

**How to Get  
The Right Education for Your Child**

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## From the Author

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Responsibility for any mistakes is, however, mine alone. I have used pseudonyms in some cases.

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## Introduction

Let's imagine you're the parent of a nine-year-old boy named Jack. He is now beginning grade 4 at his neighbourhood school, John Dewey Public School. Starting from when Jack was in grade 2, it has become very obvious that his school experience is not going well. Not only has Jack not learned to read, but also he is starting to get a reputation as a "behaviour problem". Things are going from bad to worse, and none of your discussions with Jack's teachers has made the slightest bit of difference.

The time for waiting and hoping is over!

- Jack is not going to miraculously "bloom" one of these fine days.
- His school is not going to experience a conversion on the road to Damascus.
- Aliens will not suddenly descend from a flying saucer and give him a brain implant.

The sooner you take action, the easier the job will be. So, what to do? Of course, your child's name is probably not Jack, and his or her problems are probably not identical to Jack's, but the general approach is the same. I have divided your options into three main categories.

- Working with the System
- Supplementing the System
- Opting Out of the System

### ***Working with the System***

In Chapters 2 and 3, I go over how to approach educators to ask for help. Most parents start with this option, and a few do actually get satisfaction. And of course if you do manage to get help for Jack from the system, it won't cost you a penny. So, it's a sensible place to begin.

Be warned, however, that many parents get nowhere with this approach. For one whole year, Maureen Somers asked in vain for help for her son Adam. At last, along with other parents of sev-

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eral other children in the same class, she managed to get them tested by the school board. It turned out that 12 out of 21 grade 4 students were reading at a mid-grade 2 level or worse. When the parents asked for direct, sequential instruction and remedial help for their children, the resource teacher (whose own children were in a private school) told them they would “have to go out and pay for it”. Many did. Ms Somers’ three children and many of Adam’s former classmates left for other schools, including private and home schools.

I relate this story not to frighten you, but rather to warn you that you must not blindly put your faith in the system. I have heard thousands of such stories. While every story is different in its details, each testifies to an utter lack of responsiveness on the part of educators.

Of course, it is terribly unjust and wrong that schools can get away with turning their backs on parents like this. But even worse is the fact that parents can (and often do) waste years trying to get improved service from their child’s public school, precious years which their children can’t afford to lose. The train just keeps moving along!

Barb Brown first realized that her son was in trouble when Trevor was in grade 4. She immediately began a one-woman campaign to get help for him, an odyssey which was going on eight years later when Trevor reached grade 12 still reading at an elementary school level. In all that time, only one school official had ever even acknowledged that he was at risk, while remedial teaching was never provided by the school system. Finally, Mrs. Brown in desperation arranged for him to be tutored by a retired teacher who lived on her street. According to the tutor, Trevor had the ability – he had just never been taught.

Mrs. Brown’s case, and thousands of similar cases, has convinced me that parents should never waste much time trying to change individual teachers’ programs. It may be the cheapest

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choice, but so is trying to drain a swamp with a teaspoon. If you do choose to persist with the local school however, be prepared to praise anything good that happens in school, to be constructive and direct in asking for what you want, and to do much of the work at home yourself.

My advice is – ask your child’s teacher for reasonable changes but, if you don’t start seeing results right away, start examining your options. Jack will never get another crack at grade 4, and he is already three years behind schedule.

Since it is almost impossible to switch teachers in the middle of the year, your first option is to try to find a better public school. Schools vary a great deal and good ones do exist, although they are scarcer than underpaid superintendents. Fortunately for you, school rankings have recently become available, and I will show you where they are on the Internet.

Identifying a good public school is still only half the battle, however. There can be a lot of red tape involved in transfers since there are plenty of administrators who believe students should attend only their assigned schools. A further difficulty is that good schools are often bursting at the seams. You must also bear in mind that it is usually up to parents to provide any necessary transportation to a non-neighbourhood school. Nevertheless, sometimes all the hassle is worth it, and I give advice on how to tackle this project. There is another exciting option called “charter schools” on the horizon, but as yet the only Canadian province to allow these schools is Alberta.

If it turns out that you’re stuck with the John Dewey Public School, there are possibilities beyond the classroom teacher. For people who a) cannot afford to pay for help, b) are extremely stubborn, or c) like long odds, I include information on the appeal route. Although most of these activities are usually time-consuming and frustrating, I give advice on such things as meeting with school officials, obtaining curriculum, arranging testing, interpreting re-

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port cards, handling legal issues, accessing student records, and requesting particular teachers.

Another option is to work with other like-minded parents at the school to try to make school-wide improvements. Because some people don't seem to mind spending many boring and unproductive hours sitting on school councils, I have provided some ideas on how you might try to make your experience of some value. Because most of these councils are advisory (as opposed to decision-making) bodies, they are usually an exercise in frustration.

Working with the system generally pays off right away – or not at all. If you're getting nowhere fast, I urge you to turn to the next category, and think about supplementing the system.

