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## How can parents avoid report-card shock? Daily communication is key

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SouthCoast schools are about midway through the first marking period. Do you know how well your child is doing?

Or will you be surprised, perhaps unpleasantly, when report cards come home next month?

Parents can be caught off-guard when their child brings home less-than-stellar grades. Fortunately, there are ways to avoid report-card shock and make sure your child is on the right academic track.

"The most basic and simplest idea is that parents need to speak with their kids every day and not just ask them yes or no questions," says Michelle Hoover, a guidance counselor at Ford Middle School in Acushnet. "Ask them open-ended questions. What are you studying in school? Why is something happening?"

Even though parents can be very busy, Ms. Hoover says, they need to maintain a dialogue with their child on a daily basis, even if it is only for five minutes.

Ms. Hoover kept a spiral notebook on the kitchen table, when her children were young, so the household could write notes to each other. A notebook allows children to write quick messages about what is on their mind and gives parents a chance to offer support and ask questions. Ms. Hoover says that children will often convey things in writing that they would not feel comfortable saying in a spoken conversation.

Another communication technique recommended by Ms. Hoover — a guidance counselor for 19 years and a social worker for 11 years before that — involves an ongoing communication starter. She used to tell her children to learn something every day. At the end of the day, everyone in the family, including adults, would share what they had learned.

She emphasizes that during such discussions it is important for parents to really listen to their children.

"The other piece of that is to listen when they talk. Home is a child's safe haven, and parents need to listen to what their children are saying. You may not agree with everything, and that is OK. It can be a chance to share your morals and values while acknowledging where they are coming from," says Ms. Hoover.

For parents who find it daunting to talk with their children, Ms. Hoover believes that most parents already have the capability and just need to be willing to try.

"You don't need a whole lot of money or a BA or a master's to talk with your kid. Think of yourself at that age. What did you feel? ... You will never, ever regret the time you spent talking with your children," says Ms. Hoover.

While talking with their children, parents need to be on the lookout for warning signs that may indicate a child is struggling in school.

"There might be a drastic change in attitude about school. Increased acting out, acting like they don't care, refusing to talk about school, feeling sick before going to school and changing who they hang out with are all signs that a parent should consider," says Sarah Rudolph, a school psychologist for Wareham Public Schools.

Ms. Rudolph explains that each child presents differently — a given behavior for one child may just mean the onset of adolescence, where for another it may mean an academic struggle, and for a third it could signal clinical depression.

To fully understand a child's situation, it is vital for parents to talk with the adults who are with their child during the school day.

"I can't stress enough how important it is to keep the lines of communication open with the school," says Sherry Michael, a guidance counselor at Westport Middle School.

She recommends that parents avail themselves of the many ways that most schools try to keep parents connected and informed, such as attending open houses, reading newsletters, volunteering, checking homework and paying attention to progress reports and report cards.

Some districts in the area have even enlisted the help of the Internet to keep parents informed.

Wareham Public Schools, for example, has PowerSchool, a site where parents can look up grades, homework assignments, attendance and other information pertaining specifically to their child or to the school in general.

Sarah Rudolph says that PowerSchool is a wonderful tool for parents, but it cannot replace a parent-teacher meeting or phone call.

"Sometimes you miss the subtleties when you just look at something like PowerSchool. It's important to talk with your child's teacher to really get a sense of what is going on," Ms. Rudolph says.

Kris Ainsley, head guidance counselor for New Bedford High School, welcomes phone calls from parents.

"Whenever a parent thinks there might be a problem or just wants to know how their child is doing they should absolutely call the teacher or the guidance counselor," says Ms. Ainsley. "We set up parent-teacher meetings on a daily basis."

Such meetings can result in a child getting extra help after school or being moved to a class that better fits his or her level in a subject. Parents can also learn more about a teacher's expectations and homework assignments.

Sometimes it becomes apparent that a child is falling significantly behind in class and a parent wonders about a learning disability.

"Parents can request that their child be evaluated. They just need to put the request in writing and identify what has brought them to that request and where exactly they feel their child is struggling," says Anne St. Pierre, director of special education in Freetown.

Upon receipt of an evaluation request, a school will send out a consent form for all evaluation components that must be signed by the parent before the evaluation can take place. Often a student does not have a disability and just needs more support with homework.

"Especially for the lower grades, we like to see an agenda book where students write down assignments and parents sign every night indicating that the homework has been completed," says Westport's Ms. Michael.

Parents should not do homework for the child but, instead, check to see that assignments have been properly completed.

If a student is having difficulty doing assignments or is taking an unusual amount of time to complete them, a parent can request that the child receive extra help from the teacher after school or seek a private tutor.

"We do a full assessment to find out where the child is performing and where there are skill gaps," says Gail Tuominen, director of Sylvan Learning Center in Dartmouth. "Then we create an individualized program to meet the child's needs."

Sylvan fees range from \$35 an hour for basic homework support to \$75 an hour for one-on-one tutoring in a specialized subject area.

Above all, educators stress that parents need to make themselves aware of their child's academic progress.

"Parents shouldn't just wait for progress reports or report cards," says Ms. St. Pierre of the Freetown school system. "A bad grade shouldn't be a shock to the parents. They should be looking at the papers coming home, and both the parents and the teachers should be proactive."