

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Cheating on a Test

Promoting the Life Skill of Critical Thinking in School-Age Children

Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My daughter was caught cheating on a spelling test last week. I am completely disappointed, angry and embarrassed. How can I better deal with this situation so she learns not to do it again?

While it is disappointing when your child makes a poor decision, you can use it as an opportunity to promote the life skill of Critical Thinking and help her make positive choices.

Frank Keil of Yale University defines Critical Thinking as “the ability to step back and look at what you’re doing, to look at the dimensions of the task and to evaluate.” Critical Thinking involves “thinking about our thinking” by reflecting, analyzing, reasoning, planning and evaluating.

- 1. Talk to your child.** In a calm moment, take the time to talk to your child about what happened at school. This conversation is a chance for your child to use Critical Thinking skills, like reflecting and analyzing, to see how her feelings affected her behavior. Ask questions to get your child's perspective:
 - “Is there a reason that you felt like you needed to cheat on your spelling test?”
 - “How were you feeling when you made that decision?”

You can share your feelings with your child, but be aware of how you communicate them. Take time to cool down before starting a conversation. This shows your child the importance of stepping back and thinking things through before acting, an important part of Critical Thinking. You can say something like:

- “I was disappointed when I heard about the spelling test, but I want to work together to help you do your work on your own.”

Critical Thinking calls on Executive Functions of the brain, the functions used to manage attention, emotions and behaviors in pursuit of a goal. In general, Executive Functions come into play whenever behavior is deliberately goal-directed. Paul Zelazo of the University of Minnesota says:

If you want to start to characterize more precisely what's meant by executive function, think in terms of the sequential steps that people must undertake in order to solve any problem in a goal-directed fashion.

- 2. Determine a goal.** Since a big part of Critical Thinking is planning and setting goals, encourage your daughter to set a goal for what she wants to achieve. Ask her:
 - “What is your goal for how you are going to be able to take spelling tests on your own in the future?”

While it may have become more of a common practice for parents today to try to prevent children from making mistakes or to fix things for them, this doesn't help them learn. In the business world, the expression is “failing to succeed,” meaning that we need to make mistakes in order to learn. Your job now is to help your daughter set a goal and then find positive ways of reaching it.

Philip Zelazo of the University of Minnesota notes that considering alternative solutions requires inhibiting “the tendency to do what one has done before in that situation.” It also requires thinking flexibly in the pursuit of new possibilities, and that involves imagination.

3. Brainstorm for possible solutions. By challenging your child to think of new ways of dealing with familiar situations, you encourage her to think flexibly. Your child is more likely to follow through with solutions when she comes up with them on her own and feels that you take her ideas seriously.

- Ask your child: “What can we do to make sure you feel prepared to answer the spelling questions on your test?”
- Have her write a list of ideas for strategies that might help her. Some solutions might be to ask for a new seat in the classroom, take practice tests at home or to make a regular study group with classmates.
- Then ask your child to put these ideas in order of how she would like to try them out. Make a clear plan for when and where she will use these strategies: “For next week’s spelling test, I will take a practice test the night before.”

When you and your child use this problem-solving process, you are drawing on—and undoubtedly strengthening—Executive Functions of the brain.

4. Evaluate the outcome, and if the solution isn’t working, try something else. Give your child some time to try out this solution. If she is finding it difficult to stick to her plan, you can come up with strategies to help her stay on track, like:

- “If I feel tired the night before my test, I will do my practice test in the morning.”

Find time to come back together and have a discussion with your child about what is working and what’s not. This will help her analyze and evaluate if she is achieving her goal. If not, it’s time to go back to the list of solutions and try a new one.

An important part of Critical Thinking, for both adults and children, is knowing when and whom to turn to for help. In the words of Frank Keil of Yale University:

We are incredibly dependent on knowledge in others’ minds; we lean on others’ minds; we outsource our understandings all the time.

5. Encourage your child to ask for help. First, it is important for you to communicate with your child’s teacher that you are working together to address the issue of cheating and to help her learn to take spelling tests (and other tests) on her own. In this way, your family and the school are working together to help your child succeed.

Beyond the work that you and your child do together, your child may need additional help with spelling. She may or may not feel comfortable enough to ask for help if she is struggling with a subject. She may feel that asking questions will make her look stupid or she may be embarrassed about not knowing the answers if the teacher calls on her. Convey to your child that asking for help is not a weakness, but a strength that will help her learn. Encourage your child to consider ideas like:

- Creating a plan to let her teacher know she needs help in a way that she feels comfortable with;
- Joining an after-school study group or homework club; and/or
- finding a peer tutor.

These five strategies will promote the life skill of Critical Thinking and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide our beliefs and actions.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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