Raising a Successful Student from Birth Through Adolescence[1]

By Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D.

We are living in a period in which it is clear that U.S. students are falling behind students from other countries, particularly in math and science. Numerous corporations now outsource their technical work to other countries or will hire only foreign workers in the U.S. to do advanced mathematical and scientific work because foreign graduates are so much more proficient than American ones. At the same time, many parents of newborns are already worrying about whether their children will get into the college of their choice and, as a result, are already planning their children's academic and extracurricular careers. The federal government wants "no child left behind" and is defining "behind" in terms of test scores.

Schools are responding to these pressures, which include increased demands that their students score in acceptable percentiles on standardized tests, by teaching children the three R's and other subjects at earlier and earlier ages. First grade is no longer the time when children learn to read and do simple arithmetic. Rather, in many first grades children are expected to enter as proficient readers, and good adders and subtractors, and six-year-olds who are not up to this standard are put in "special" classes. As a result, kindergarten teachers and, even, preschool teachers are now charged with the job of teaching reading and math. Kindergarten and preschool, which used to be a time primarily for introducing children to the learning community in a gradual and pleasant way have now become pressurized and much less fun.

I offer a personal anecdote to illustrate how much things have changed since I was a child (admittedly, quite a ways back). As a kindergartener, I very much wanted to learn to read, mainly so that I could make sense of the comic strips that came on Sundays. Repeatedly, I begged my parents to teach me to read. They had been told that first grade was the time to learn reading, that reading should be taught only by teachers who were specialists in this area, and that I would be damaged if my "amateur" parents tried to teach me to read, so I was told that I had to wait. The first day of first grade I discovered to my horror that one of my classmates, the daughter of a well-known professor at the University of Chicago, could already read. Outraged, I confronted my parents with this scandalous news and said bitterly that my friend was able to read because she was lucky and had a father who was a professor. I am happy to report that I caught up in reading and that I forgave my parents.

Today, four-year-olds (and even younger children) are not only being taught reading and arithmetic in preschool whether they are ready or not, but they are also being enrolled in "enrichment" classes after preschool. An article that ran in the New York Times entitled, "Jockeying for Position, at Age 4," describes the popularity of these "enrichment" programs for preschoolers. The director of one

[1] Adapted from a talk given in Oak Park, IL, October 18, 2005

program said, “It’s a perception that the more you do for your child, the more successful they will be.” One of the mothers said that at the preschool, “There is a lot of pressure. There is a lot of competitiveness of how much children are supposed to learn at this age.”

Unfortunately, the emphasis on earlier and earlier learning, high test scores, and college admissions has meant that the most important question, namely, “*What are the elements that go into the making of a good student?*” is rarely addressed outside of the narrow testing parameters I have been discussing. This, though, is the question I am going to address, as well as the related question: *“How can we as parents best help our children to become curious, committed, creative, and effective learners?”* If you are hearing about the Smart Love approach for the first time, some of my answers may surprise you, but let me assure you that they are supported not only by the decades of clinical research done by my late husband and myself, but also by independent contemporary child development research across diverse research approaches and contexts, some of which I will mention briefly.

I, too, recommend that you start at an early age to foster good students – in fact, I suggest that you start at birth. But rather than focusing on teaching any particular content at any particular age, *my approach is designed to avoid dampening and to encourage those character traits that are indispensable for good scholarship.*

What, then are the qualities of a good student and a not so good student. Let me begin by saying that it is not helpful to answer this question in terms of scores and grade point averages for a number of reasons.

- We all know students who did well for a while and then lost all drive and ambition, so a snapshot of a student doing well does not mean that student will have academic staying power.
- We all know students who are so driven by needs for approval and good grades that they parrot what others say and are unable to think creatively and flexibly. They are uncomfortable with complex questions and prefer problems to which there are easy solutions.

Students like these are often undone by difficult subject matter, or by times when they feel confused and don’t understand what they are being taught. They may react to a difficult course by dropping it, passively giving up, or by turning to “shortcuts” such as various forms of cheating.

Often these students also have difficulty asking for help or ask for help continuously in an effort to get someone (teacher, parent, fellow student) to do the work for them.

