

ABCs of Being Smart...

P is for Productivity

By Dr. Joanne Foster

In this piece, I present pointers for—and perspectives on—pathways to productivity.

- **Planning and Preparation**—The first step to anywhere may be the hardest, and so it helps to know where you're headed, and to figure out what you'll need in order to get there. Planning involves thinking in advance about goals. Preparation involves investigating and putting in place the resources and supports that might be needed. Both planning and preparation require time and effort but they're particularly important because they enable people to anticipate and take next steps, and to respond more purposefully to tasks and responsibilities. It's good to model strategies to help kids become better planners and to learn to prepare themselves so they can aspire to meet their objectives and be happily productive.
- **Proper Programming**—Children are more responsive when they're asked to participate in meaningful activities. Since no two kids are alike, this requires thoughtful attention to what fits a given individual in a particular situation. The best programs are those that are designed or adapted for children's learning interests and levels of readiness, aligned with their areas of strength and weakness in different domains. If you want to foster and sustain productivity, aim for a creative and motivating approach, set clearly defined expectations, and remember that flexibility around pacing or other circumstances may be necessary along the way.



- **Play**—Play is the foundation on which productivity is built. There's value in a strong work ethic, but there's also value in play. It provides opportunities to develop skills that will be needed for achievement and fulfillment over the long haul. Playtime is one of the most cost-effective investments a parent can make in a child's education. It requires nothing more than time, space, and imagination. It does require your faith in her inner strength, her capacity to make her own fun; it requires stepping back and letting your child discover who she is, what she enjoys doing, and the ability to pursue her own interests (Matthews, 2014). Moreover, through play, children learn how to process and effectively cope with their feelings, get along well with others, and enjoy the great outdoors. And, the beauty about playtime is that one never gets too old for it!

- **Pay Attention**—Be attuned to what's happening in your child's life. Listen, observe, communicate openly, and stay on top of things so you're better positioned to advise, guide, and trouble-shoot. Honor children's interests and preferences, give them access to relevant and stimulating learning opportunities, help to ensure that they're appropriately challenged, and reinforce their efforts. Don't hover, but do encourage, offer genuine praise, and support their endeavors.
- **Possible Problems**—There are many ways of proceeding toward an interim or end goal, yet sometimes things go awry. For example, procrastination can impede a person's progress. There may be good reasons why people put things off—just as there may be rather questionable ones. Nevertheless, task avoidance can obstruct learning curves and short-circuit productivity. Perfectionism can also become a roadblock. That is, being compelled to do things just so, always driving toward precision. Perfectionists may feel overwhelmed by demands, and become upset and self-critical. The same goes for procrastinators. Depending upon the situation and upon what may underlie a child's procrastination or perfectionist behavior, there are lots of strategies parents can use to help children become more comfortable with pursuits and performance (Foster, 2007). For example, parents can help children understand that they shouldn't equate self-worth with achievement. Parents can

also use criticism judiciously and constructively, make sure to comment on the behavior not the child, and be cognizant that sometimes children need guidance to learn to relax and/or redirect their focus.

- **Practice and Persistence**—Parents often tell their children to practice, and whether it's piano chords, math equations, or something else, practice leads to achievement. However, this kind of personal investment demands resolve—and patience. A positive attitude is beneficial, too, but like a strong work ethic, it requires nurturing. Parents can help children develop a more positive, confident, and resolute outlook by modeling being upbeat, by showing why perseverance matters, and by adopting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). When kids see the adults in their lives learning, working hard, and being resilient, the message conveyed is very

clear—that effort and commitment are empowering! ☺

References

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Author's Note

As a parent, teacher, consultant, researcher, author, and education specialist, **Joanne Foster, Ed.D.** has more than 30 years' experience

working in the field of gifted education. Her newest book, *Beyond Intelligence: Secrets for Raising Happily Productive Kids* (2014, Anansi), is written for busy parents who have questions and concerns about how to offer the best possible guidance, challenge, and encouragement to children and teenagers—those who love to learn, and those who don't. *Beyond Intelligence* includes strategies and resources for intelligence-building, and for supporting kids' well-being at home and at school through checklists, quizzes, examples, anecdotes, and summaries. Another book, *Not Now Maybe Later: Helping Children Overcome Procrastination* is forthcoming (Great Potential Press). Visit her website at www.beyondintelligence.net or contact her at joanne.foster@utoronto.ca.

What Kids Can Do!

Share these practical tips and strategies with your children to help them overcome procrastination and perfectionism.

For Better Planning and Preparation

- Get to know yourself—including personal tendencies and work habits with respect to prioritizing, scheduling, determining organizational strategies that serve you well, and getting the necessary materials for task completion.
- Make sure expectations are clear. (*Fair? Flexible? Realistic? Attainable?*)
- When planning, consider what you can learn from past experience. (*What are your previous successes and hurdles? How much time do you need to complete things?*)
- Try to anticipate possible complexities and obstacles.
- Be optimistic about what needs to be done, and have faith in your ability to do it.
- Remember, most accomplishments occur step-by-step, over time—so factor in patience.

To Help Overcome Perfectionism

- Challenge misconceptions you might have. What constitutes excellence? Why does everything have to be done just so? Purposely make a small mistake—court imperfection. (*What happens?*)
- View mistakes as learning opportunities that lead to personal growth.
- Balance criticism by focusing on your accomplishments.
- Emotional states affect how we deal with things. Take note of your feelings. For example, if you're frazzled, try to relax with breathing

exercises, stretching, or time out.

- Be selective about resources, and mindful of time spent. Recognize when “enough is enough.”
- Set high, but realistic standards for yourself. Priorities are learning and experience, *not* performance or product.

To Help Overcome Procrastination

- Concentrate on the value of the task—that is, why it matters.
- Identify your reason(s) for putting something off. (*Overwhelmed? Worried? Muddled? Too easy? Too difficult? Blasé? Low energy level?*) Perhaps your parents, a teacher, or a close friend can help you figure out why you're procrastinating, and also encourage and support your efforts to get on track.
- Recognize, then eliminate frequently recurring excuses and refusals.
- Work constructively with others—don't take on too much alone.
- Consider incentives and motivators that might work for you. (*See “M is for Motivation” in Parenting for High Potential, Volume 3, Issue 3, Dec. 2013, pp. 14–15.*)
- Commit to action, not avoidance—and then to staying focused. Show grit (the ability to persist when challenged), and look forward to the joy of accomplishment.

Consider talking with someone you trust about any concerns you may have related to perfectionism or procrastination, or questions you may have about planning and preparation.