



Ten Commandments for Parents

One question that often goes through a parent's (or guardian's) mind is: How can I bring out the best in my son; what can I do to help him succeed at school? Actually, from many years of observing the influences parents have on their children, I believe there are lots of things that you can do to support Johnny in the years of his schooling.

Notice I say schooling, not education. Education is a much bigger question, involving more than a school can hope to deal with across the years of a young person's growth and development. Apart from your primary role as parent and the role of the school in assisting you, other influences play a significant part in the education of Johnny. Relatives, friends and neighbours, your church family, his Sunday school teacher, television, his peer group, writers of books and magazines, the internet and the Saturday team coach, to name a few.

In remembering that school is only one of the influences in his growth and development, it's important to understand the limited role a school can and should have. Do some reading and talking with friends on the topic; find out what the school says it will set out to do with the batch of youngsters that includes your child. What does it undertake to do? What does the school judge to be success for each child? What part does it see for parents to play? And, how will the school help you do this?

Remember also that schools, like any other institution, are not perfect places and that the people who work and learn in them have the same kinds of human frailties that we experience as parents. So it will not be realistic to teach Johnny to expect things to be plain sailing all the time, in the playground, in the classroom, on the playing field or at a classmate's party. And it will be realistic to teach him that there are always problems to solve and others who must be considered. How you teach Johnny to deal with life's challenges in an imperfect world is important preparation for schooling and for life.

Here are some practical ways you can assist Johnny so that he can get the best out of his time at school.

First, the ordinary things do count. A good diet, plenty of sleep and exercise and a settled and ordered routine at home will enable him to do as well as he can. We all need and thrive on understanding, encouragement and the interest shown by others, and Johnny will thrive too, especially when you combine these with realistic expectations about what he can achieve at his age.

Second, establish and enforce reasonable rules of discipline for Johnny, giving him a knowledge of right behaviour and a sense of simple courtesy and good manners. Be sure to demonstrate these through your own example. Also, teach Johnny the difference between getting what he wants and getting what he needs. His needs should be satisfied willingly and generously but unnecessary wants should be turned down with the reasons clearly and simply given.

Third, teach Johnny the importance of being helpful to others. Children who have learnt to do tasks at home — "family job's", preferably not tied to pocket money — already know about carrying out responsibilities, being a part of a team effort, contributing to the welfare of others and facing up to the consequences of actions or inactions. So no matter what age Johnny is, set up some sensible and manageable tasks that he has to carry out on a regular basis for the family. This will have benefits in self-discipline beyond his schooling.

Fourth, learn to talk to him about school in terms other than, "What did you learn at school today?" Doing this will help to establish good communication. Try: "Tell me about just one thing you did today" or, "Was there something you did today that you really enjoyed?" "Was there something you found difficult?"

Fifth, help Johnny to become self-organised. This is a great benefit from the earliest age, and essential eventually. Dressing in the morning, packing and carrying his own bag and ensuring that all the major items are first in place — lunch, homework, library bag, etc, is the goal here. At first, depending on his age, you will need to assist, but do not be slow to find a way of commending and perpetuating each newly learnt skill of self-organisation.

Self-organisation is what schools call a "process"; something that will go with Johnny across life. There are many other "process" things that will be a part of the big picture you and the school should envisage for him. Things like thinking well for himself and being able to assert and stand by a view, being able and willing to listen to and think about the views of others, asking questions and knowing where to seek information, communicating with others, seeing the funny side of things, working in a team and getting along with others, being positive when faced with a challenge. It's these process things that parents can help with all the time without having something written in the homework book!

Sixth, prevent indiscriminate television viewing and computer access. A heavy diet of television, videos and the computer is not good news for Johnny. To ban television and the computer altogether is to avoid the parental opportunity to teach him to recognise quality from rubbish and to monitor his own activity by the use of the program guide and the television or computer switch. Establish some simple family rules and stick to them. Spend time watching television or computing with Johnny. How else will he learn what to avoid and why?

Seventh, include Johnny in as many of your activities as possible where you can talk together. But don't baby talk or "talk down" to him. What is good news for Johnny is plenty of conversation, interest in his experiences and sharing in reading, ideas, tasks around the home and outings. All of these provide opportunities for him to think, to respond, to express how he feels and why, to participate with you in solving "real" problems and to learn how to participate in the give and take of relationships.

Eighth, take a realistic and sensible approach to his homework. Unfortunately it can be a battle ground in some homes. To avoid this happening, don't expect too much that is formal in the early years of schooling; and don't compare him with the rose-tinted glasses memory of your own homework efforts (You didn't really know the 8x table and how to spell accommodation in third class), or with his younger sister who already colours in and cuts out so beautifully!

Get a copy of the school's policy on homework which should tell you about time and type and how much you should assist. A good general rule is: encourage, provide a place (the kitchen table is fine for youngsters), help clarify the tasks and expect that problems or non-completion will be followed up at school. If you have problems with Johnny's homework, then speak with the teacher; but do it sooner rather than later.

It's vital that you keep up with what's happening at school. Communication from and with the school is a key element in assisting you to be a good parent. Look for (sometimes under that uneaten sandwich, or saturated almost beyond reading by the leaky drink bottle!) and read newsletters and class notes and attend as many information nights and parents' meetings as you can. Importantly, do not wait for Johnny to have a problem before you contact the school. There will be plenty of opportunities for you to write or telephone your commendation or thanks, and you will have a big impact for good every time you do.

Ninth, expect that problems will arise from time to time. Some of them can and should be tackled by your son with encouragement and suggestions from you. Others will require your intervention. However, how you go about it is important. I have not seen very many problems solved "at the front gate". Nor have I seen many good results when Johnny has to bear the weight of adult

criticism of his teacher or school. There are some things you should not expect to discuss and solve in Johnny's presence. An appointment with the teacher or other appropriate person is always a good way to begin to sort out an issue or difficulty.

Tenth, recognise that God has made Johnny a unique individual, one lovingly created with his own special gifts and character (Psalm 139:13-16) and that you have been entrusted with his care and nurture. One of the greatest traps for the unwary parent is that of trying to re-live your own school experiences through your child's life. This time you will get it right, you will do better, get the highest mark, sum up powerfully in the debate, learn that musical instrument, score the winning goal. I have never seen it work this way. The pressure builds, the expectations cannot be met and the damage is so easily done.

Look for and recognise the unique attributes, skills and potentials that Johnny has and be prepared to encourage and nurture these so that he can use them fully to know, enjoy and serve God and others.

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