

Parent-Teacher Conference

5 Things Teachers Wish Parents Knew: Your Children Can Do More Than You Think

By Jessica Lahey

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This week, I'm turning the tables and giving some space to the "teacher" half of the "Parent-Teacher Conference." When I ask teachers, "What one thing would you want your students' parents to know?" the same five points come up over and over again.

1. Your kids can do much more than you think they can do.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, your children do not need your help tying shoes, zipping jackets, sharpening pencils, packing their backpacks and lunch, or any of the million other tasks they expect you to do for them every day.

Take some direction from kindergarten teachers. If you think it takes an eternity to get your children out the door, imagine getting 20 children out the door, six times a day. Elementary school teachers are masters of delegation, so the child proficient at shoelaces becomes their "tying expert," and the boy with a skill for zippers becomes the designated "zipper helper," and before you can say "self-sufficient," every child in the class has learned to tie and zip and mitten themselves. The next time your child tells you they can't do something, step back and wait.

2. It's not healthy to give your child constant feedback. When

children require approval on every scribble, homework problem and picture they draw, it's probably because they have been offered feedback on every scribble, homework problem and picture they draw. It's vital that children develop their own internal locus of approval and honest self-assessment, because as they grow up and face hardship, they need to be able to look to themselves for strength and approval. If they can't, they will be much more susceptible to the superficial external approval that comes their way in the form of peer pressure, bullying and the usual social jostling. As you wean them off of your feedback, turn their "Mommy, is this picture good?" or "Daddy, did I do a good job?" back on them, and ask them how they feel about their work.

3. We promise not to believe everything your child says happens at home if you promise not to believe everything your child says happens in our classrooms. Experienced teachers know that not everything children share during circle time represents an accurate reflection of what goes on in their home. When, for example, my cousin's son told to his entire class that a robot had come to his house and removed his mommy's lady parts, his teacher was wise enough to remain skeptical. Accordingly, when your child comes home and claims that the teacher screamed and yelled at him in front of the entire class for his low test score, try to give his teacher the benefit of the doubt until you've had a chance to talk to the teacher about it.

4. Your children learn and act according to what you do, not what you say. You are your child's first and best teacher, and they learn more from your actions rather than your words. When you tell your child that it's rude to text during conversations, yet you continue to read your email while pretending to listen to him talk about his day, you are teaching him to distrust your words and your intent, while reinforcing the very behavior you seek to modify.

In the same vein, if you want to promote a behavior such as a love of

learning, model that, too. Seek out new knowledge and experiences; learn something new just for the sake of learning. As teacher S.Q. wrote in an email, “Model intellectual curiosity and a visceral pleasure in learning. Not just the brainy stuff, but anything of interest (how to clean spark plugs, what kinds of wood work best on a wood lathe, what the fox says). Show your own interest in learning by reading, thinking aloud, wondering aloud.”

5. Teach your children that mistakes aren’t signs of weakness but a vital part of growth and learning. Let your children see you fail, admit to your mistakes, and talk openly about how you have learned from those mistakes. As teacher K.M. wrote in an email, “Failure is part of the process. It’s what they do after they fail that matters. If you pick them up after their every failure, they learn nothing about how to begin again.”

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