If grades and test scores are not the measure of a good student, what is? For sure, the following characteristics are crucial:

- A stable desire to learn that doesn’t depend solely on the appeal of the subject matter.
- The ability to enjoy the process of learning and not just the outcome (the grade).
- The capacity to stick to the learning goal in the face of difficult subject matter, setbacks, and times of not understanding the material.
- The ability to study in the face of feeling tired or having attractive options, such as calls from friends, favorite TV shows, etc.
- Being willing to get help when necessary yet not looking for unnecessary help out of a general feeling of incompetence.

I suggest that parenting decisions made from birth onwards in the years before the child even enters school can either foster or interfere with children's abilities to become good students as I have just defined this. The sad fact is that much of the parenting advice given by pediatricians and parenting experts is harmful to children, in that it interferes with their inborn curiosity and ability to learn.

The good news is that, because parents exert a tremendous influence on their children from birth onwards, children's learning ability is not fixed at birth (with very few exceptions, children are not born slow learners, inconsistent homework finishers, bad test takers and paper writers etc.). It is a myth that genes and other inborn traits determine what kind of student a child will be. Increasingly biologists understand that genes operate in and their expressions are shaped by the environment, both internal and external. For example, rats bred to be hypertensive only develop hypertension if they are reared by hypertensive mothers! If rats who have been bred to have genes for hypertension are reared by foster mothers who are not hypertensive, they don't develop hypertension. It's good to keep reminding ourselves that each cell in one part of our body (say a muscle) could have developed into a cell in any other part of our body (say a nerve). These cells all started with the same genome. The type of cell they became was determined by relevant differences in the cells' environments at particular times during the cell's development. As Gilbert Gottlieb, a cutting edge researcher in developmental biology puts it, "genetic activity does not by itself produce finished traits such as blue eyes. . . the concept of the genetic determination of traits is truly outmoded, as is the concept of a genetically determined reaction range."[2]

Let's begin by discussing the issue of babies and sleep, a topic that would on the surface appear to have little to do with scholarship in later years. In spite of what we have shown to be the harm in "sleep training," the euphemistic term for letting babies cry themselves to sleep in order to get them on a convenient schedule, this strategy is still widely recommended by pediatricians and parenting authors and practiced by parents. I have written about various aspects of the damage done by this practice[3], but now I would like to focus on its implication for the child's ability to learn.

No baby has the capacity to evaluate the care she receives. Put differently, every baby loves whatever care she gets and wants more of it, regardless of the quality of that care. When babies are allowed to cry uncomforted, they conclude that the unhappiness they feel is what their parents want for them and they learn to want more of it. Moreover, uncomforted babies learn that they are unable to get their parents to respond. From the beginning, they conclude that requests for help (which is what their crying represents) will not be met. Their inborn optimism about relationships has been dented, and this will later make it difficult for them to ask for help when appropriate. Their uncomforted cries may also become the basis of learned needs for unhappiness, which, as I will discuss shortly, seriously interfere with children's (and adults') abilities to learn. Our clinical research findings are supported by experimental research. For example, it has been shown that when some adults are responsive to 4-6 month old babies and other adults are not, babies not only prefer the responsive adults, but also do better on **cognitive** tasks than do babies who are paired with unresponsive adults. From early infancy, then, cognitive abilities are dependent on the quality of relationships – and responsiveness is one of the key ingredients of a good relationship. When parents reject advice that tells them to allow their baby to cry

[2] Gottlieb, p. 5.
[3] *Smart Love: The Comprehensive Guide to Understanding, Regulating, and Enjoying Your Child.* Smart Love Press, LLC, Chicago, 2011.

herself to sleep and, instead, soothe her and use their relationship to help her get to sleep, their baby's inborn optimism will be confirmed and she will be confident about asking for help when appropriate.

Another seemingly inconsequential issue which impacts a child's later abilities as a student is babyproofing and the related issue of saying "No" to a baby for safety reasons. Once a baby starts crawling, parents are often told not to babyproof the house – not to make the environment safe for the mobile infant or toddler – in order to prevent the baby from developing unrealistic expectations that parents will make the world safe for her. Rather, parents are told to say "No!" when the baby nears fragile objects (Aunt Susan's vase) or dangerous places (plugs, hot stoves).

