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Page: 2

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When *good students slip* , it's often because requirements have changed

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Scripps Howard News Service

Dear Dr. Fournier: I read with interest your article in the Thomasville (Ga.) newspaper. I am the mother of a 12-year-old daughter who is in the seventh grade. She has always been an "A" student who has not had to work hard for her grades. However, since she started school this year, the story is a little different. So far her actual grades have not been bad (As and Bs), but when we average her test scores, they end up being Cs and Ds. Luckily for her, classroom participation and completing homework assignments are figured into her grades.

My husband and I are helping her study each night but feel that our study methods may not be the most appropriate for her. Unfortunately, she seems rather uninterested in studying and unconcerned about her grades. I feel that since this is the first time she has really had to work hard for *good* grades, she is at a loss for how to handle the pressure.

The Assessment: When "*good students* " suddenly have difficulty in school, parents often assume that it's due to lack of motivation. While this may be true for some children, it's certainly not the case with the majority of *students* I have worked with through the years.

Parents and children must be aware that the purpose of education changes at certain grades. When the purpose changes, the methods must change, too. *Students* cannot continue to do more of the same and expect different results.

Middle school is a major transition for *students* and parents. As you adapt to the new requirements, remember one important rule: If you do something and it doesn't give you the desired result, doing more of the same thing just makes you fail that much quicker.

In grades one through six, children are taught basic skills and given the opportunity to practice and repeat these skills until they master them. "Basic skills" include reading, writing and arithmetic, but they also include decoding words and meaning, understanding the difference between fact and opinion, identifying the main idea and support information, grammar, punctuation, and language formulation with logic and sequence, just to name a few.

Basic skills are learned through repetition. That's why, regardless of grade, most textbooks start with a review of what has been taught before. It takes all of elementary school for our children to practice these skills until they become automatic.

In grades seven and eight, the purpose of school changes. Basic skills are assumed to be in place. Now *students* must use those skills to access information and demonstrate ownership of the information by "translating" it in a unique way.

Here are a few examples of how elementary and middle school differ:

In elementary school, *students* are asked to memorize a poem. In middle school, *students* are asked to read the poem and interpret what the author is saying.

In elementary school, *students* are asked to memorize the dates of the American Revolution, the major victories and who led the battles. In middle school, the above is a given; *students* are now held accountable for explaining why we had a Civil War.

In elementary school, *students* are asked to write a book report. In middle school, *students* are asked to identify with a certain character and explain why the character is important to the book.

Many children do well in elementary school because they develop basic skills quickly. Repetition works. However, the *students* also fall prey to the belief that repetition - or having a *good* memory - is the key to success as they move up to middle school. This is the common downfall.

What To Do: To find the best learning strategies for your child, begin by recognizing that the destination is different. Help your daughter develop the main skill she needs not just for studying, but for learning: paraphrasing.

Unless your child is able to read, write and do math through explanations of her own, you are headed for problems.

Instead of working with her to read and answer questions, use your time together to discuss what she is learning. Make sure your daughter understands and can explain the cause-and-effect relationship of important events. Challenge her to ask, "Why?" and help her develop confidence in her own answers.

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