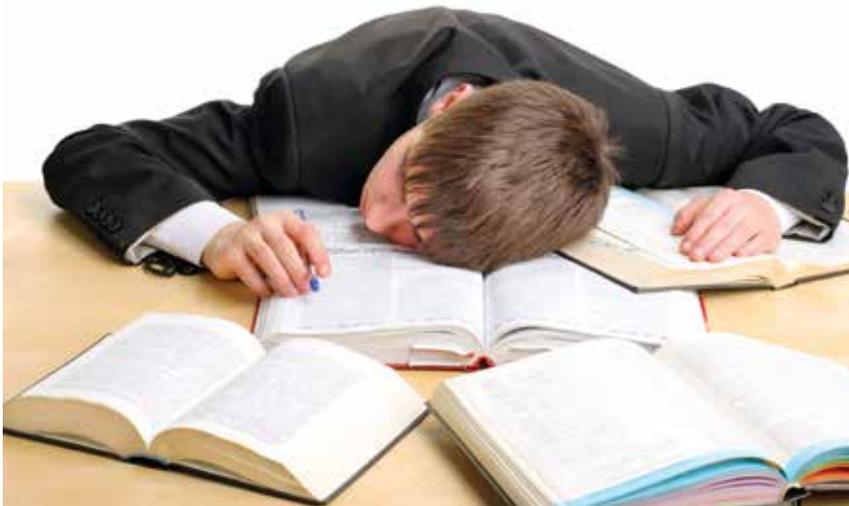


Ready to Learn?

Tips for parents to help their children learn better in school



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PARENTS, BY THEIR very nature, want the best for their children and that means helping them grow up to be healthy, happy and successful - and a large part of that is helping them to do well at school. Perhaps frustratingly, once a child goes through the school gates, there is very little parents can do, leaving many feeling helpless and completely reliant on the school and teachers, whom parents have entrusted to educate their child. However, there are many things parents can do before the school day starts to give their child the best chance of having a good day of learning.

While Abraham Maslow's book *Hierarchy of Human Needs* was written some 80 years ago, it's still relevant to children and learning today. Put simply, it states that all humans have basic physiological needs, for example food, water, clothing, sanitation, sleep and shelter, which, unless met, mean we lack the motivation to pursue anything else. Children are no different. A hungry child is unlikely to learn as well as one who has a full belly.

Even as adults we are guilty of taking these basic needs for granted at times, until of course we are forced to go without water for a week because we tried to change the faucets on the bathroom sink and caused a major leak (my DIY skills are not what they should be). Yet even with these basic needs

fulfilled, getting the balance right when trying to satisfy them all is critical, and not always that easy.

A child who stays up too late will find it difficult to concentrate in class the next day. Likewise, a child who skips breakfast or doesn't drink enough water will also have problems. Schools are acutely aware of this. The introduction of breakfast clubs is not simply to make parents' lives easier - it is intended to make sure that every child has been well-fed before entering the classroom. Therefore, children are encouraged to have a bottle of water with them at all times. But getting them into the habit of using it is slightly trickier. As the saying goes: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

In class, I often refer to our brains as sponges designed to hold lots of water, but if left untended, dry out. And when they do, we become dehydrated, find it more difficult to concentrate and become more susceptible to headaches.

How Much Sleep is Necessary?

For adults, the recommendation is eight hours and this is common knowledge. Most parents probably would admit that they don't know exactly how much sleep their child should be getting or how much they should be eating. I'm sure feelings of guilt and anxiety fill every parent's mind when they compare

notes with others. Whatever the topic, we assume that we are the ones getting it wrong. Unfortunately, children don't come with a manual and their needs continually change as they get older, so it is difficult to get it right all the time. As long as parents are mindful of these issues, that is usually enough to 'get it right.'

What is important to remember is that every child is different. The amount of sleep a child needs each night can change depending on the activities they've done that day. But they should have fairly standardized bed and wake up times. As a rule of thumb, if your child appears tired during the day, at times when you wouldn't expect them to, they probably need more sleep. Avoiding technology for the last hour or two before bedtime will also help your child to get to sleep faster, easier and to sleep more deeply. Reading a bedtime story to them is a better option.

Healthy Lifestyle

Helping your child to get the right amount of sleep is just one of many ways to help them perform well at school. Providing nutritious and healthy food is another. Getting enough exercise, regular washing and regular medical checkups are still more. And even when all of these physiological needs are met, there is another level of need before children become motivated to learn - the need for safety. Take the example of the playground fall-out that spills into the classroom at the end of break-time - a scenario I'm sure every teacher can relate to. Nowhere in the lesson plan does it say "deal with playground incidents"; but for children, the need for justice and reconciliation is far higher at that moment than anything else, and so the teacher has to deal with it as promptly and effectively as possible so that the loss of learning time is minimized.

While your child's education is the responsibility of their school and teachers, it is incumbent upon parents to ensure that they eat, sleep and exercise well so that they are 'ready to learn.' ■