

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS

Living With Children

By John Rosemond

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Q: Our 9-year-old daughter recently announced to us that she doesn't like school, doesn't want to go, and doesn't want to do the work. We've been unable to get a coherent reason out of her and her third-grade teacher tells us that she seems well-adjusted, has friends, and is doing above-average work, which is probably her best. She usually makes this complaint during homework time, when she encounters a difficult problem or doesn't readily understand some explanation I've given. Lately, however, her complaints have become more frequent, anytime the subject of school comes up. We've tried to figure out what the problem is, but to no avail. She has no explanation other than "I just don't." Do you have any ideas or suggestions?

A: I have two suggestions, both of which may seem counterintuitive, but both of which are based on solid research:

First, stop talking to your daughter about her attitude toward school and schoolwork. Research in the field of neuro-linguistics predicts that the more you discuss her dislike of school, trying to get to the bottom of it, the more she will complain of disliking school, and the more convinced she will become that she has valid reasons for not liking school. The same is true, by the way, concerning repeated discussions of irrational childhood fears, self-deprecating remarks like "I'm ugly" and "No one likes me," and threats of self-harm.

At some point, the proper response is "We've talked about that enough. I've said all I have to say about it. We're not going to talk about it anymore." Talking, however well-intentioned, can transform a random comment (Let's face it, folks, at some point, nearly all children complain of not liking school, being irrationally afraid of something, not liking themselves, being unpopular, and so on) into a drama.

The value of talking about a problem has been overblown of late. Talking, like most things that are initially beneficial, carries with it a point of diminishing returns. When that point is reached, talking becomes counter-productive. Having an audience, someone who will listen sympathetically to complaint, is a powerful thing (which is something even some therapists fail to understand).

Second, stop helping your daughter with her homework. The latest research - which I review in my book *Helping Your Child Succeed in School* (2014) - confirms what I've been saying for more than thirty years: to wit, parents who help with homework run a strong risk of depressing their children's academic performance. According to the research in question, that's true regardless of a parent's education or the ability level of the child in question. Occasional, time-limited help is fine, but anything more than infrequent, brief homework consultations - as in, sitting with a child while homework is being done - is likely to stimulate complaints of "I can't!"

Said another way, the more parents help with homework, the more evidence children give that they need help with their homework. It's that audacious thing again.

Family psychologist John Rosemond: johnrosemond.com, parentguru.com.



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