### ***Supplementing the System***

In Chapters 4 and 5, I talk about how you can ensure that Jack gets the teaching he needs. This option is so widespread that it has been given its own name – after-schooling. A survey of the parents at a Toronto public school revealed that an incredible 45% of parents had taught their children at home “over and above normal parental assistance with homework”. In addition, 29% had paid for extra help from a tutor.

In many cases, after-schooling helps a lot. Sometimes, it is the lifejacket that makes the difference between staying afloat and sinking.

Of course, after-schooling is not without its drawbacks.

- It can get expensive, often beyond the range of the average pocketbook.
- The teaching necessarily takes place after school, on weekends, and in the summer, times when the children are tired.
- It is not unusual for kids to be uncooperative, and sometimes your extra “homework” sets the stage for family friction.

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Whether you plan to teach Jack yourself or pay someone else to do it, I provide information to guide you through the maze. If the former, I tell you how to get started, and I list some recommended resources. If the latter, I outline and evaluate the options, ranging from the retired teacher down the street, through Kumon, professional remedial teachers, and professional remedial services. I also give information on how to go about getting Jack tested. After-schooling services are booming, as a glance at the “Schools” section of the Yellow Pages will attest.

If you have already tried both working with the system and supplementing the system and it’s still not enough for Jack, you may be ready to opt out of the system completely.

### ***Opting Out of the System***

In Chapters 6 and 7, I describe the remaining two possibilities. Those who flee public education can choose between private schools and home-schooling.

For those who can afford them, private schools may be the answer. But there are no guarantees. Standards vary widely, as the Joneses (not their real name) found when they transferred their children from one private school to another. Not only did the Jones children find the work extremely easy and unchallenging at their new private school, but also Mr. and Mrs. Jones were appalled by how rough some of the teachers were. The Joneses became so dissatisfied they withdrew their children from the school. And then – the school refused to refund their \$20,000 tuition fee! Only the threat of legal action pried their money loose – and even then \$1,000 was held back.

The moral of the story? Do not assume that a school has high standards just because it is a private school. I give guidance on how to seek out and evaluate good private schools.

If you don’t have several thousand dollars lying around or if you can’t find a good private school, you may wish to try home-schooling. Numbers are really hard to come by (since many home-

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schoolers don't register with their local school board), but the numbers are significant. The Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents estimates that 1-2% of Canadian children are home-schooled (making a total of approximately 60,000 children).

Home-schooling is not as daunting as you might think. For one thing, there is a vast supply of teaching materials available. For another, home-schoolers tend to be exceptionally well-organized, with local support networks everywhere. And lastly, home-schooled kids can soak up learning at an incredible rate. Most spend two or three hours a day on academics, yet cover the year's work with no difficulty whatsoever.

Barb Benson took her grade 5 daughter out of the public system at Christmas. At that time, Blair was unable to add one-digit numbers without counting on her fingers. She read grade-level material very slowly, with an average of one or two mistakes per sentence. By June of the same year, Blair was reading adult-level material with no mistakes. In math, she could do rapid calculation, fractions, decimals, and the beginnings of algebra. Blair had even memorized the metric and imperial tables and could convert from one to the other.

There is a huge amount of resources and networking available in the home-schooling community, and I provide a start-up kit on how to plug in to this vast support system.

So there you have it. Those are the choices. I wish I could tell you about other options – like how to sneak a common sense pill into educators' thermoses. Unfortunately however, science has not yet found a cure for progressive teaching methods.

If you've tried working with the system, supplementing the system, and opting out of the system, and you still haven't had enough, there's always trying to change the system. Those who refuse to accept the status quo should check out the Society for Quality Education, an organization which is dedicated to the sig-

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nificant improvement of student learning in Canada. More on this in my last chapter. For the time being however, you must choose among these somewhat limited options.

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**Chapter 1**

**Confusion in the Classroom**

Imagine that you have just walked into a modern grade 3 classroom.

You are surprised to see the children are all moving freely around the room and overflowing into the hall, chattering loudly. You notice that a couple of boys are throwing paper airplanes around, and you wince as you see a little girl deliver a vicious pinch. The room is cluttered, with papers, books, and games piled everywhere. You have a little trouble locating the teacher but finally spot her back in a corner deep in conference with one of the students.

Raising your voice to be heard over the din, you ask one of the little girls what is going on. She explains that the class just finished watching a “visual novel” on television and now they are supposed to create something to show how the movie made them feel. Many of the children have decided to put on a play, while others are drawing pictures or building something with Lego. One or two are writing stories.

Welcome to the world of “child-centred learning”.

Times have changed in the little red schoolhouse. Conceived in the US during the days of the flower-children in the free-spirited sixties, child-centred learning is a backlash against rigid, rote, and irrelevant teaching. Teachers are no longer expected to merely transfer facts to their students – active learning, higher-order thinking, and creativity are the order of the day. Teachers are now expected to be “the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage”.