The problem, however, is that this advice is based on a complete misunderstanding of the young child's mind. Babies and toddlers are neither suicidal or given to vandalism. If they were old enough to understand that valuable things can break and that they could be hurt by outlets and hot stoves, they would, on their own, decide to avoid these hazards. There is no way a baby or toddler can understand that a plug is dangerous or a vase sitting quietly on a table is both valuable and likely to break. So when parents say "No!" in a disapproving tone, the baby can only conclude that for some mysterious reason her parents are displeased with her. She has no idea what she has done, only that *sometimes parents get angry at her when she is an exploring mood*.

Parents are only trying to safeguard their things and/or the baby, but without meaning to, what they teach their baby is that they do not want her to be curious and explore her world. Obviously, this is not a good foundation for later learning. On the other hand, if parents do not protect children from their immaturity either because of permissiveness or a misguided notion that "natural consequences" will teach the child to be more careful, the "owies" and other harm that result will also dampen children's curiosity and eagerness to explore. Negative experiences that result from parents' failure to offer gentle protection teach the child to fear or mistrust her own competence. If, on the other hand, parents babyproof the environment at home and scoop the baby or toddler up and divert her in a friendly way when she heads for something problematic outside the home, the baby will enjoy exploring and her curiosity and self-confidence will be enhanced – an excellent foundation for later learning.

Another interaction with your baby that can either foster or interfere with her ability to become a good student is your response when she is struggling to reach a goal. If your nine-month-old is trying to put a square block in a round hole in a shape-sorter and isn't succeeding, after a minute or so it is tempting to show her which hole to put it in. The problem is that if she is satisfied with her effort and is comfortable with not succeeding, your intervention will show her that you are not comfortable with failure and soon she won't be either. One of the qualities of a good student is stick-to-itiveness – the ability to keep working at a problem even when the solution is not immediately forthcoming. At the same time, if your baby or young child gets frustrated, step in and help rather than prolong her upset. The message you want to give her is that you admire a good effort, but that you won't leave her to suffer if she wants help. That is also an important ingredient in successful learning – the ability to ask for help when necessary without feeling shame.

From the point of view of fostering curiosity and self-confidence, both of which are essential qualities of good students, it is especially important to avoid saying, "No," to young children who are asking, exploring, wanting companionship, or making mistakes. At first this may sound impractical, because you know your baby or young child is too immature to be making her own decisions and needs

your protection and guidance. Forethought, diplomacy and positive thinking are as important in parenting as they are in the United Nations. From the two-year-old's perspective, there is all the difference in the world between asking a parent to read a story and being told, "No, I'm busy, not now!" and being told, "I would love to – just let me finish putting the dinner in the oven." The first response makes the child feel she shouldn't have asked or shouldn't want to hear the story; the second response tells the child that the request was appropriate and that her parent would like to respond but there has to be a short delay. The child who concludes she shouldn't have asked to be read to may also conclude she would rather avoid books and reading altogether. The child who gets the positive response will conclude that her parent enjoys reading and reading to her as much as she does and the child will be inclined to turn to books for pleasure.

Similarly, if your three-year-old sees older children playing basketball and starts to run onto the court thinking that she will be welcome and able to hold up her end, try not to say, "No, you are too little," "No, you can't play," etc. The idea is not to give her the message that her enthusiasm for trying new things and her belief in her ability to take on a challenge are silly or ill-founded. If you say instead, "Doesn't that look like fun! When you are older you will certainly be able to play with the other children. For now, would you like to get one of the basketballs over there and play catch with me?" The object is to manage the child's behavior in a way that keeps her safe and is sensible without denting her optimism, confidence, and eagerness to wade into new and unfamiliar areas, which are qualities she will need later as a student.

I have been focusing on the fact that how you choose to respond to your preschool baby and child can either foster or interfere with her ability to develop the emotional qualities she will need as a student. **In addition, for the first three years of your child's life you are your child's main teacher of content – words, ideas, answers, and so on**. From reading *Pat the Bunny* to your baby, to naming what your baby is pointing at, to answering your three-year-old's endless "Why?" questions, to showing your preschooler interesting things in the world, you are the model for teaching and learning that your child will carry with her into formal school.

