

Commentary...

# Empowering students helps them to learn

By Edie Jones  
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As the school year gets underway in Sisters, parents are eager to help their students have the best possible experience. How that plays out through the year greatly depends on what takes place in the opening weeks of the school year.

One of the most important aspects of learning is for students to feel empowered and important. I'd like to suggest some strategies for parents that will help develop these perceptions.

First, I feel it's important to have a strength-based approach to learning. When students only hear about what they don't do well, their desire to learn will quickly disappear. Instead of looking at what's not happening, supporting a child by looking at their strengths, aptitudes and interests, helping them relate these to what the teacher is having them work on can make a huge difference.

When one of our daughters was in the first grade she was having great difficulty learning the alphabet. She had always loved books so it wasn't a lack of exposure that hindered her. I experimented

and discovered that dancing the letters helped her learn them. Pretending she had paint on her feet, she wrote her name on the ground. Shaping her body into letters imprinted them on her memory. It wasn't long before we moved past this challenge and she was reading on her own.

As a high school student one of our sons was having difficulty with advanced algebra. When given the opportunity to drop back to a lower level of the subject he responded that he'd rather get a C from the instructor teaching the advanced class than an A from the one teaching the regular class. We accepted his appraisal and applauded his resiliency and tenacity. I don't remember his grade, however it did not prevent him from getting into the college of his choice.

I encourage parents to identify their own biases. We parents all have biases. These are usually unconscious thoughts that often direct how we react and respond to the things our kids do or don't do. Since these are hard to identify, asking a friend or a spouse to help recognize our tone of interactions with each child (whether its positive or negative) and what kind of

feedback we give (specific and concrete or general and/or dismissive) can make a big difference on how empowered each child will feel.

A third suggestion is for parents to become a "warm demander." This means to hold high expectations for all kids and to believe in their potential for growth. Numerous studies indicate that when kids know that adults have high expectations for them their motivation increases and they achieve more. It is important to guard against students falling into perceived expectations and biases that hamper their learning. Be sure they know you believe in them and support their efforts to achieve. At the same time be mindful of piling on expectations that create stress.

As you, the parent, engage with teachers encourage as many student-centered learning experiences as possible. Even kindergartners and elementary-school-aged kids can get excited about learning that is presented in project-based learning, cooperative learning, and service learning. All of these help create a community environment, providing meaningful roles of leadership and focusing on performance outcomes instead of reinforcing

the need for good grades.

Here in Sisters we hear of many learning experiences that fall into the above category. A wonderful example is shown in "Journey's Flight" and the students' involvement in writing the story of a butterfly's adventure. The profits from the sale of this book will be donated to maintain the monarch butterfly garden built by Sisters Middle School students.

The Seed to Table collaboration with the school system; Sisters High School students going to Seattle to study cancer; traveling to Nepal with Ten Friends; and becoming counselors at outdoor school are marvelous examples of how this teaching concept is played out in our school system.

Equally important in helping students feel empowered about their learning is ongoing and active reflection by them of how they are doing. Establishing personally relevant learning goals and actively engaging in ongoing self-assessment develops habits for a lifetime. When a young child is having trouble making friends, helping them learn skills builds an understanding of appropriate social behavior. Helping

a third-grader who is having difficulty with spelling figure out his best learning style (visual, audio, physical or a combination) may be the key to success. Equally important are efforts to help older students look at how they are doing, analyzing what's behind successes and classes not going as well.

Research shows that individuals who demonstrate enthusiasm, kindness, focus, calmness, and openness enjoy more power in their social circle. Helping students learn to focus on others will inadvertently build their feelings of power.

If our goal is to have happy, engaged students excited about learning, we need to help them feel like they have personal power. Take time as a parent, or the friend of a young person, to really get to know them and use that information to encourage them to feel excited about the year ahead.

*This article was inspired by ideas presented in the article, "How to Help Students Feel Powerful at School," by Amy L. Eva, Ph. D, education content specialist at the Greater Good Science Center, printed online in PrintBookmark, February 22, 2017.*

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