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Family Focus Helping Your Older Child Who Procrastinates

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children miss out on learning how to plan and execute in a timely way, and how to achieve a sense of accomplishment.

Like many procrastinators, Matt fears failure and would rather not try than try and be unable to succeed. And he sets the bar so high for himself that it becomes even more difficult to accomplish what he expects.

Angela, a graduate student I see, also rebels against very strict parenting. She says that her mother has been so controlling that she enjoys behaving completely opposite to what her mother would want. Angela has always taken pride in being a good student, but she is a thrill-seeker who enjoys the adrenalin rush of pulling one or two all-nighters to study or write long papers at the last minute. She has learned to wait until she feels a sense of urgency to start working. Then she feels euphoric as she challenges herself to get everything done within a short period of time. Angela recognizes the pitfalls of her procrastination: she is often sick and exhausted after her bouts of nonstop work, and she doesn't perform as well as she would like. In addition, what finally prompted her to seek counseling was a bout with pneumonia that landed her in the hospital and set her back in her studies considerably.

Angela is working on finding other ways to stand up for herself with her mother. She loves her mother and knows she only wants the best for her. Angela needs to be more direct and assertive in their relationship so that she and her mother can form a more comfortable bond. And we are also addressing her alcohol problem. Many procrastinators use excessive drinking as a distraction to avoid dealing with their feelings and their problems.

So what can parents do for older children? Here are some suggestions:

Matt was a nineteen year-old college freshman who attended a prestigious private college. When he was in high school his parents felt they had to manage him and his schoolwork constantly in order for him to succeed. Matt scored in the upper ranks on standardized tests, but he was a chronic procrastinator. His parents breathed huge sighs of relief when he went away to college and seemed to be making a good adjustment.

Unfortunately, Matt's coping abilities in college soon failed him. After the first two months he fell behind in his assignments, started cutting his classes, and developed a significant video game addiction. His school gave him a chance to make up his missing work and stay for the second semester, but Matt's performance continued to decline. Matt had been giving his parents glowing reports of his success in school, so imagine their shock when he was told to leave after his freshman year.

As well-intentioned as Matt's parents were, they didn't do him a favor by micro-managing his education throughout the years. Matt never learned how to regulate his time or academic demands. In addition, he quite naturally developed resentment as his parents took almost complete control of him during these years. Matt complained along the way, but his parents were successful, forceful people who were able to prevail until he went away to college and was on his own.

Matt's parents came to me to find out how they could help him. They were very receptive and were willing to try a new approach with Matt. They needed to stop questioning him about his schoolwork (or grilling him as Matt would say later), and instead work on strengthening their parent-child relationship. Seven months after his parents began demonstrating their newfound patience and hands-off approach with him, Matt was finally willing to come in for therapy to address his procrastination and shaky self-discipline.

Like Matt, some children become procrastinators in reaction to authoritarian parenting styles. They rebel in this passive-aggressive manner; they don't study or turn in work and then spend a huge amount of time making excuses and arguing with parents. These

*Establish a close relationship with your child. Be fair, supportive, nonjudgmental, and positive. Avoid letting your relationship be too intense or task-oriented. Spend time enjoying your child and having fun together.

*Help him set realistic expectations for himself.

*Ask your child if he wants your help with his schoolwork or other projects before you automatically step in.

*If your child doesn't want your help, see if he will set a goal for himself. Do this a little at a time, one goal at a time, so there isn't too much pressure. If he doesn't meet his goal, continue to be positive and encourage him to try again. Help him feel good about starting and making any amount of progress.

*Challenge (nicely) your child's all-or-nothing thinking. Help him see that most tasks can be broken down into small steps and that making a good effort is more important than an actual grade.

*Allow your child, as often as possible, to participate with you in decision-making so that he learns how to be decisive and solution-oriented.

*Have structure at home for family meals, doing chores, writing thank-you notes, and limiting television, computer time, and other electronic device use.

*THANK him when he helps out and when he performs household tasks promptly. It is essential to reinforce good behavior.

*Do not get angry or frustrated in hearing defiance of your child. You don't want to establish grounds for rebellion. Breathe deeply and vent privately to trusted family and friends.

*If his behavior is persistent and entrenched, call your school counselor for intervention. Or contact a therapist for help. Even if your child refuses to participate, a counselor or therapist can work with you on strategies to change his behavior.

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