These teaching and learning interactions are so woven into the fabric of everyday life with preschoolers that parents often give them little thought. But because they affect your children's attitudes toward and approaches to learning, it is crucial to tailor your teaching responses to children's ages and interests. Most important is to make sure all along that you are responding to your child's expressed wishes to learn and not imposing your own agenda. For example, I once treated a two-and-a-half-year-old child whose parents had managed to teach him all the States and their Capitols. They were very proud of their son's accomplishment, and whenever friends came over they would ask him to perform for them. The problem, of course, was that the child learned the States and Capitols to please his parents – **no** two-year-old would want to know this information on his own, and, as a result, he was very conflicted. He was happy to make his parents proud, but he also felt pressured and controlled. These negative feelings expressed themselves as stuttering, which was the symptom that brought the little boy to me. Once I explained to the parents how, with the best of intentions, they were making too many demands on their child, they immediately took the pressure off him. They stopped teaching him content that didn't interest him and showing him off to their friends. Within three months, the stuttering stopped.

When your baby points to something and wants to know the word for it, this is a golden opportunity to teach her, because you are responding to an interest she has expressed. How you answer is also important. For example, if she points to Fluffy, the family dog, and you tell her she is pointing at "Fluffy," she may go through a period of calling all other dogs "Fluffy." In that case, her learning will not be as straightforward – she will find it more difficult to sort out and correct categories of things on her own. If, on the other hand, she points and you say, "dog," eventually she will look at a dog in the park and say, "Dog." Once she realizes that there are any number of animals that go by the name, "dog," and she can recognize their characteristics, you can begin to identify particular dogs. At that point, it will be helpful when she points at Fluffy to say, "Yes, that's Fluffy dog." In other words, with the exception of the important people in her life (Mom, Dad, Grandpa, Grandma, etc.) first teach your young child category names and introduce proper names only when she has mastered the categories. If your child makes a mistake -- for example, she looks at another dog and says, "Fluffy" – it's important not to dent her confidence in her ability to name things by saying something like, "No, that's not Fluffy, that's Herman." Rather, praise her good effort – "Yes, you're right, that dog looks a lot like Fluffy. His name is Herman dog."

People often make the mistake of thinking that spending a lot of time with a young child is intellectually deadening for the adult. You can see, though, that teaching your child in a responsive and age-appropriate way is actually both challenging and intellectually interesting.

If there is particular information like colors, numbers, shapes, and letters that you want to introduce, try to do it tactfully and diplomatically so the child doesn't feel pressured or inadequate, and you avoid a power struggle. For example, when parents teach in the form: "Here are some crayons – how many crayons are there?" the child may not feel like answering even if she knows the answer. Then parents sometimes make the mistake of saying, "I know you know the answer – tell me how many or you can't have a crayon." Suddenly learning and knowing has gotten enmeshed in a power struggle and punishments and rewards are being attached. The learning is no longer fun and an end in itself. You can avoid this entirely by never testing children on what they are learning from you. For example, as you hand your child crayons you can say, "Here are two crayons." Over time, the child will learn the difference between one, two, three, four crayons, etc. without any conflict. You will be surprised one day when on her own she takes three crayons, saying, "Look, I have three crayons." The same approach works with colors, letters, and shapes. You can say, "Here's a blue crayon." Or "Oh, you are pointing at the blue crayon," rather than "What color is that?"

Another opportunity for teaching children is the "why" phase that occurs sometime around three years of age. Parents can feel persecuted, manipulated, or just plain annoyed by the barrage of seemingly never-ending "whys." In fact, the continuous stream of "whys" is a developmental achievement in that children are beginning to be interested in learning about complex causal relationships well beyond their ability to understand on their own. The understanding of complex causal relationships is another building block in achieving academic success. The ideal answer to your three-year-old's "why" questions takes into account her age and attention span and never involves impatience or irritation. If you answer each "why?" with a short answer that fits her understanding, children will feel pleased. True, this pleasure may incite them to say, "Why?" again, but in the long run, that is good. As you answer each "Why?" your child gets the message that: you enjoy teaching her; you are interested

in her thinking; you approve of her curiosity; and, that learning is fun. When parents get irritated and say, "Just because," or, "This is the last "Why?" I'm answering for now," children get the message that their curiosity is unwanted or bad and shouldn't be pursued. When parents misjudge the child's intellectual sophistication and give long and complicated answers that the child cannot understand, the child gets the message that being curious isn't all that much fun, that asking for help doesn't pay, and that she is not very smart because she can't understand the explanation.

