**Parenting With Purpose – The Report Card Conversation**

by Neil McNerney, M.Ed., LPC

It’s that time of year again. If you haven’t received your child’s report card yet, it will soon be on its way. There will be lots of different emotions in Purcellville households, ranging from happiness to sadness, to anger…sometimes all three depending on the number of kids at home!

I would like to share some tips that will make the report card conversation the best it can be. Even if the report card is good, there are things we can do and say that will increase the chances of a good report card next time as well.

Let us assume there are three different types of report cards: The Good, The Bad, and The Combo.

**The Good Report Card**

Although it is great to start with the standard responses such as “Great Job!” and “I’m So Proud,” let me suggest a few other ideas:

1. Don’t overdo it. Especially for boys, we can end up overdoing praise. Too much praise can make boys uneasy. It can feel like too much pressure and end up backfiring. If you have a child that looks away or tells you to stop when you are praising, be careful of over praising.
2. Focus on hard work, not on intelligence – This is a great one to keep in mind, especially for elementary kids. When we praise intelligence, academic performance tends to decrease. When we praise hard work, performance increases. Why? Because intelligence is generally something we are born with. Praise won’t make us more intelligent. It is like praising someone’s height and expecting them to grow taller. Hard work, on the other hand, is something we can improve, so praising it will increase our children’s desire to work hard.

**The Bad Report Card**

By “bad report card,” I mean the type of grades that you know your child can do much better with some more work, fewer distractions, or better organization.

1. Don’t make it about you. About 25 years ago, it was all the rage for parents to share their negative emotions with their kids. This is where the “I’m disappointed in you” phrase came into vogue. I don’t think it is a good way to encourage change, especially for report cards. It tends to demotivate most kids instead of increasing their motivation. So try to avoid phrases like: “I’m disappointed,” or “I’m not happy with these grades.” Instead,
2. Focus on both the positive and the negative. There is usually at least one grade that can be praised. Start with the positive, and then focus on the negative. When we do this, it sends a good message to our kids that we aren’t going to freak out. When our kids think we are freaking out, they stop listening.
3. Ask for a plan. Ask, specifically, what he is going to do differently. If the answer is “I dunno,” or “I’ll try harder?,” then let him know that if he doesn’t come up with a specific plan, then you will come up with one for him. This usually motivates kids to come up with some ideas.
4. Set up some consequences. As I discussed in my last column, rewards tend to work better than punishments when it comes to schoolwork, but that doesn’t mean we can’t come up with some powerful ideas. For instance, when your child shows that homework is done, then they can watch TV, play video games, get their phone back, go outside and play, etc. Rewards are great, and they don’t have to be extravagant. Make your kids earns things that they are used to getting without doing anything.

**The Combo**

1. Start with the positive sections, praising just like it was a good report card. This is always a great place to start. If you can do at least 4 or 5 praises before going on to the negatives, your kid will be in a much better mood to listen to the rest.
2. After you have focused on the positives, then focus on the negatives, asking what her plan is for pulling up the grades that were low.
3. Finish with another compliment. This technique is called a “compliment sandwich,” which means that the hard conversation happens between the two compliments.

Regardless of which type of conversation you will be having, remember that the grades belong to your child. Avoid the trap of losing your temper about grades. When we lose our temper about grades, it tends to backfire. Instead of focusing on what they need to do to get better grades, our kids will focus on our anger. For some, it might motivate them to better grades, but only for a short while. Our temper is a parenting strategy that does not have long term effects.

I share many more tips and ideas on how to increase school performance in my book: *Homework – A Parent’s Guide To Helping Out Without Freaking Out!* available online, in Kindle format, and at Around The Block Books in Purcellville.

Are you interested in reading about a certain parenting topic, or do you have a parenting question? Contact Neil at: [neil@neilmcnerney.com](mailto:neil@neilmcnerney.com).

Neil McNerney is a licensed counselor in private practice and author of *Homework – A Parent’s Guide To Helping Out Without Freaking Out!* Neil provides seminars to parents both locally and nationally on topics of parent leadership. For more information go to www.reducehomeworkstress.com.