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### **Warning! Jargon Alert!**

In their roles as guides, teachers try to “facilitate” the discovery of new learning, especially learning that is “relevant” to each individual learner. Each teacher is expected to develop his or her own curriculum, custom-made for each child, fresh-minted every year. Particularly in the early grades, teaching materials often have to be searched out, photocopied, or made, since workbooks and textbooks are suspect. In an attempt to instil a love of learning, every effort is made to make school fun and easy. “Self-concept” is paramount, and thus students’ work is rarely corrected and always praised, while report cards focus on the positive.

That’s the theory, but how does it play out in practice? Classrooms differ. Generally speaking, however, teachers rarely stand up in front of their class and teach lessons. Instead, they frequently “conference” with one student while the rest of the class works alone or in groups. There is very little drilling of basic facts, since the students are thought to learn better if they apply these skills to their assignments (learning by doing). Even if students are not ready for the work of the next grade, they are promoted anyway, lest their self-esteem be damaged – usually with the result that at least a third of the class is in trouble.

Programs are described as “individualized”, but that should not be taken literally. It means children have a lot of choice, not a lot of individual help. It would be impossible for even the most competent teacher to effectively oversee the individualized programs of an entire class – especially given the large numbers of students with special needs. Conscientious teachers know this all too well, and that is why they complain about class sizes that earlier teachers could only dream about.

By no means are all child-centred classrooms as noisy and chaotic as the one you visited at the start of this chapter. (I just sent you to that one to get your attention.) Many are calm and orderly, with most of the children on task and engaged. But if you look

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closely at what the students are doing, you will notice that most are either repeating things they already know (such as reading books below their reading level) or trying to do things beyond their capability.

It's not hard to figure out why. When each child is supposed to be following an individualized program, unobtrusively guided by the teacher, there just isn't enough time to go around. Even a teacher with no administrative or disciplinary demands on her time can give each of her 20 students only three minutes every hour. Consequently, the children are in charge of their own learning for at least 57 minutes of every hour! Even when superbly managed, most child-centred classrooms get poor results. This is the almost-inevitable consequence of "individualized" instruction.

Few people have any idea of the revolution which has taken place in Canadian elementary classrooms. Just about everyone, however, knows that Canadian students are not acquiring the skills and knowledge they need in order to survive and flourish in tomorrow's world. Could there be a connection? Could the fact that students are not learning enough have anything to do with how they are being taught?

Let's take a look at how child-centred learning has affected your nine-year-old son Jack. When Jack started kindergarten just over four years ago, he was a sweet little boy – bright and curious and excited about learning to read.

You were impressed by the programs in kindergarten and grade 1. The teachers were so kind, so dedicated. The classrooms were bright and colourful and filled with good books and busy activity. It looked like heaven on earth for Jack.

- The teachers read wonderful stories to the children every day.
- The children drew pictures and the teachers printed captions underneath.
- The children chanted repetitive stories together, "reading" from big books held up by the teacher.

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- The teachers printed children-generated stories on a chart in front of the class.
- The children “wrote” their own stories, using “invented” spelling and “read” repetitive books.
- Sounds and letters were presented in a fun, non-pressurized manner.

It looked like the perfect way to ease Jack into reading. And when it didn't happen for Jack, his teachers told you not to worry – clearly, Jack just wasn't ready yet. This was very comforting for everyone concerned.

A few years back, the former method of teaching kids to read (“Whole Language”) fell into serious disfavour with the public. Forced to do something but unwilling to abandon their beloved Whole Language, education leaders added a few bells and whistles, and renamed the approach “Balanced Literacy”. Balanced Literacy includes things like “phonemic awareness” (hearing the sounds in words) and fun ways of learning some of the letter-sound combinations. The added features mean that kids tend to do slightly better than they did under Whole Language, but the “new” Balanced Literacy approach is still far from adequate.

The theory behind Whole Language/Balanced Literacy is that if students are immersed in an inviting literary environment and provided with a few clues, they will pick up reading as naturally as they learned to walk and talk. When they're ready, of course. Can kids really learn to read this way? Amazingly, some do. Somehow, they manage to put together the scattered clues and crack the phonetic code all by themselves.

The successful ones tend to be children with many thousands of hours of exposure to print already under their belts. They are usually students who are interested in academic learning, dedicated learners who are able to persist at tasks despite frequent interruptions and noise. More often than not, they are girls, since little girls are on average more focused and mature than little boys.

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As well, the successful students tend to have strong auditory abilities, since learning to read is sound-based (hearing-impaired children and children who lisp are at extreme risk of reading failure).

Sadly, something like half of all students lack at least one of these characteristics, meaning that Balanced Literacy leaves a long tail of stragglers in its wake. Statistically, they are already doomed. Reading ability at the end of grade 1 is a powerful predictor of later academic success, future income, and even life expectancy. Most kids either become good readers in grade 1 or they never do, since few grade 2 teachers offer reading instruction geared to children who can't read. It's not even in the Ontario grade 2 curriculum. So what happens to the children who do not pick up reading in kindergarten and grade 1?

