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Evaluating Report Cards

Does your child hide out at the neighbor's house when it's report card time? Before you go looking for her, read these five tips for dealing with the less-than-perfect report card.

1. Don't lose your cool: Though many people see report cards as motivating, they can also be demoralizing. "They can sap a child of his confidence," says Dr. Kenneth Shore, school psychologist and author of the Parent's Public School Handbook. "The report card is not a measure of your child's worth or of your parenting skills." But grades can have an impact on a child's future. Make this point constructively.

2. Accentuate the positive: Point out what your child is doing well, whether it's an academic subject or an extracurricular activity. "Children need to know where they show motivation because they may not be aware of their strengths," says Dorothy Rich, president of the Home and School Institute. If your child does poorly in math, but enjoys figuring out basketball players' free-throw averages, make the connection for him.

3. Look behind the grade: The report card only indicates that there is a problem. Compare your child's papers over the year to see his progress. Discuss whether he's involved in too many extracurricular activities. "Kids need time to get their work done," says Rich. If your child is trying her hardest and still not understanding the material, contact the teacher immediately.

4. Set goals for improvement: Goals help us get motivated, but be realistic. If a child is getting all C's on his report card now, expecting all A's the next time may be an unrealistic goal.

5. Contact but do not attack the teacher: "If a parent has any questions at all, the first thing he or she should do is call the teacher for clarification - not the guidance counselor or the vice principal," says Martie Fiske, a White House Distinguished Teacher. "A parent's first question should be: 'What's going on?'" Fiske suggests gathering more information before charging that something is wrong with the program or the teacher.