The "why" phase is time-limited, so if you can hang in and answer the tenth "Why?" you will be helping your child become a good student in later life. If in response to the child's "Why?" your answers get you into realms you aren't familiar with, it is perfectly ok to say, "I don't know the answer, but it's an excellent question. Would you like me to look it up?" If the child says yes, look it up, but translate it into language the child can understand. For example, if your three-and-a-half-year-old says, "Why is the sky blue?" and you respond, "Because of the way the sun's rays come through the air." The child says, "Why?" You say, "the air bends the rays from the sun and that makes different colors," which exhausts your knowledge of the subject. At the next "Why," you can offer to look up the answer and then explain it in a child's terms. "Different colors are different lengths and blue is the shortest and gets caught up in little parts of the air and sent in all directions. That's why we see so much blue." If the child asks "Why?" again, you can simply say, "That's all I know about it," but it's a terrific question." I can't overemphasize that the "Why?" stage is a marvelous opportunity to show your child that learning can be fun and that adults want to help. At the same time, unfortunately, it can teach the child not to ask for help and not to pursue intellectual interests.

Sometimes young children may reject your explanation out of hand. One child responded to his parents' answer to his question about the color of the sky by saying, "That's not why the sky is blue – the sky is blue because Elmo is blue and he likes blue and he painted the sky blue." At this point, there is no point in getting into a power struggle with your child over the correct answer. Just as you shouldn't rain on her parade when she tells you she can run faster than you can, if she is in a fanciful rather than an information-gathering mood, that is age-appropriate as well. You might simply respond to the Elmo theory by saying something like, "That's an interesting explanation!"

I have been trying to give you some examples of how you can interact with your baby and young child so as to help her develop abilities and interests she will need in order to succeed as a student in later years. Now I would like to spend some time on how to help the nursery school through grade-school child.

I can't emphasize enough how important the big picture is when we are talking about parenting decisions. What good does it do to teach three, four, and even five year olds reading and math skills if they are not sufficiently mature to enjoy learning them, with the result that they enter first grade disliking school and the learning process. If we are thinking long-term about what makes a good student, wouldn't we do better keep in mind the real function of nursery school and kindergarten– to introduce children to the school culture and to make sure that above all children enjoy school and the learning process. Three- to five-year-olds who arrive at school to find they have a choice between painting, building with blocks, playing circle games etc. and who have plenty of time for cooperative play with their friends and who spend a reasonable amount of "rug time" when teachers read a story or ask the children to share an experience with the class are likely to enjoy school and to think learning is

fun. Three to five year olds who are expected to sit for twenty to thirty minutes at a time with worksheets that teach letters and numbers and who are tested frequently are likely to withdraw, to say they "don't care" or "don't want to" and to develop stomach aches and headaches before or during school hours. I can't overemphasize this point – to the extent that non-traditional, rigorous content is going to be introduced into the nursery school and kindergarten curricula, schools must make the teaching of this content interesting, enjoyable, age-appropriate, and flexible in terms of the different rates at which children at this age develop.[4] When young children are overwhelmed by academic demands and are left feeling inadequate, sour, resentful, pressured, or phobic, we are failing our job of preparing these children for academic success in later years.

Let's turn to the question, "What can parents do in the years from three to six to foster the qualities that make for a good student?" At this age, you remain your child's most important teacher and role model. If you love to read, chances are your child will too, especially if you also love to read to your child. Most important is to make learning fun. For example, it's much better to count the number of red cars on the road and then the number of blue cars, and so on, than it is to sit the child down and have her try to identify colors. Another fun game is to have the child take marbles or grapes and hold a certain number behind her back and then you guess how many she is holding. After you have guessed, you can count them out to see if you were correct. Sometimes we are asked, "If you make learning all fun and games, what will happen when my child has to buckle down at school." But since the typical three- to six-year-old is not old enough to enjoy regular instruction, making learning fun is not only an age-appropriate form of teaching, but will launch the child into the later grades with a positive attitude toward the pursuit of knowledge.

