

It's Back to School, for Parents Too

By Jerry F. Cammarata

The father and his little son in the post office were dressed alike, in the modern uniform of summer vacationers: tee-shirt, baggy shorts and sports sandals. The father could have just opened his mailbox, taken out his mail, and been on to his next errand in a matter of seconds, but instead he took several minutes, as he let the kindergartner read the box numbers until he found his own.

It seems like a small thing, but that father, by taking just a few extra moments, gave that boy so much: a chance to practice his numbers and to understand how numbers work in the real world, a feeling that he is an important part of the family as he "helped" dad, and, though the boy won't be able to articulate or even realize it for some years, a message that he and his education are worth at least that short extra time, on a warm day during the summer.

Our young people are about to head back to school, and it is not just important, it is absolutely crucial to their success in school and in life that parents take seriously their role as their youngsters' first teachers, and to

fix firmly in their children's minds that their instructors in school have the support of mom and dad at home.

Chancellor Harold Levy, in pointing out the disappointing attendance rate at summer school this year, mentioned the disturbing truth that many parents either chose to keep their kids at home or pulled them out of summer classes midway through the session.

Other adults, in the marketing business, have "dumbed down" popular culture to the point where students really believe that night is spelled "nite," light is spelled "lite" and that words like "kwiikee" and "gansta" really exist.

On-line "netiquette" has given us the "emoticon," so that students make smiley-faces in their writing because they have never gained enough facility of expression to put their thoughts and feelings into words.

All of this sends confusing and harmful messages to our kids. They learn that school is almost optional, that correct spelling is unimportant, and that sloppiness of expression and an appallingly limited vocabulary is acceptable.

So, what's a parent to do?

The opportunities for reinforcing school lessons and counteracting the confusing messages of the ironically named "information economy" are

ubiquitous. Demand that children use grammatically correct English in their speech, and gently correct them when they use an "ain't" or a double negative or a singular noun with a plural verb. When you are out shopping with a child just learning to read, and you encounter a "Toys R Us" sign, help the child to figure out for herself what is wrong with the spelling. Encourage your school-age children to put some real thought into things like "thank you" letters, so that they will exercise their minds in searching for precise and thoughtful expressions. Have books around the house - good, age-appropriate literature and non-fiction books about your children's hobbies - that are available to be casually picked up on a rainy afternoon or in a moment of boredom. Establish a regular "library day" once a week or once a month, when you take your children to the public library, and let them find books on whatever topics interest them.

Most importantly, make it absolutely clear to your children how seriously you take their education. Parents need not instill dread in children of Report Card Day, but should insist that the students in their house set aside regular time each day for homework, and parents should review their children's homework and tests, just so they have an idea of what is going on in the classroom, and what is being expected of their youngsters. Deal with

disputes with or criticisms of their teachers directly with the teachers, and leave the children out of it: if your children hear you castigating their teachers, they will believe that they have license to show contempt for all of school.

School is about to go back into session, but learning shouldn't end when the dismissal bell rings, and schools are only as successful as parents are supportive of them. The best teachers and best programs can never take the place of concerned parents.

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