A lucky few get grade 2 teachers with a traditional orientation who close their doors and actually *teach* their students to read. Other students go to private schools and home schools. Most of these children do well. Other children stagger along the road towards literacy propped up by help from home or sessions at Sylvan Learning Centre. Perhaps they become adequate readers but terrible spellers. They get by.

And then there are the Jacks. There are a lot of them. In Ontario, only about 60% of grade 3 students read well enough to cope with the work of the next grade, according to the provincial tests. Not much changes after that. The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey found that about nine million (42%) Canadian adults aged 16 to 65 read below the "desired threshold for coping with the increasing skill demands of a knowledge society". The situation was even worse when it came to numeracy – with 55% of adults below the threshold.

These statistics are really hard to believe. But every time Canada's literacy and numeracy is studied, the result comes up roughly the same: well over a third of the population cannot meet everyday reading and/or numeracy demands. Yet most people

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seem to be able to read menus and handle money. This is illiterate? This is innumerate?

The answer can be found in the curious type of illiteracy and innumeracy generated by child-centred methods. The casualties of modern teaching methods are hard to spot, since their education has provided them with some crutches. For example, most Balanced Literacy victims have a sizeable bank of memorized sight words, allowing them to fake it in most everyday situations. Few people would ever guess their sad secret – namely, that they can't decipher unknown words. As for innumeracy – there are always calculators (and I mean always).

As a result of the limitations of child-centred illiterates and innumerates, they have trouble reading anything complicated, like the instructions on a medicine bottle, or a bus schedule, or the newspaper. They can't double most recipes or grasp how much interest they're paying on their credit cards. Nor can they write a business letter or fill out a job application form. They are easily duped by fast-talking salesmen and unscrupulous politicians. And so they are forced to lurk on the fringes of our rich and complex society. What a shame!

Unfortunately for Jack, he was not one of the lucky kids who can crack the phonetic code by themselves. Even though you read to Jack religiously and encouraged him in literary pursuits, he didn't have a bookish bent. A typical little boy, he preferred to be active and busy at sports and games, and he always chose the sandbox over the reading centre. Furthermore, Jack was not blessed with strong auditory abilities – in fact, he still speaks with a slight lisp.

Consequently, Jack's high hopes have been dashed. Now in grade 4, he is reading at a low grade 2 level, mainly by dint of having memorized dozens of words. He does not enjoy reading out loud. Faced with an unknown word, he falls silent or guesses wildly.

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As Jack's parent, you are terribly concerned. Perhaps your primary worry is not that he can't read yet – after all, his teachers have assured you that Jack is just a late bloomer. Rather, you are upset at the changes in Jack's personality.

No longer the charming, vivacious pre-schooler he once was, now Jack is sullen, disobedient and moody, and his self-esteem is very low. He hates school and gets stomach aches every morning (except on the weekends). He has started to hang out with a gang of rowdy grade 6 boys. His teacher has called to say Jack has become very disruptive in class and she is planning to send him for psychological testing.

You have the feeling Jack is going down for the third time. What should you do?

If you are like most parents, you will turn to the school personnel to help your son. And, if you do, chances are they will let you down. In the early stages, you will be told Jack is doing fine and is quite normal, just like lots of other little boys (which, unfortunately, is all too true). By the time he is 10 or 11, you will be “reminded” that Jack has always been a problem and not much can be expected of him). Jack is in danger of becoming a statistic. Perhaps, like a great many illiterates, he will drop out of school, turn to drugs or crime or welfare, and resign himself to a low-grade sort of existence for the rest of his life.

It doesn't have to end like this, however. Jack's personality problems can be cleared up like magic. But first, you're going to have to do a little detective work.

Your investigation should begin by asking yourself how you would feel if you were forced to go every day to a job where you were constantly humiliated. Imagine that all around you, your fellow workers are churning out fantastic widgets, hundreds of them an hour. You, however, can't learn how to make a widget – and this makes you feel very stupid. You are sure you will never be

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able to learn how to do this, and at the same time you are miserably aware that you are going to be forced to stay at this job for years and years. If you try to quit or even play hookey, you will be breaking the law, and a policeman will track you down and drag you back to be disgraced and humiliated some more.

Your boss is very kind and tells you frequently that you'll catch on one of these days "when you're ready" – *but she won't show you how to make widgets*. To add to your frustration, everyone is always talking about the importance of making widgets and saying that non-widget makers let their families down, get poorly-paid jobs, and generally miss out on the good things of life.

This is the situation in which non-readers find themselves. They realize it is crucially important to be able to read and write. They are anguished over the fact that they are unable to. Naturally, they assume it's their own fault, and furthermore that they are stupid and worthless. A heavy burden to lay on a seven-year-old!

