

Why your teen may be failing 1

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IT COULD BE as simple as a power struggle, as serious as depression or as timeless as love

For most parents, having their child do well in school is a priority. We all want them to have the best opportunity in life, and many of us feel that education is the key. When their marks start to go down, our concerns start to go up, and we may not be able to handle our worries in the best possible way, thus creating a power struggle between parents and their teens.

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Parents need to be ready to listen and communicate calmly in order to discover why their child is struggling in school.

I hear so many parents express frustration, anger and concern as to why their very bright and capable daughter or son is doing so poorly at school. Usually these concerns show up in high school at a crucial time when grades matter the most. The parents worry that their teen won't get into the CEGEP of their choice, or worse yet, won't get into university and will then end up with a poor paying job and a feeling of failure.

Several reasons might explain why your teen is falling behind. If in earlier years, he had done well in school, this decline may be due to having difficulty with certain subjects. This problem could be easily remedied with tutoring. The more challenging concern is when you know that your teen is capable but just not applying himself.

One reason your teen is less focused on his schoolwork could be due to a power struggle. Schoolwork is one of the few areas where your teen has full control. If your teen is feeling angry or resentful about your rules, your consequences or your pressuring him to study longer, this is the easiest place to take back his power and get his revenge. This can occur without your teen being consciously aware of why he is no longer motivated to do well. But in my experience, it doesn't take long after I start asking questions and notice a small smile appearing on his face, for both of us to realize that it is payback time. I have even heard some teens admit that as much as they want to do well, they are so angry at their parents that they are ready to fail just to, as they put it, "get even."

It's not that these teens are vindictive and hateful, it is that they feel stressed and frustrated by the endless pressure they feel their parents continue to exert on them and they feel that this is their only way to assert themselves. How sad is that?

Another common reason for a decline in grades could be distraction due to peer pressure. For a teenager, his most important influence is his friends. At this time of his life, his parents take a back seat to being accepted and acknowledged by his peer group. If his friends are a bad influence or they think it's not cool to do well, this could certainly affect your teen's motivation to excel.

Another possibility could be that your teen has fallen "in love" for the first time. If this is your teen's first serious relationship, he can be so focused on spending time with his new girlfriend that nothing else matters. Even so, there are steps you can take as parents to welcome this new person into the family and still have boundaries that permit your teen the time he needs to focus on schoolwork.

Another reason for marks to decline could be depression. Feeling like a failure, being bullied, not fitting in or feeling rejected, can affect teens deeply enough to develop into a depression. Remember, teens are also dealing with heightened hormones, questions about their identity and confusion about their feelings. They tend to be hypersensitive to situations that you might consider minor, but which could have devastating effects on their self-esteem and self-worth. If you suspect your teen is clinically depressed, please bring him to a doctor to be evaluated. He might need to be medicated for a short period of time, as well as receive some psychotherapy to help him through this difficult time.

The important thing for you to remember is whenever there is a significant change in your child's behaviour, there is always a reason. I have suggested only a few but there are others, including changes in the home like tension between the parents, a move, re-marriage, a death or serious illness in the family. These are all situations that can affect your teen's capacity to cope and may manifest in how he functions at school.

The good news is that once you find the reason for the change in behaviour, the problem can be fixed. With positive communication, good listening skills and the willingness to negotiate and find a win/win solution for all, these problems can dissolve and disappear. The challenge is for you to be able to sit down with your teen and have a calm conversation about what is going on in his life at this time. Don't have the conversation when you're feeling angry and worried after reading a disappointing report card. You must be ready to listen as well and communicate calmly and with an open mind. Being open to looking for solutions and understanding the reasons he is not applying himself will go far toward ending the power struggle and improving your relationship with your teen.