tend to be overly critical of and easily disappointed in themselves.

Kids with low self-esteem see temporary setbacks as permanent, intolerable conditions, and a sense of pessimism

prevails. This can place kids at risk for stress and mental health problems, as well as real difficulties solving different kinds of problems and challenges they encounter.

Kids with healthy self-esteem tend to enjoy interacting with others. They're comfortable in social settings and enjoys group activities as well as independent pursuits. When challenges arise, they can work toward finding solutions and voice discontent without belittling themselves or others. For example, rather than saying, "I'm an idiot," a child with healthy self-esteem says, "I don't understand this." They know their strengths and weaknesses, and accept them. A sense of optimism prevails.

How Parents Can Help

How can a parent help to foster healthy self-esteem in a child? These tips can make a big difference:

Be careful what you say. Kids can be sensitive to parents' and others' words. Remember to praise your child not only for a job well done, but also for effort. But be truthful. For example, if your child doesn't make the soccer team, avoid saying something like, "Well, next time you'll work harder and make it." Instead, try "Well, you didn't make the team, but I'm really proud of the effort you put into it." Reward effort and completion instead of outcome. Sometimes, a child's skill level is just not there — so helping kids overcome disappointments can really help them learn what they're good at and what they're not so good at. As adults, it's OK to say "I can't carry a tune" or "I couldn't kick a ball to save my life," so use warmth and humor to help your kids learn about themselves and to appreciate what makes them unique.

Be a positive role model. If you're excessively harsh on

yourself, pessimistic, or unrealistic about your abilities and limitations, your kids might eventually mirror you. Nurture your own self-esteem and they'll have a great role model.

Identify and redirect inaccurate beliefs. It's important for parents to identify kids' irrational beliefs about themselves, whether they're about perfection, attractiveness, ability, or anything else. Helping kids set more accurate standards and be more realistic in evaluating themselves will help them have a healthy self-concept. Inaccurate perceptions of self can take root and become reality to kids. For example, a child who does very well in school but struggles with math may say, "I can't do math. I'm a bad student." Not only is this a false generalization, it's also a belief that can set a child up for failure. Encourage kids to see a situation in a more objective way. A helpful response might be: "You are a good student. You do great in school. Math is a subject that you need to spend more time on. We'll work on it together."

Be spontaneous and affectionate. Your love will help boost your child's self-esteem. Give hugs and tell kids you're proud of them when you can see them putting effort toward something or trying something at which they previously failed. Put notes in your child's lunchbox with messages like "I think you're terrific!" Give praise often and honestly, but without overdoing it. Having an inflated sense of self can lead kids and teens to put others down or feel that they're better than everyone else, which can be socially isolating.

Give positive, accurate feedback. Comments like "You always work yourself up into such a frenzy!" will make kids feel like they have no control over their outbursts. A better statement is, "I can see you were very angry

with your brother, but it was nice that you were able to talk about it instead of yelling or hitting." This acknowledges a child's feelings, rewards the choice made, and encourages the child to make the right choice again next time.

Create a safe, loving home environment. Kids who don't feel safe or are abused at home are at greatest risk for developing poor self-esteem. A child who is exposed to parents who fight and argue repeatedly may feel they have no control over their environment and become helpless or depressed. Also watch for signs of abuse by others, problems in school, trouble with peers, and other factors that may affect kids' self-esteem. Encourage your kids to talk to you or other trusted adults about solving problems that are too big to solve by themselves.

Help kids become involved in constructive experiences. Activities that encourage cooperation rather than competition are especially helpful in fostering self-esteem. For example, mentoring programs in which an older child helps a younger one learn to read can do wonders for both kids. Volunteering and contributing to your local community can have positive effects on self-esteem for everyone involved.

When promoting healthy self-esteem, it's important to not have too much or too little but "just enough." Make sure your kids don't end up feeling that if they're average or normal at something, it's the same as not being good or special.

Finding Professional Help

If you suspect your child has low self-esteem, consider getting professional help. Child and adolescent therapists and

counsellors can help identify coping strategies to help deal with problems at school or home in ways that help kids feel better about themselves.

Therapy can help kids learn to view themselves and the world more realistically and help with problem-solving. Developing the confidence to understand when you can deal with a problem and when to ask for help is vital to positive self esteem.

Taking responsibility and pride in who you are is a sure sign of healthy self-esteem and the greatest gift parents can give to their child.