I should add that it is important not to overestimate the maturity of a three-, four- or five-year-old who has taught herself to read by watching Sesame Street or looking at road signs. While such a child may be reading, it is crucial not to treat her as if she were an older child and expect her to read consistently or on demand. If you start to show your four-year-old off to friends and neighbors, you may suddenly find she won't read anymore. Similarly, even if your young child can read, she is no more mature emotionally than her non-reading peers. It is a mistake to say to the child who asks you to read her a story, "You can read on your own now, why don't you read to me." Young children who read need the emotional pleasure of being read to every bit as much as young non-readers. In general, if you have a young child who is precocious academically, it is crucial to continue to meet her age-appropriate emotional needs, or you may discover that she stops progressing because her ability to read or do math has started to rob her of the attention she needs.

Once children are established in grade school, the bulk of questions I hear from parents have to do with homework – what rules should be made, how much help should be given, what to do if homework isn't done well or isn't handed in, etc. etc. I will get to the issue of the struggling child shortly. For now, I want to make a few basic points about how to maintain the momentum of a successful student. First, I cannot overemphasize that there is no child, no matter how intelligent, who doesn't at times need help with a subject or assignment. This is a normal part of childhood, not an indication that your child is somehow inadequate. So don't second guess your child when she says she needs help by responses such as, "Did you try it? I'm sure you can do it." If a child asks for help, she is

[4] This is the approach taken by the Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool, www.smartlovefamily.org.

feeling inadequate to the task, whether or not that feeling reflects what she might be able to do at other times or contexts.

Most important is to encourage your child to ask for help when she needs it. Too many children get themselves into a deep hole at school because they didn't understand something, were ashamed to ask their teacher or to tell their parents, and then became increasingly confused when the content they didn't understand became the basis for other learning. I saw a child in treatment who was failing French because he had never grasped the need for agreement between verbs, adjectives, and nouns, which is much different than in English. He had, therefore, understood little of what he was taught after he missed that basic information. This boy needed help from me with his difficulty asking for help, but he also needed a French tutor to help him to catch up with the rest of the class. If in the process of helping your child you discover that she doesn't understand a basic concept, be careful not to show dismay (I can't believe you haven't learned that yet!") but to offer a positive response ("You know, we had better stop for a second and clarify this idea – it will make the rest of the assignment a lot easier to do.")

Another strategy for the child who is learning to cope with homework is to help by providing a quiet time – perhaps after school and before dinner, or right after dinner, during which you read, write and answer emails, or pay bills, the TV is off, and the child can work in the same room. The child won't feel isolated and you will be available to help when necessary.

The child's most important challenge in the early grades is to be socialized into the school culture. At first, socialization has to do with the need to sit still, raise hands to talk, take turns, and so on. Later socialization is organized around the need to take responsibility for homework. It can be very difficult for children who find themselves with homework for the first time to understand that they have to do their homework even when they are tired, don't feel well, would rather watch T.V., want to keep playing outside with friends, or find the assignment difficult to do. They often pout, sulk, cry, or outright refuse to make the effort. The challenge for parents is to walk the line between being sympathetic and insisting that homework must be done, and the line between being helpful and simply doing the work. You can begin with a statement like, "I understand that you are tired, but this work needs to be done. Why don't you get started and I will sit here with you. If you get stuck, I will help you." Once your child realizes that you are not abandoning her and that you understand how difficult it can be to have to work when she doesn't feel like it, but at the same time that there is no question in your mind that the work needs to get done, she will usually get to it without too much more protesting.

Another important issue in creating good learners is how to respond to a good effort. The best response is to praise the child's hard work ("You really stuck with that problem and worked hard – good job!") and to avoid rewards ("If you finish your homework by eight, you can watch TV until nine), punishments (if you don't get your homework done, you can't see your friends this weekend) and also to avoid statements that imply that you view qualities of the child, like her intelligence, as linked to outcomes or success ("Good job – you are so smart!").