Some seek out a dark corner and keep their heads down in the hopes that no one will notice them. Some cultivate their ability to charm and beguile in order to distract attention from their reading problem. And some, like Jack, start acting out because they would rather get in trouble for misbehaviour than for stupidity.

Jack's personality changes are, quite simply, the result of his inability to read. If you could wave a magic wand and transform Jack into a competent reader, he would soon revert to the sunny little guy he once was.

Carl Kline was a child psychiatrist who witnessed this particular miracle approximately 4000 times. In 1972 when he moved to Vancouver from the US, Dr. Kline was immediately struck by the number of children who were being referred to him because of "behavioural problems". Although by that time it was well accepted in American psychiatric circles that the problems of such children were usually due to difficulties with reading, the news had apparently not yet reached Canada. Using the phonetic principles

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enunciated by Samuel Orton and Anna Gillingham, Dr. Kline and his wife arranged for the children to be taught to read. Presto! The children's behaviour problems melted away.

The Klins found that the vast majority of his patients had only minor difficulties with literacy. Taught properly, they would probably have never got into any trouble in the first place. What a pity they had to endure so much pain! And even the kids with major difficulties all learned to read in the end – after lots of good, careful teaching, that is.

Teaching Jack to read is not going to be as simple as waving a magic wand, but it's probably not going to be as hard as you think either. First and most importantly, do not believe the explanations why Jack can't read.

- Jack has a learning disability.
- Jack has ADHD.
- Jack has dyslexia.
- Jack has an auditory processing disorder.
- Jack has allergies.
- Jack is a late bloomer.
- Jack is a December baby.
- Jack doesn't pay attention.
- Jack watches too much television.
- Jack wasn't read to as a toddler.

Spectacularly absent from all explanations is the possibility that Jack received poor instruction. A professor of psychology at Western Michigan University once surveyed 50 school psychologists as to the causes of the learning difficulties of the approximately 5000 students whom they were serving at the time. According to the school psychologists, zero percent of the 5000 students' problems were the result of bad teaching, while 100% were the fault of the students.

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In Ontario, this is changing, and many school psychologists now recognize the results of bad teaching. Among themselves, they refer to the Jacks of the world as the “teaching-disabled”.

It is easy to understand why educators think the problem must always lie within the child. They have been convinced by their teaching training and their in-service programs that child-centred learning is the best approach. After all, it’s not as if *all* the children are struggling in school. It’s usually “only” five or ten kids in each class who are in trouble, while the rest appear to be doing just fine. So the problem is with the dummies, right?

Well, no, not exactly. The problem is with the peculiar nature of child-centred learning. Some children, a minority of students, do really, really well – perhaps even better than they would have done in a traditional classroom. Their parents are ecstatic about the new methods – and curiously unsympathetic, even hostile, towards parents whose kids have been damaged by child-centred learning. The new methods are like the little girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead – when they are good, they are very, very good and, when they are bad, they are horrid.

As a result, child-centred learning increases the differences between children and, the higher the grade, the greater the differences. A good rule of thumb is that the range of abilities in a child-centred class is generally about the same as the grade number. In other words, a typical grade 3 class would have students ranging in ability from grade 1 to grade 4. By grade 8, the spread might be from grade 2 to grade 10. This makes things very tough for the grade 8 teacher (not to mention the students at the bottom).

In order to work, child-centred learning needs to meet several criteria.

- The teacher must be energetic, dedicated, and talented.
- The class size must be very small.
- Every child must be a self-starter who is motivated and able to learn in a non-linear, non-sequential fashion.

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- Most important, the children must have no learning difficulties, be confident and outgoing, and come from very supportive homes.

Obviously, the first criterion is not always met. Child-centred learning is like an extremely sophisticated airplane – it requires extensive training and strong back-up if it is to be flown safely. But, while only very skilled pilots qualify to fly high-tech aircraft, *all* teachers are permitted – indeed encouraged – to try their hands at child-centred learning. Unlike in the case of the pilots however, at least in theory there are no casualties if they crash and burn.

Even given superb teachers and small classes, there are still only certain children who thrive in child-centred classrooms. They are kids who love books and understood the connection between the printed word and meaning before coming to school. Often they come from enriched homes and, as such, they are more likely to be able to fill the gaps which child-centred learning inevitably leaves. Many such children receive massive teaching at home or are sent to paid tutors.

Though Jack had wonderful teachers, was placed in classes of about 20 kids, and was lucky enough to have you as a parent, he still missed the boat. Jack didn't happen to be the type of kid who does well in child-centred classrooms. His bad luck.

Do Jack's weaknesses mean he can never learn to read? Not at all. Chances are, a three-month-long session of intensive phonics (the alphabet and its sounds) is all he needs. All children, except the severely-disabled, can learn to read fluently after one school year of competent instruction. The same principle applies to all the basic skills, such as arithmetic, spelling, and penmanship.

In September 2007, the impoverished Scottish school board of West Dunbartonshire announced that every one of its 11-year-olds had entered high school with a reading age of at least nine and a half.