Encouraging a Healthy Body Image

It seems like just yesterday that you had to coax your daughter to bathe. But then she turned 11 and started spending hours in the bathroom and sizing herself up in every mirror she passes. She seems consumed by her looks. What happened? And is it healthy?

As they approach the teen years, it's common and natural for kids to become more interested in appearances — their own and others' — seemingly all of a sudden. Their bodies are going through some big changes as they grow and go through puberty. As preteens change physically they become more aware of how they look.

Growing and puberty affect more than a preteen's outward appearance — body image is affected, too. Having a healthy body image means that most of your feelings, ideas, and opinions about your body and appearance are positive. It means accepting and appreciating your body and feeling mostly satisfied with your appearance.

Developing a healthy body image happens over time. It can be influenced by experiences and shaped by the opinions and feedback of others and by cultural messages.

Body Image and Appearance

Body image can be especially vulnerable during the preteen and teen years because appearances change so much and cultural messages that fuel dissatisfaction can be very strong. Being criticized or teased about appearance can be particularly hurtful at this age.

Preteens and teens often compare their looks with others' or with media images of the "right" way to look. In cultures in which looks seem to matter so much — and ideal images are so unrealistic — it's all too common to be dissatisfied with some aspect of appearance.

But feeling too self-critical about appearance can interfere with body image. And poor body image can hurt a teen's overall self-image, too.

Beyond Appearances

As teens mature mentally and emotionally, they will develop a more complex self-image — one that incorporates their interests, talents, unique qualities, values, aspirations, and relationships. But during the early teen years, the image they see in the mirror makes up a big part of their self-image.

And while it's true that appearance isn't everything, feeling satisfied with appearance means a lot. If you're wondering why your child suddenly seems so focused on appearance, keep in mind that preteens are:

Adapting to a new reflection. Spending extra time grooming, making comparisons with friends and celebrities, and experimenting with clothing, hair, and makeup can be ways of getting to know and like the new self reflected in the mirror.

Making a fashion statement. When preteens and teens express their taste in clothes and hairstyles, they're making statements about themselves. Experimenting with and defining their styles is one way to express their interests, personality, independence, and identity.

Finding a way to belong. Peers, groups, and cliques —

which take center stage during the teen years — can also play a role in heightening young teens' concerns about appearances. Dressing a certain way might be a way of feeling included, fitting in, standing out, or belonging to a group of peers.

Boys and Body Image

It's not just girls who become focused on appearance. Boys might not be as vocal about it, but they can worry just as much about their looks. They may spend the same amount of time in front of the mirror, weighing where to part their hair, what kind of product to use, assessing acne, and deciding whether or not to shave. And when your son emerges wearing pants that sag as if he hasn't quite finished getting dressed, he may in fact have spent hours getting them to hang at that exact angle.

Self-Critical Feelings

Feeling satisfied with appearance isn't always easy. Many kids who have positive body images become self-conscious or self-critical as they enter the teen years. It's not uncommon for preteens and teens to express dissatisfaction about their appearance or to compare themselves with their friends, celebrities, or people they see in ads.

Our culture emphasizes the need to look just right. Ads for everything from makeup and hair products to clothing and toothpaste send messages that people need to look a certain way to be happy. It's hard not to be influenced by that.

You might hear your son or daughter fret about anything from height and hair to the shape of their nose or the size of their ears — any aspect that doesn't match the "ideal."

Body shape and size can concern them, too. It's important for preteens or teens to eat nutritious foods, limit junk foods, and get plenty of physical activity, but it's not advisable for them to diet. Being overly concerned about weight, restricting food, or exercising excessively can be signs of an eating disorder. Talk to your doctor if you notice any of these signs in your kids.

Self-criticism that seems constant or excessive or causes daily distress that lasts might signal an extreme body image problem known as body dysmorphic disorder. This condition involves obsessions and compulsions about slight or imagined imperfections in appearance.

A Natural Transition

In most cases, the focus on appearance is a very natural and common part of becoming a teenager. Typically, these expressions of frustration resolve quickly and don't warrant concern — just plenty of patience, empathy, support, and perspective from parents.

Still, parents can be frustrated when looks seem to matter so much to kids. It can be a delicate balance to help preteens feel confident and satisfied with their looks while encouraging them not to be overly concerned with the superficial. It's important to encourage teens to take pride in their appearance but also to emphasize the deeper qualities that matter more.

