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Parents: You are your children's most important and influential teachers

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By Ann Rosen Spector, Ph.D.

When he began his studies at the beginning of the 20th century, famed Stanford University psychology professor Lewis M. Terman believed that intelligence was largely inherited. He began a longitudinal study of gifted children in California in the 1920s and found out that he was wrong.

The children who were successful were not necessarily those with the highest IQ; they were the children of parents whose own educational and occupational achievements influenced them to emphasize hard work and perseverance for their offspring.

As the Dalai Lama recently said, "Discipline is a gift we give ourselves." That's a gift that keeps on giving (unlike expensive sneakers and other forms of bling).

Look at the names and nationalities of the prodigies in the national science awards, spelling bees, and musical conservatories. You will find an overrepresentation of Asians. They, too, do not come equipped with a smart gene. They are blessed to have parents who not only have high expectations for their children but they demonstrate that very same work ethic in their own lives. They don't buy a million tutors and fancy shmancy coaches. They urge their children to work hard. Themselves.

No school can provide more important educational opportunities than parents. Schools generally have children five hours/day, five days/week, and 160 days/year. Where are our children most of the time?

No matter what we tell our children about education, it's what we model for them that is most important. Telling our child to read while we watch television sends the message that reading is something you do as little of as possible until you get out of school.

But if they see us reading, for work and pleasure, they get a whole new perspective.

Reading is integral to life, it's fun, and we should all do it a lot.

Vocabulary is important and reading is one way to expand it, but equally important is speaking to our children not in slang or epithets, but in complete grammatically correct sentences. Keep raising the bar and they will grow right before your eyes.

When my older daughter was in 3rd grade, she came home with a lengthy (they were always lengthy) description of a playground dispute at school. After listening, I said that the problem was simply about resource allocation. She nodded but my 5 year old wailed, "I don't know what you're saying!" I explained all the words to her and she said, "Why can't you talk like a normal mother?"

"I'm getting you ready for the SATs," I calmly replied (knowing that the time to learn vocabulary is a lifelong commitment, not something you do in a prep class when you are a junior or senior in high school).

"But I'm only in kindergarten!"

"Well, we're behind schedule." Almost every night thereafter, they asked me for SAT words and their vocabulary (and therefore their reading and writing skills) improved markedly. And every parent can do that for free.

There are numerous studies that show conclusively that the more children are involved with educational activities with their parents (and everything presents itself as a teachable moment), the more successful kids will be in the classroom.

Consider cooking. If we prepare meals with our children at least some of the time, they learn nutrition, reading, math (measurement, timing, sequencing), chemistry and problem solving. As important as all that is, it also means we are talking with our children about a wide range of subjects, giving and receiving information about their world and ours.

Teaching parents how to be more effective parents is important. Consider Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone, begun over a decade ago, or NW Philadelphia's KidZone, part of Foundations' Community Education Initiatives office. They work not only with the children but also with their parents and caregivers, providing a range of social and health services so that the parent-child team is intact and strong. All of that is the underpinning of a successful school experience. If the government and private groups have to supplant what some parents can do on their own, so be it. It's better for us as a country.

Should we just let all too many of our children model parents sitting on the couch night after night, eating and watching "Biggest Loser?"

Extrapolate from the projects that work. We can ameliorate ignorance and sloth. That is a gift that keeps on giving.

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