

# Creating Independent Learners

| BY RENAE ABBOUD |



*After school, a middle schooler comes home and plops down on the sofa. An hour later, she decides to start her homework, but only begins after numerous reminders. She sits there staring off into space, then quickly scribbles her answers. She slams her books down, declaring; “I’m done!” At parent-teacher conferences, you find out she is consistently failing to complete assignments. Her grades are slipping and she is failing tests. When you ask her why she is not succeeding, she simply says, “I don’t know.”*

Typically, a parent assumes a child like this needs educational support or tutoring to succeed in a specific subject. However, too often a lack of study skills cause a student’s failing grades. With the skills necessary for successful learning, the student can grasp the content information. These skills include: note-taking, listening and study habits, time management, test taking, research and responsibility. As a parent, you need to ensure that tutoring sessions have goals for teaching these important skills, which will lead your child to being an independent learner. At home, parents can provide many opportunities to generate the same results.

To begin with, let’s explore the use of tutors and how to ensure tutoring will help to create independent learners. Then, we’ll focus on how parents can create the opportunities that will support these results.

If you decide to seek the educational support of a professional tutor, from the beginning, work with the tutor to ensure a study skills focus. The tutor should empower the student to achieve skills that will result in value for learning, responsibility, motivation, initiative, and more.

A young child’s tutor is sick and unable to help that afternoon. The child opens up his journal homework and writes one sentence, “I couldn’t do my homework today because my tutor was not here.” This is an example of tutor dependence. If the tutor only focuses on completion of everyday homework, the problem will simply be bandaged and repeat itself over time, with the child becoming too dependent on the tutor. The tutor should be spending at least half of each session teaching skills necessary for independent learning. A qualified tutor will find opportunities to teach these skills

through the everyday homework, breaking down long-term projects into meaningful sections and studying for tests.

Because of high curriculum standards and emphasis on standardized tests, it is vital to teach your child independent learning skills. Since parents are the number one role models for their children, home is the place where this can be modeled and taught. A parent who displays independence will likely have accomplished the first step in creating independent learners. Here are other opportunities to encourage independent learning at home:

**Make learning meaningful and relevant to your child’s interests.** Encourage your child to pick out books and choose research topics she is most interested in learning about. The more your child relates to a subject, the more motivated she may be.

**Give your child set responsibilities, stick to them and teach your child the consequences of following through.** As an adult, if you don’t pay your electricity bill, your electricity will be shut off. Allow your child to learn from his mistakes. If you constantly complete the job for your child, he will never learn the consequences of his actions, or lack thereof. On the flip side, teach your child how studying and hard work pay off in improved grades, how helping a neighbor brings satisfaction and more.

**Give your child opportunities to make choices.** First, be sure to assess your child’s age and maturity level to determine what choices they are ready to make, and then provide the opportunity to learn. For example, on a cold day, your young child might go to school without a coat. Relinquish some power you may feel over your child’s choices and allow your child to make a decision. Next time he’ll realize

he should check the weather or feel outside before determining what to wear. Remember to start small so that your child can experience success right away.

**Encourage communication with the teacher.** Communication should be between the student and the teacher, not the parent and teacher. Independent learners take the initiative to talk to their teachers, ask how to improve grades, find out how quarter grades are determined, seek after-school help, inquire about the type of tests given, etc. Your child should feel confident talking with teachers regarding the expectations and opportunities for extra help. Keep in mind that helping your child to learn to communicate her needs will help create the independence, motivation, responsibility, and initiative you find in lifelong learners.

Every student, by the end of 8th grade, should feel confident about her study skills. By the time they reach high school, students should be spending most of their time learning content. It will make things easier if they have already acquired the study skills needed. Students who are motivated to learn, confident, take initiative, are held accountable for their actions, and have a value for their learning will become lifelong independent learners. Strive to support your child in learning these important skills so as they get older, they become more self-sufficient. ♦

*Renae Abboud is president of Renae’s Tutoring, which hires licensed educators to provide support to students struggling in school or those in need of academic challenge. Renae’s Tutoring emphasizes communication and collaboration between parents, teachers, and tutors and strives to provide the best local academic support resources. For more information, contact Renae at [renae@rtutoring.com](mailto:renae@rtutoring.com), [www.rtutoring.com](http://www.rtutoring.com) or 703-582-0000.*