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To put this in perspective, they could all read the following sentence: “Any educator who asserts that a certain percentage of the population is incapable of learning to read is talking through his bonnet.”

The message in this book is a good news/bad news message. The good news is that Jack can learn. The bad news is that it’s up to you to make it happen. If you don’t help him, chances are no one else will.

In the following chapters, I will tell you how you can teach Jack to read – and write and spell and do math. It won’t be quite as easy as it would have been before he got so messed up, but it’s by no means too late.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Exhausting the System**

Pauline Kennedy first became interested in education reform when she was called to an interview at her eight-year-old son's school and told, in a bolt from the blue, that he was so far behind he might have to repeat his year. Freddy's most serious problem, she was told, was that he had no word attack skills. In other words, he couldn't read.

The next day, Mrs. Kennedy happened to see a grade 1 phonics workbook in her local bookstore and picked it up on a whim. She set aside half an hour a day for phonics, and at the end of six weeks, Freddy was reading "at grade level or better" according to his teacher. It was that easy.

So then Pauline asked herself why she had been able to teach Freddy to read in six weeks, while his teachers hadn't been able to do it in three years. She began to volunteer at the school. It didn't take Pauline long to discover that there were several poor readers in Freddy's class, most of them boys, and nothing was being done to help them. The teacher seemed to think it inevitable that a certain percentage of every class would never become good readers. I guess this philosophy helped her sleep at night.

Pauline also noticed that there was very little actual instruction taking place in Freddy's classroom. Reading, writing, math, art – every subject was presented in an activity-based "discovery" format – with the expectation that the students would "learn by doing". But while *most* of the children were involved in the activities, only *some* of them were making the intended "discoveries". Some of the children were thriving in the stimulating, enriched environment – latching on to the new learning and reaching out for more. Other children, Freddy among them, were enjoying the fun but spurning the learning. All the time, the learning gap was widening.

## *Exhausting the System*

But the teacher couldn't see this! Totally wrapped up in an almost-religious enthusiasm for child-centred learning, Freddy's teacher treated Mrs. Kennedy like a Doubting Thomas. Despite evidence to the contrary right in front of her eyes, this teacher unswervingly believed that child-centred learning was necessary and beneficial for every single child in the class. When asked about the nine children who still couldn't read, the teacher severely reprimanded Pauline for comparing one child to another.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which most elementary educators actually believe in the child-centred dogma. In some ways, it is like a religious cult – beliefs are taken on faith, doubts are not entertained, the outside world is shut out. In many Canadian provinces, educators have now been indoctrinated in the child-centred doctrines for more than 30 years! The elementary schools in some Canadian provinces – Ontario and Nova Scotia are probably the worst – may be more child-centred than schools anywhere else in the world.

It is unfair to blame teachers – or even principals – for the problems in public education. They are, for the most part, well-meaning and hard-working front-line workers who are trying their best to help the students they cherish. The real culprits are their leaders: the faculties of education, the departments of education, the teachers' unions, and the school board officials. These people are pulling out all the stops in their efforts to enforce child-centred learning: by means of propaganda, moral suasion, policy, regulation, and even financial incentives. Teachers who refuse to toe the party line are reprimanded, and recalcitrant principals are not considered for promotion. Teachers and principals are pawns in a huge chess game.

Looking back, you realize that Jack's primary teachers were all worshipping at the altar of child-centred learning. Whenever you would summon up your courage and ask about Jack's

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reading problem, these teachers would assure you that Jack was developing appropriately. Further, they would warn you not to communicate your foolish worries to Jack, lest you damage his self-esteem. As a result of their well-intentioned claptrap, Jack has lost three years. There's nothing you can do about that now. But perhaps his new grade 4 teacher is more open-minded? Will she provide Jack with the kind of teaching he so desperately needs? How to find out?

Before deciding how to approach Mrs. Enigma, put yourself in her shoes for a moment. Every day, Jack's teacher stands in front of a class of 25 nine-year-olds, many of them with special needs. Mrs. Enigma has nine students with severe reading problems. Three of them have behaviour problems. One student has been very upset by her parents' recent divorce, and two don't speak English very well. One, severely-disabled and with his own teaching assistant, often shouts uncontrollably, drowning out the teacher's words.

To add to her difficulties, Mrs. Enigma has never had special training on how to cope with challenges like these, and so she is just doing the best she can. Furthermore, she was away the day they mentioned phonics at her faculty of education – so she doesn't have a clue how to teach kids to read.

Because Mrs. Enigma is teaching grade 4 for the first time this year, she has had to develop her entire course of study, finding or making the necessary teaching materials. (Despite spending almost \$10,000 per student, her school board can't seem to afford textbooks. In any case, whole class sets of texts are against board policy.) Being the busy mother of two preschoolers, Mrs. Enigma hasn't a lot of spare time. She does find a few minutes now and then, however, to scan the newspaper headlines. She knows how much criticism the schools have been getting lately. Furthermore, you are not the only parent who has been in asking for special treatment for her child.

