

January 2006: Helping Preoccupied Kids to Learn

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Publisher's Pen: Helping Preoccupied Kids to Learn

"While there's life, there's hope."

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC).

I specifically used the term, "preoccupied" instead of "special needs" for the express purpose of including all students. Today, our educational system is preoccupied with raising learning standards, thereby creating a stressful situation for students, teachers and parents.

"Special needs" is the term used to label the students in special education classes, where the lessons are modified to meet their needs. However, all students, teachers and parents are teaching new, higher-level subject areas for every grade level. In my home state of New York, the following are comments I have heard:

Ninth grade algebra teacher: what I taught my students last year is now being taught to eighth grade students this year.
Second grade teacher returning from a one-year maternity leave: I am now teaching the former 3rd grade curriculum. I have to redo my entire year's lessons.

Fifth grade teacher: I have two students in my class who are declassified special education students, meaning that they were taught 3rd grade math last year in 4th grade, and are now entering a regular 5th grade math curriculum. How are they to succeed?

Most inner-city elementary teachers: I have students who are at different grade levels for reading and math. How am I to teach to all the different learning levels?

Sound convoluted? It is. What can we do to help our children? Certainly, the answer lies in doing whatever we can to support them, by helping them to reach their personal and academic goals without adding extra pressure.

We can do this by taking cues from the many wonderfully dedicated special education professionals who are masters at creating safe, stress-free environments in which our children can learn. The positive reinforcement in this type of environment results in increased self-esteem and pride in achievement.

May we take these modifications to heart, and be the heart and soul support of our children.

Smiles,

Elaine

Empowering Parents and Teachers:

Here is a list of modifications to help all students learn how to be successful, including quick tips on determining learning styles by watching a student's response to a question, maximizing learning in a minimal amount of time, and more.

Creating a Safe and Effective Learning Environment

Simplify instructions – keep them concise and to the point. Write them down in large and bold letters. Repeat as necessary. Be nonjudgmental towards those who don't get it right away.

Teach key words as clues to word problems or situations. This creates a quick response when students know the clues.

Teach shortcuts and strategies for problems and situations. This helps students to be self-sufficient and less reliant on you. Guide them towards independence through the "I do it – we do it – you do it" method.

Build in a re-teaching option for material that is not mastered. Build a foundation by continually reviewing important concepts. Moving forward when students have not mastered skills or strategies only creates anxiety.

Be sensitive to slower learners. Put yourself in the student's place. Avoid red pen for corrections. Studies show it has a negative impact. Use a different color pen or a pencil. Score by using the number correct instead of the number wrong.

Teach to students' comfort zones. This does not mean easy work. It should be challenging but not frustrating. Teaching above the appropriate instructional level will cause discipline problems and the "defeated learner" syndrome.

Teach to all the learning styles (visual, auditory, tactile). Say it, show it, touch it. Know students' learning styles. The one-second assessment: ask a question (What color is your room?). If students' eyes look up while pondering the answer, they are visual. If students' eyes look down, they are auditory. If students' pick up something while thinking, touch a plant, or start moving or walking around the room, they are tactile.

Breakdown complex concepts. Break it down into incremental steps and stages when students have difficulty understanding a concept. Some students may do this by themselves, but not all will be able on their own.

Limit lecture time, and add "doing" time. Give just enough information to get students started. You'll waste your breath after 30 seconds. (Incidentally, you' waste your breath with a working adult after 18 seconds!). When students need more

information, give it to them and walk away, allowing them to work it out. You'll find they'll listen more intently when they ask for information while working problems out on their own.

Give much praise and encouragement. Rejoice at the slightest breakthrough - the "velcro moment" - when it "sticks." Students will feel that future struggles will get better with time. Give them HOPE (hoards of praise and encouragement).

Play music when possible. Studies show that foundational subjects such as math and foreign language are retained easier when learning is coupled with music that matches your heartbeat, but is not distracting. This has been documented by research as far back as 1950. Not only does it improve rate of retention, but it creates a calming effect. (Try using the Greatest Hits of 1750 and Pachelbel for starters.)

Let students take control of their grades. If errors are corrected, then every assignment becomes 100% correct. Tests should be used only to see what concepts need to be re-taught, rather than decorate a grade book. Set a standard of how many assignments completed receive a grade of A. How students control their grades is through their effort. Simple - you don't give the grade; they earn it.

The above modifications are being used by teachers the world over with good results. Coupled with positive reinforcement and fostering independence, increased self-esteem is realized and there is less school-based (and/or home-based) anxiety. What more can we ask for?

These modifications can also be used at home to keep kids on task, modify behavior and reduce discipline problems. Are you willing to take the time and effort needed to put it in place?

Empowering K.I.D.S. (Kids In Daily Situations):

Focus on taking care of yourself. You are worth it! Only you can make your dreams come true. Create a poem of your innermost feelings. Here's an example to get you started.

This poem was sent to me by my favorite sister, at least ten years ago. She felt I needed encouragement, as I was going through a particularly difficult time in my life. It still graces the shelf in my home office:

Dream...

And as you dream,

Remember,

That only you can make your dreams come true.

Reach...

And as you reach,

Remember,

That success takes time, devotion, and sometimes a little disappointment.

Believe...

And as you believe,
You will find,
Reaching gets easier,
Setbacks get more manageable,
And life becomes more meaningful.

There's a wonderful dream waiting just for you...

I know you can make it come true!

Renee Duvall

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