Boosting Body Image

As preteens try on different looks, parents can help by being accepting and supportive, providing positive messages, and encouraging other qualities that keep looks in perspective. Be sure to:

Accept and understand. Recognize that being concerned about looks is as much a part of the teen years as a changing voice and learning to shave. You know that in the grand scheme of things your daughter's freckles don't matter, but to her they might seem paramount. As frustrating as it can be when they monopolize the bathroom, avoid criticizing kids for being concerned about appearances. As they grow, concern about their looks will stop dominating their lives.

Give lots of compliments. Provide reassurance about kids' looks *and* about all their other important qualities. As much as they may seem not to notice or care, simple statements like "you've got the most beautiful smile" or "that shirt looks great on you" really do matter. Compliment them on other physical attributes, such as strength, speed, balance, energy, or grace. Appreciating physical qualities and capabilities helps build a healthy body image.

Compliment what's inside too. Notice out loud all the personal qualities that you love about your kids — how generous your son is to share with his little sister, the determined way that your daughter studies for her tests, or how your son stood by his best friend. Reassure them when they express insecurity. When you hear "I hate my hair" or "I'm so little," provide valuable counterpoint.

Talk about what appearances mean. Guide your kids to

think a little more deeply about appearances and how people express themselves. Talk about the messages that certain styles might convey. One outfit may send the message "I'm ready to party!" while others might say "I'm heading to school" or "I'm too lazy to do laundry."

Set reasonable boundaries. Be patient, but also set boundaries on how much time your kids can spend on grooming and dressing. Tell them it's not OK to inconvenience others or let chores go. Limits help kids understand how to manage time, be considerate of others' needs, share resources, exercise a little self-discipline, and keep appearances in perspective.

Be a good role model. How you talk about your own looks sets a powerful example. Constantly complaining about or fretting over your appearance teaches your kids to cast the same critical eye on themselves. Almost everyone is dissatisfied with certain elements of their appearance, but talk instead about what your body can *do*, not just how it looks. Instead of griping about how big your legs are, talk about how they're strong enough to help you hike up a mountain.

Having a healthy and positive body image means liking your body, appreciating it, and being grateful for its qualities and capabilities. When parents care for and appreciate their own bodies, they teach their kids to do the same.

Helping Kids Cope with Stress

To adults, childhood can seem like a carefree time. But kids still experience stress. Things like school and social life can sometimes create pressures that can feel overwhelming for kids. As a parent, you can't protect your kids from stress — but you can help them develop healthy ways to cope with stress and solve everyday problems.

Kids deal with stress in both healthy and unhealthy ways. It also revealed that while they may not initiate a conversation about what's bothering them, kids do want their parents to reach out and help them cope with their troubles.

But it's not always easy for parents to know what to do for a child who's feeling stressed.

Here are a few ideas:

Notice out loud. Tell your child when you notice that something's bothering him or her. If you can, name the feeling you think your child is experiencing. ("It seems like you're still mad about what happened at the playground.") This shouldn't sound like an accusation (as in, "OK, what happened now? Are you still mad about that?") or put a child on the spot. It's just a casual observation that you're interested in hearing more about your child's concern. Be sympathetic and show you care and want to understand.

Listen to your child. Ask your child to tell you what's wrong. Listen attentively and calmly — with interest, patience, openness, and caring. Avoid any urge to judge, blame,

lecture, or say what you think your child should have done instead. The idea is to let your child's concerns (and feelings) be heard. Try to get the whole story by asking questions like "And then what happened?" Take your time. And let your child take his or her time, too.

Comment briefly on the feelings you think your child was experiencing. For example, you might say "That must have been upsetting," "No wonder you felt mad when they wouldn't let you in the game," or "That must have seemed unfair to you." Doing this shows that you understand what your child felt, why, and that you care. Feeling understood and listened to helps your child feel supported by you, and that is especially important in times of stress.

Put a label on it. Many kids do not yet have words for their feelings. If your child seems angry or frustrated, use those words to help him or her learn to identify the emotions by name. Putting feelings into words helps kids communicate and develop emotional awareness — the ability to recognize their own emotional states. Kids who can do so are less likely to reach the behavioural boiling point where strong emotions get demonstrated through behaviours rather than communicated with words.

Help your child think of things to do. If there's a specific problem that's causing stress, talk together about what to do. Encourage your child to think of a couple of ideas. You can get the brainstorm started if necessary, but don't do all the work. Your child's active participation will build confidence. Support the good ideas and add to them as needed. Ask, "How do you think this will work?"