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Still want to visit her?

It should be clear that you must plan any encounter carefully. The first thing to do is to work out what you can realistically expect Mrs. Enigma to agree to. If, for example, you march in and demand she totally junk her Balanced Literacy program in favour of the McGuffey Readers, you're sure to strike out. If you insist she devote an hour a day to a personal tutorial for Jack, she might throw you out of the game.

On the other hand, Mrs. Enigma might agree to:

- Refer Jack to the “resource” (remedial) teacher for special tutoring\*;
- Give Jack special homework in his areas of weakness (especially if you promise to mark it yourself); or
- Put her nine struggling readers into a group and give them special instruction.

You have nothing to lose by asking. Bear in mind, however, that your request could be dead in the water for a variety of factors you have no control over. For example:

- Most resource teachers are so flooded with referrals they can take only the direst cases. You may find it hard to believe, but Jack is probably by no means the worst off.
- Mrs. Enigma may turn out to be a hard-core Balanced Literacy addict.
- Mrs. Enigma may be under strict orders not to use systematic phonics.
- Your school may be one with so many hostile parents that the teachers have adopted a pattern of passive resistance to parental requests.

With all these possible reasons for refusal, you should be very careful not to add any unnecessary ones. At all costs, try not

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\* Before asking for this, check to see whether the resource teacher is a Balanced Literacy fanatic – a surprising number of them are.

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to antagonize Mrs. Enigma by coming on too strong or appearing critical.

Your first interview is probably make or break. If Mrs. Enigma turns you down today, she is highly unlikely to change her mind later on. Of course, you can always try to force her to cooperate, and I do outline the appeal route later in the chapter, but I don't know of a single case where this strategy has worked. So there is a big premium on getting it right the first time.

As I have already mentioned, you must be exquisitely careful not to make Mrs. Enigma feel she is under attack. Thus, it would be appropriate to find something positive (and true) to start out with.

- Jack is really interested in the unit you're doing on turnips.
- My husband and I are delighted that Jack has a teacher who is young and enthusiastic/mature and experienced.
- Your classroom is so vibrant and full of stimulating material.

At the same time, do not come on as ingratiating, since it's also a mistake to appear weak. Instead, just pretend you have made an appointment with your dentist to ask about false teeth. Naturally, you do not wish to annoy Dr. Torquemada (you are somewhat dependent on his good graces). On the other hand, you are paying him to perform a service and you have every reason to expect him to accommodate you. After all, you can always take your business elsewhere.

Oops. Unfortunately, the analogy breaks down at this point, since you can't exactly switch teachers at the drop of a molar. Even so, keep in mind that Jack's teacher is being well paid by taxpayers to perform a service for you. It's your tax money and it's your kid. Therefore, you should adopt a pleasant but business-like attitude, whereby you confidently expect to have your reasonable request granted. Here are a few ideas for helping to set the stage.

- Wear full regalia – business attire, no dangling jewellery. Bring a pad and paper to take notes.

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- Moms, it kills me to say this, but you will be taken more seriously if you bring your husband along (or any other man, for that matter).
- Give a miss to those wee chairs. There's a big psychological advantage to the person sitting up high behind a desk peering down on her abject petitioners scrunched into their baby chairs.
- Bring documentation to back up what you are saying – report cards, the results of testing, Jack's previous written work, etc.
- Leave Jack at home. The last thing you want is to have to guard your tongue lest he overhear something hurtful.
- Pick a time when neither you nor Mrs. Enigma are going to be subject to distractions or time pressures. Make sure you have at least an hour at your disposal – your probably won't need it, but don't put yourself in a position where you have to leave just when you're starting to get somewhere.

All right, so now the stage is set. The three of you are sitting there, smiling at one another rather tentatively. The time has come.

You begin, as agreed, with a compliment. "We're so pleased that you're Jack's teacher this year. Jack says he's really enjoying your drug education program – and he seems to be learning so much too...."

Next, you lead into the substance of your concern very matter-of-factly. "Last May, as you know, Jack was tested by the school board and found to be reading at a low grade 2 level." At this point, it might be a good idea to seek Mrs. Enigma's opinion. As an educator, she is programmed to respond to requests for information. But before you ask her, you should be aware that many educators, possibly because they are accustomed to a captive audience in the classroom, often have trouble stopping. In order to forestall a 15-minute monologue, you might try suggesting that Mrs. Enigma make her answer brief. For example, "There's no

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need to answer at length, but...” or you might try framing your question in an open/shut format: “Do you agree that Jack is two years behind in reading?”

If it turns out that Mrs. Enigma doesn’t think that Jack is in big trouble, then you’ve already lost the game. Convincing her otherwise is going to be almost impossible. I would suggest that you cut the interview short and start looking for help somewhere else.

For the purposes of this exercise, however, let us suppose that Mrs. Enigma does agree that Jack is in trouble. If so, you’ve made it to first base. Because if she admits Jack needs help, there is at least a possibility that she will see the need to do something about it.