Remember that the long-term goal is to instill a love of learning and the confidence and ability to stick with and master difficult material in the face of setbacks. Rewards devalue the intrinsic pleasure of learning – the child who is promised rewards for learning assumes that the rewards are needed because the learning process is unpleasant or difficult and is not genuinely or sufficiently valuable in and of itself. Punishments give children the same message – schoolwork is an unpleasant chore that gets done

in order to avoid negative consequences, not for the joy of learning. A more subtle finding is that responding to children's finished products by telling children they are intelligent or focusing on grades backfires and actually has a negative impact on their ability to function well as students.

For example, Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck found that when children who succeed at a task are told that they are very smart, these children conclude that they are smart because they succeeded and that their intelligence and value are contingent on continued success – that if they are less successful, this means that they are not as intelligent as was first thought. These children become afraid of encountering information they don't understand and, therefore, they subsequently have trouble handling difficult assignments. They try to protect their "smartness" by avoiding new and challenging problems, or, when confronted with these problems, they limit their efforts to the parts they know and can solve well. Sometimes, children who are labeled "gifted" or "talented" become overly concerned with justifying that label and are unwilling to meet the kind of challenges that will enhance their skills.

In contrast, recognizing and praising children's genuine hard work and stick-to-itiveness increases the likelihood that children will enjoy their work and, especially, will seek out and enjoy intellectual challenges. In other words, praising your child for a good effort is much better than praising her for her ability.

I would like to turn now to the topic of children who are struggling in school. We have already talked about the child who is somewhat turned off the process of learning because her curiosity is blunted, she is worried about outcomes, or she is discouraged by premature expectations, and so on. We have also discussed solutions to this negative attitude toward learning, which mainly consist of concentrating your parenting responses on recognizing and appreciating your child's real efforts, and responding to her needs for help by sharing new learning strategies when appropriate in a non-judgmental, palatable way, such as praising a good effort, teaching the preschool child in a low key manner that makes learning enjoyable, babyproofing, having patience in the "why" phase, stopping rewards and punishments and substituting academic help and partnership, and so on.

There is another group of children who are having a very difficult time in school because they are in the grip of psychological conflicts. These children may be disruptive in class, have difficulty sitting still and concentrating on what they are reading, they may "lose" their assignments on the way home, they may refuse to complete assignments, and so on. These children have developed what we call "inner unhappiness." There are two kinds of happiness, primary and secondary. Primary happiness refers to a sense of inner well-being, secondary happiness refers to the enjoyment that comes from everyday activities such as reading, playing a musical instrument or a sport, talking with friends, and so on. You can find a detailed discussion of these two kinds of happiness in *Smart Love: The Comprehensive Guide to Understanding, Regulating, and Enjoying Your Child.* I am just going to touch on them here as they relate to our topic.

One of our most important discoveries was that babies are born loving their parents and feeling loved by them, and that because of their immaturity, babies cannot evaluate the quality of the care they get. They believe that whatever care they get, whether or not the care accurately meets their needs, is ideal and they will learn to want more of it. This quality of newborns has been demonstrated in other animals. For example, Regina Sullivan has shown that up until 9 days of age, rats that are given electric

shock at the same time as they are exposed to the odor of their mother's milk develop a strong attraction to the milk odor, rather than an aversion, as you might think. That preference persisted into adulthood, long after the rats had matured enough to reject experiences that were paired with painful stimuli, and it could not be reversed later by classical conditioning.

The point is that if babies get care that doesn't meet their emotional needs, for example, when parents follow advice that tells them to leave babies to cry uncomforted, babies will believe that the unhappiness they feel is good because it is what their parents want for them. Like the rat pups, babies will learn to need and want unhappiness. As they grow older, their primary happiness will consist to some degree of needs for unhappiness. They will need some degree of this familiar discomfort to maintain an inner equilibrium and they will carry this learned need for unhappiness into adulthood, which is why I called my self-help book for adults, *Addicted to Unhappiness*.

Many children who are diagnosed with ADD, ADHD and medicated are actually struggling with inner unhappiness learned in early childhood. Much of the antisocial behavior, the inconsistency in their schoolwork, the accident-proneness, the inattentiveness, the opposition to taking care of themselves by getting their homework done is actually driven by learned needs for unhappiness. The good news is that these children can be helped to reconnect with the optimism and wish for genuine pleasure that all babies bring into the world and that needs for unhappiness can be left behind. Inner unhappiness can manifest in many different ways in school settings.

