

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

The Importance of the Arts

Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in School Age Children
Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My daughter loves her ballet class, but now that she is getting older, I want to make sure she focuses on her schoolwork. How can I encourage her interest in dance without it distracting her from her school responsibilities?

Does involvement in the arts promote schoolwork or distract from it?

That was one of the questions that the Dana Foundation pursued by assembling a task force in the late 2000s. Michael Gazzaniga of the University of California at Santa Barbara, the task force chair, shares its conclusion:

An interest in a performing art leads to a high state of motivation that produces the sustained attention necessary to improve performance and the training of attention that leads to improvement in other domains of cognition.

Here are some suggestions for maintaining your daughter's interest in ballet without hurting her school responsibilities.

1. Do foster your child's creative interests. As the Dana Foundation Task Force found, when a child, like your daughter, really cares about something, she is more likely to pay very close attention, work hard, deal with and overcome challenges, and practice, practice, practice. These skills can positively affect school work.

Larry Schweinhart of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation was involved in the HighScope Perry Preschool Project in the 1960s. This program's aim was to help children take increasing responsibility for their own learning—to become more goal directed—through daily routines. Schweinhart says:

The reason we want children to be involved as initiators is because it works better for their education and, in fact, it makes them better citizens in the long run. The basic cornerstone of that daily routine is children making plans, then carrying out the plans, and then getting back together and reviewing the plans.

2. Help your child set goals about how much time she is going to devote to ballet and how much time to school work. The lessons of the HighScope project—which have positively affected children—can be used in your home. Rather than you organizing things for your daughter, she is old enough to take some responsibility for organizing her commitments to ballet and to school. There is the issue of the larger schedule and her schedule at home.

- You and she can discuss how many times a week she will pursue ballet after school and whether that schedule is working or not.
- She can use a planner or other tool to stay organized and keep track of events and tasks.
- You can think about how she works and learns best and whether it is better to work on ballet or schoolwork first at home or to go back and forth.
- She can set her own short-term goals, like: "I will work on reading or spelling as soon as I get home."

Consider her schedule with ballet and at home as an experiment. If you find that it's not working, it is time to sit down with her, nonjudgmentally map out the problems, and look for solutions. Mid-course corrections are always a part of setting and achieving goals.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many children and their families get overscheduled with multiple activities that fill children's "free time." All children—and adults—need some downtime.

3. Build some downtime into the schedule. Your child is more likely to take in and make sense of new information and experiences when she has time to process and reflect. Make sure your child has room somewhere in her daily life for some unstructured free time.

The research of Carol Dweck at Stanford University has shown that the children most willing to take risks, to feel comfortable making mistakes, and to take on learning that is hard for them are those who are praised for their effort, not for their intelligence or inborn skills.

4. Because your child has a special talent, it is important to remember to praise her efforts and strategy.

Instead of praising your daughter's skill in dancing or in schoolwork, praise her efforts and strategies. Rather than saying, for example, "you are so smart," or "you are so gifted," tell your child things like:

- "You worked so hard to get ready for your ballet recital."
- "It must feel good to get your homework done before dance class."

This doesn't mean that you should never tell your child that she looks nice or is talented but the focus of your attention should be on what she is **doing to use her talents**, not who she is.

These four strategies promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

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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