

How not to help your child pass exams.....

Every year, around about January, they start to knock on my door. Students (mostly, but not always boys), who are no longer coping with the stress and pressure of exams because of.....their parents.

Its a classic scenario. The mock results are out, the reports have gone home, and suddenly mum and dad begin to get stressed themselves that maybe their offspring is not working hard enough. The pressure at home begins to mount up and then it happens:

parent comes in and finds, for the third time that week that, instead of being in their room working the blasted child is out on his rollerblades, watching television or listening to music.

No matter that the parent, coming home from a day at work, likes to unwind when they get in; that can't be the case after a day at school can it? So the parent sparks. "Get up to your room and work" and then there's a row.

Am I saying that the teenager *shouldn't* be working at home at all? No, of course not. But hang on a minute, its about to get worse.....

An hour later the parent discovers the child still not working and then it goes something like this: "Right, that does it! From now on there's to be no more rollerblading, no more television, and you are not going out at all for the next three weeks. GET ON WITH YOUR WORK"

And the next day I get a knock on my door. Why? Because:

- 🕒 Everything enjoyable in the youngster's life has just been removed from them
- 🕒 There is nothing to look forward to any more
- 🕒 Study, which for this student has always been hard work, has now become intolerable and relentless
- 🕒 Home life is miserable
- 🕒 Parents aren't listening

Mostly these problems occur in families where the student is working generally but 'could do better'.....the ones that don't work at all seem to avoid this sort of treatment.

We all need encouragement, and we all need things to look forward to and to reward ourselves with. Why on earth do so many parents think that teenagers are different? Very often all this leads to the exact opposite result to the one intended.....the student ends up doing worse at school and attains poorer results than they would have done had they been left alone. Sometimes they run away from home or, worse, attempt suicide.

The only benefit is that the parents feel less stressed themselves, because they feel they have done something about the perceived problem. Often prior to this they have not noticed particularly, and this strong reaction is partly to alleviate a guilt feeling they have.

So, if this is all the wrong thing to do, what could be done to help?

Firstly, be very realistic about your daughter or son's actual potential. The people who know this best are the teachers. Accept what they say!! Don't try to force your child to work for A* grades if realistically they are going to struggle to get a C or an E.

Secondly, you also need to be realistic about what is an acceptable amount of work, both generally and also specifically for your little darling. If Trades Unions have been working towards a less than 40 hour week for adults, and the European working time directive states an absolute maximum of 48 hours unless voluntarily exceeded, let's not expect teenagers to do any more! Many parents forget that their children spend 25 hours working at school each week. That means that the amount of work at home should be about 15 hours, and an absolute maximum would be around 23....though for many students it would be cruel to expect them to work that long.

The working time directive (and I am so anti-E.U. that it galls me to quote it, but anyway here goes!) also states that there needs to be a minimum of 11 hours rest between work shifts, and a maximum of 6 days work a week (a requirement which predates the European union somewhat!!). Yet I hear teenagers telling me they are forced to work till bedtime from arrival home after school day after day.....

What ought to be happening instead is an agreed schedule that fits the student's work rhythms (not the parents'!) and which builds in quality time for rest, recreation, family life etc. A suggestion follows.....

Let's work with the 40 hour week, which I strongly believe should be the norm except perhaps for exceptional times such as near exams or coursework deadlines for instance. After school, that leaves 15 hours to make up at home. This could be agreed to be totally a week-night activity, leaving the whole weekend free of work. Or 2 hours per night and 5 hours at weekends, etc.

Fitting up to 3 hours of work into an evening should be fairly easy.....most of it could be done before dinner if the student likes to work straight after arrival home. Or work could start around 7 for 2 hours, with the other hours made up at the weekend.

You ought to have a homework timetable from the school (possibly not at A Level), which would form the basis for the planning of the schedule. Blocks of no more than about 45 minutes are ideal (studies show concentration on one task greatly reduces after this length of time). 5 or 10 minute breaks between blocks allow time to get a coffee (or let the previous one complete its journey through the system!).

Rather than a system of sanctions ("no more rollerblading!") which are unlikely to yield the desired results, the student needs rewards. Often these should be self-awarded, e.g. "When I've done this work I can have some chocolate/watch my favourite programme" etc. The parent can add to this on occasions "This has been a good week of work, I haven't had to remind you to do it, well done". It's far better for the teenager to feel they can please their parents than that they can never do so because they always have to do some more.

Parents need to remember too that part of the process of learning is one of learning how to make priorities. Sometimes there are so many deadlines, and so much work, that it can't all be done in the time available. Coping with stress is about knowing your limits and being able to stop work and say "that's it for today". Parents need to accept that what won't fit into the 40 hours will have to wait, but your help is needed here to get the priorities right.

What can be left, what needs longer, which teachers should be approached about asking for more time and, frankly, what can just be left because it was set simply because teachers are told “homework must be set”. If there’s time available it must be done, but if there isn’t then it has to be left. Nothing is gained from working into the small hours of the night and being wrecked for the rest of the week (though some do tell me they work best when everyone else has gone to bed.....if this is the case *genuinely* then they need to be left to mellow in the earlier evening!!).

OK, so what if the blessed littlun won’t even do anything like the 15 hours at home? You can still apply many of these principles to get them to do 1 hour, 2 hours, something more than what they have been doing. If you become confrontational you build up your own stress, which leads to more conflict, and that takes us back to the top of the article.

The most important thing, after all, is not that they get amazing exam results but that they still love and respect you and see you as someone to confide in and turn to in later life. You can always have another chance at taking the odd exam or ten. But if your relationship in the family has been blown it may never be repaired.

Go on, give them back their ‘blades, sit down and watch BLUE PETER with them, and take them out for a family meal at Makky Dees. And let them know that you love them and you will go on loving them even if the exam results are disastrous. More than anything else, telling them that might get them working!

As to how to study in the years leading up to the exams, TFG’s Study guide can help – see the website for a copy.

