

# How Important Are Grades?



By Joanna Nesbit

These days, many elementary schools use standards-based report cards featuring multiple scores in one subject to communicate a child's proficiency. If your child's school is among them, chances are you're not getting caught up in a grade craze at your house. Still, it's hard not to spotlight that report card each semester.

We want our kids to focus on learning and work up to their potential. We also hope they earn good grades. So how do we communicate what could potentially sound like a double message? And what happens if we focus too closely on the grade side of the equation?

According to Dr. Deb Moberly, former associate professor and founder of an early-childhood-development consulting service, education researchers examined the use of grades during the 1980s and '90s and found that grades affected kids' interest in learning. When graded, children tended to prefer easier assignments and became less interested in learning for learning's sake. Studies also revealed that receiving low grades did not motivate kids to study more.

Yet somehow teachers must communicate students' abilities and mastery of academic skills to parents. "But while educators debate systems, standards and assessment measures," says Moberly, "ultimately it falls to the families to deal with teachers and their own children in grading situations." Here's how to keep it in perspective and give your kids the message that learning is more important than acing all their tests.

## Understand the Meaning of Grades

First, think of grades not as a reward, but as a means of communicating with parents. "It's important to remember that grades are a communication tool with a lot of gray area that varies from school to school," says Dr. Russell Hyken, educational consultant, psychotherapist and author of *The Parent Playbook*. In the lower elementary grades, qualitative systems for communicating content mastery work best because kids vary a great deal in cognitive development. For example, a child may know her math facts but not be able to execute them

quickly. "Being graded on speed before a child is ready can impede further learning," Hyken says.

At the fourth-grade level, when children are learning new math skills that can often prove troublesome (fractions and long division), Hyken says a grade may capture the initial struggle a child is having but not reflect the fact that the light bulb is about to go on. "It's important to understand whether it's your child struggling or whether it's a new subject that everyone is struggling with," he says. Rather than looking to report cards, talking with teachers throughout the year is key.

### **Get Involved With Your Child's Learning**

Because grades may not capture the nuances of a child's progress, Moberly recommends parents get involved with their children's learning and become their advocates. She offers the following suggestions to take the pressure off grades:

- Have a conference with your child's teacher at the beginning of the year and find out what is included in the grading system (e.g., mastery of content, attitude, behavior).
- Ask the teacher what you should be looking for in the papers your child brings home and how you will know your child is on the right track.
- Ask the teacher how you can support your child's learning, and find out what topics will be taught so you can reinforce the classroom teaching and learning objectives outside the classroom.
- Ask your child how grades are determined (some kids believe grades are lucky or mysterious determinations by the teacher).

### **Keep Grades Real**

Of course, it's nice if good grades follow a child's hard work, but how do you promote the work habits without everyone getting too focused on the outcome? "In my experience, when parents significantly emphasize top grades, kids typically experience anxiety rather than motivation to work harder," says Stephanie Dethlefs, former fifth-grade teacher and university educator. These are the kids who also worry excessively about grades.

Hyken sees both kids and parents who melt down when a child receives something lower than an A, especially as kids' middle school classes begin to have implications for the honors track in high school.

"If a student's motivated to get a good grade, that's fine, but what parents need to emphasize to their kids is their effort and attitude," says Hyken. "Keep in mind that once kids get to high school, they might work really hard in a math class and may not always make A's." He would rather parents take a step back from grades and teach their children how to advocate for help from a teacher when they are struggling. "There's a certain skill that goes with self-advocating," says Hyken. "And then there's a whole blend of communication and being supportive when a kid does get a lower grade. You can talk about why they got the grade and ask what they would do differently in the future, versus focusing on the bad grade."

Additionally, to keep grades meaningful and instill motivation, Hyken recommends creating a family culture of valuing hard work by celebrating good grades received on papers or projects

throughout the year. That doesn't mean buying the latest video game or paying for grades, he cautions, but instead making a special dessert or going out to dinner to make the hard-earned grade a family event. "As kids get older, make sure you're celebrating the right grades — like when your child has a big project and he's been working all weekend for a couple of weekends and he makes a great grade," he says. Keep in mind it's the process you're celebrating rather than the grade itself.

### **Put it in Perspective**

Of course, we love it when our kids earn top scores, but what if they don't? Here are a few tips for keeping the big picture in mind:

- **Stay calm.** If your child brings home a low grade, have a conversation. There are a host of reasons for low grades besides laziness. It's possible he worked hard but the subject is challenging. Asking him to share his insights about his progress helps him see that you value process over results. If he didn't work hard, ask what he will do to improve work habits next semester, such as not procrastinating, checking work for mistakes or not rushing.
- **Consult the teacher.** Talk to your child's teacher in a collaborative manner to learn more about your child. He may be academically capable but highly disorganized about communicating his work on paper and in need of extra help. He may be struggling with a concept he's just about to master, or distracted by social issues. Or you and the teacher may suspect a learning issue that needs to be addressed.
- **Offer something extra.** If a child is bright and understands concepts but isn't pulling good grades, she may be a deep thinker and just need more time for tasks. Conversely, a distracted child may be bored and need an enrichment activity in class. Collaborate with the teacher about what might work best. If a child is exhibiting signs such as sloppy work or trouble with fine motor skills, or feels too "sick" to go to school, she may need an evaluation to determine what's going on. A tutor may also be in order.
- **Consider the whole child.** If your kid is making decent but not necessarily top grades, engages in extracurricular activities, and is generally respectful, you're doing a great job, says Hyken. Spend time with your kids, he advises, because the more you do, the more they'll be motivated to be part of a happy family.

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