Listen and move on. Sometimes talking and listening and feeling understood is all that's needed to help a child's

frustrations begin to melt away. Afterwards, try changing the subject and moving on to something more positive and relaxing. Help your child think of something to do to feel better. Don't give the problem more attention than it deserves.

Limit stress where possible. If certain situations are causing stress, see if there are ways to change things. For instance, if too many after-school activities consistently cause homework stress, it might be necessary to limit activities to leave time and energy for homework.

Just be there. Kids don't always feel like talking about what's bothering them. Sometimes that's OK. Let your kids know you'll be there when they do feel like talking. Even when kids don't want to talk, they usually don't want parents to leave them alone. You can help your child feel better just by being there — keeping him or her company, spending time together. So if you notice that your child seems to be down in the dumps, stressed, or having a bad day — but doesn't feel like talking — initiate something you can do together. Take a walk, watch a movie, shoot some hoops, or bake some cookies. Isn't it nice to know that your presence really counts?

Be patient. As a parent, it hurts to see your child unhappy or stressed. But try to resist the urge to fix every problem. Instead, focus on helping your child, slowly but surely, grow into a good problem-solver — a kid who knows how to roll with life's ups and downs, put feelings into words, calm down when needed, and bounce back to try again.

Parents can't solve every problem as kids go through life. But by teaching healthy coping strategies, you'll prepare your kids to manage the stresses that come in the future.

Raising Confident Kids

It takes confidence to be a kid. Whether going to a new school or stepping up to bat for the first time, kids face a lot of uncharted territory.

Naturally, parents want to instill a can-do attitude in their kids so that they'll bravely take on new challenges and, over time, believe in themselves. While each child is a little different, parents can follow some general guidelines to build kids' confidence.

Self-confidence rises out of a sense of competence. In other words, kids develop confidence not because parents tell them they're great, but because of their achievements, big and small. Sure, it's good to hear encouraging words from mom and dad. But words of praise mean more when they refer to a child's specific efforts or new abilities.

When kids achieve something, whether it's brushing their own teeth or riding a bike, they get a sense of themselves as able and capable, and tap into that high-octane fuel of confidence.

Building self-confidence can begin very early. When babies learn to turn the pages of a book or toddlers learn to walk, they are getting the idea "I can do it!" With each new skill and milestone, kids can develop increasing confidence.

Parents can help by giving kids lots of opportunities to practice and master their skills, letting kids make mistakes and being there to boost their spirits so they keep trying. Respond with interest and excitement when kids show off a new skill, and reward them with praise when they achieve a

goal or make a good effort.

With plentiful opportunities, good instruction, and lots of patience from parents, kids can master basic skills — like tying their shoes and making the bed. Then, when other important challenges present themselves, kids can approach them knowing that they have already been successful in other areas.

Stay on the Sidelines

Of course, supervision is important to ensure that kids stay safe. But to help them really learn a new skill, it's also important not to hover. Give kids the opportunity to try something new, make mistakes, and learn from them.

For instance, if your son wants to learn how to make a peanut butter sandwich, demonstrate, set up the ingredients, and let him give it a try. Will he make a bit of a mess? Almost certainly. But don't swoop in the second some jelly hits the countertop. In fact, avoid any criticism that could discourage him from trying again. If you step in to finish the sandwich, your son will think, "Oh well, I guess I can't make sandwiches."

But if you have patience for the mess and the time it takes to learn, the payoff will be real. Someday soon he'll be able to say, "I'm hungry for lunch, so I'm going to make my own sandwich." You might even reply, "Great, can you make me one, too?" What a clear sign of your faith in his abilities!

Offer Encouragement and Praise

Sometimes, kids give up when frustrations arise. Help by encouraging persistence in the midst of setbacks. By trying

again, kids learn that obstacles can be overcome.

Once kids reach a goal, you'll want to praise not only the end result but also their willingness to stick with it. For instance, after your son has mastered making that peanut butter sandwich you might show your confidence by saying, "Next time, want to learn how to crack an egg?" Sandwich-fixing and egg-cracking might not seem like huge achievements, but they're important steps in the right direction — toward your child's independence.

Throughout childhood, parents have chances to prepare kids to take care of themselves. Sure, it's great to feel needed, but as kids steadily gain confidence and independence, their relationship with you can be even richer. You can be bonded, not just by dependence, but by love and shared pride in all they've achieved.

Eventually, your grown-up kids just might say thanks for how prepared they feel for the road ahead — a road they can take with confidence.