One common expression of inner unhappiness in a school setting is the disruptive child who doesn't pay attention, has difficulty sitting still, and interrupts the class by talking out of turn. The dynamic at work here is that the negative attention the child receives has the meaning of being cared for. Remember the rat studies in which the rat pups develop positive feelings for odors that are paired with electric shock and that this preference continues into adulthood. Children who have learned to need unhappiness, which they mislabel as happiness, often seek out that unhappiness in the classroom. When a child is soothed by making teachers angry, the worst possible response is a punitive one, because punitive responses (which include aversively repetitive assignments, isolation, withholding of activities the child likes, such as recess, and so on) simply strengthen the part of the child that derives well-being from provoking negative responses. If teachers apply Smart Love principles and respond firmly but with understanding, for example, "I can see that you are having trouble paying attention – come sit here by me and let's see if that helps," the child's inborn wishes for positive relationship pleasure will be strengthened. Moreover, teachers should take every possible opportunity to give these children *positive* attention, so they understand that they can be noticed for good behavior as well as bad behavior and they have the chance to experience the superiority of eliciting positive responses.

The same principles apply at home – parents need to manage a disruptive child's behavior, but the more they use positive, friendly means, the less the child's appetite for negative responses will be increased and the more the child will learn to appreciate and seek out positive responses. Sometimes the disruptive child needs professional help to get back on the road to productivity at school. The important thing to look for in a professional is someone who understands that the child is not "bad," or "manipulative." The therapist who understands this child will not become angry or upset when the child is provocative and, ultimately, will help the child to experience the happiness that comes from a positive, unconflicted relationship, with the result that the child will become able to choose this

happiness herself. Once the child's appetite for conflict diminishes and her appetite for genuine closeness and caring is liberated, the disruptive child will usually become a productive, functional classmate.

In general, when children are struggling in school parents and teachers need to keep in mind that the good news is that the problem is almost never genes or chemical imbalances, but rather the problem is being fueled by children's learned needs to create unhappiness for themselves and that these learned needs for unhappiness can be unlearned. Punishing, isolating, disapproving, and criticizing these children will backfire, because these responses supply the kind of fuel that is feeding the problem in the first place. Offering help, caring, patience, and building on strengths rather than engaging the child around weaknesses will show the child that the best happiness comes from positive relationships and exercising his or her capabilities.

Another key to success in helping these children is to anticipate and not be thrown by backsliding, which is always part of the healing process. When the child's constructive motives gain influence, needs for unhappiness go ungratified and reassert themselves causing backsliding. Over time, the child will recognize the superiority of constructive pleasure and will become less vulnerable to the pull of unhappiness masquerading as happiness.

The following is a short summary of the principles I have been discussing for raising children to become good students.

- Always keep in mind that the goal is not to make a child succeed in any particular subject or on any particular assignment or test, but to encourage a lifelong love of learning and the ability to enjoy and stick with an intellectual challenge.
- Start when children are babies to encourage their curiosity (babyproofing, answering "why" questions, avoiding "No's").
- Always comfort crying babies (show them that help is always available and you don't want them to be unhappy).
- Make learning fun and tailor it to your child's age and attention span and avoid the impulse to test your child or show off her knowledge.
- Be sure to meet children's emotional needs for closeness, cuddles, to be read to, even when children have learned to read.
- Don't worry if a child is not reading or doing math on the new, accelerated time table – social demands may have changed, but children don't mature any faster because of these pressures. It's not **when** children learn to read or add and subtract that matters, it's whether they love these activities and want to do more of them.
- Never reward or punish for good grades. And do **praise** children for hard work and good efforts, but not for grades or being smart. That way children will continue to enjoy being challenged intellectually.
- Let your school-age child experience you as a learning partner in that you are available for help, encouragement, discussion, time-management, and, if necessary, making outside help available.
- If your child is really struggling in school, offer positive, constructive help, build on her strengths, and get professional assistance if the problem persists.

If you follow these principles and focus on developing your child's curiosity, self-confidence, love of learning, and her ability to enjoy challenges and to ask for help when appropriate, you will foster a **truly** successful student who will go on to become an engaged and productive member of society. Along the way you will experience the deep pleasure of teaching in the most profound sense of that word – namely, leading by example.