Of course, you already have a pretty good idea of just what that something should be. And what better time than the present to begin exploring the options? You could now:

- Seek Mrs. Enigma’s opinion as to what should be done;
- Inquire how she is planning to solve Jack’s problem; or
- Ask her point-blank if she would agree to (fill in the blanks).

If you have played your cards right and have remembered your rabbit’s foot, Mrs. Enigma will make a commitment to help Jack. If you are very, very lucky, Mrs. Enigma will be open to making changes in how she teaches Jack. You can offer, in the spirit of collaboration, to provide her with *Stairway to Reading*, a free remedial reading program at [www.teachyourchildtoread.ca](http://www.teachyourchildtoread.ca). If Jack’s problems are in math, you can offer to give her the very reasonably-priced grade 2 JUMP workbook (<http://jumpmath.org/publications/grade-specific/workbook-2>).

And if Jack needs help with something else, like spelling or printing, you can find additional suggestions in the appendix to this book.

### *Exhausting the System*

If Mrs. Enigma agrees to help Jack, you have arrived at second base. There are, however, two bases left. Don't make the mistake of thinking you're home already.

Third base can be reached only if Mrs. Enigma actually keeps her promises. That's why you should offer to prepare a written outline of whatever agreement was reached during your interview. That way, there is less scope for misunderstanding. Given the myriad demands and pressures on teachers, it will be very difficult for Mrs. Enigma to follow through. And, even if she does succeed in starting up a new program for Jack, circumstances may change and the special treatment may gradually fade away as the weeks go by. You are going to have to be vigilant, checking regularly to make sure the program continues. Frequent notes of appreciation and encouragement will not go amiss. Be sure to keep Mrs. Enigma posted on what you're doing at home to support her special efforts.

If Mrs. Enigma keeps her part of the bargain, you have pulled in at third. To get home, of course, Jack has to learn to read. That's the home run you're trying to hit.

Home runs, of course, are awfully hard to achieve, and it's a very long way from this particular third base to the home plate. You should bear in mind that most of the time the school's best efforts will not be enough. After all, you are still dealing with a school system that let Jack get to grade 4 without learning to read and where this is not an abnormal state of affairs. Mrs. Enigma has many priorities, and you are not the only parent with a special request.

The education system is permeated with a "progressive" ideology which contaminates everything it touches. Thus, any tutoring by school staff is likely to be tainted by Balanced Literacy, the very method that failed Jack. In addition, many teachers are exhausted and close to burn-out in the wake of child-centred learning and all the problems it causes. As a result, most remedial

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teachers have crowded schedules and huge waiting lists, while the rest of the teachers have classes full of children with special needs. Surrounded by plane crash victims, there's only so much a doctor can do.

That's why I urge you not to put all your eggs in one basket. If, several months down the road, it turns out that the school's best efforts have failed Jack, what then? You have wasted five or six precious months during which time all Jack's problems and misery have continued to build. Even worse, you risk falling victim to the school's smooth blandishments: everything possible has been done but Jack just can't learn. Worst of all, Jack may have come to think this too.

### **DON'T BUY IT! THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH JACK.**

- Can he sit still for hours playing computer games?
- Can he beat the pants off you at checkers?
- Can he think up a thousand reasons why you should let him stay home from school?

Then Jack can certainly learn to read. But it's up to you to make it happen. That's why, even if back in September Mrs. Enigma agreed to try to help Jack, you should have arranged for him to get help from outside the system *if you didn't start seeing results right away*. Yes, that's right. Successful educational interventions start to work almost immediately – both in terms of learning and in terms of behaviour. It will be obvious.

Let's assume, however, that you did not realize you needed to take this precaution and it's now March of Jack's grade 4 year. Even though (to the best of your knowledge) Mrs. Enigma has been working with Jack in a special reading group all along, he is still a poor reader. As well, his behaviour has been deteriorating steadily. Moody and defiant, he has become a holy terror at school. Mrs. Enigma says he is hyperactive and wants you to discuss Jack's behaviour with your doctor. "Perhaps Ritalin would help?"

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Another six months have been lost, and it looks as if the rest of the school year is a write-off. You're not sure what to do. Should you just let things slide for a while and hope next year will be better? Maybe Jack will finally bloom in grade 5? If this is what you think, you deserve the ostrich-of-the-year award. At some point, it is going to be too late for Jack – he will pass the point of no return in his downward spiral. How much further behind is *too* far behind ever to catch up? How entrenched does his delinquency have to be before it cannot be corrected? If he's like this at 10, what will he be like at 16?

It's probably not too late YET. You have several options at this point. You can try to force the school to teach Jack to read (see the next section). You can try to transfer him to a better public school (see the following sections). Or you can try to get help for him from outside public education (see the next three chapters).

### ***Trying to Force the School***

Don Quixote had an optimistic attitude and a strong sense of what was right. So did Robin Hood. Both Don and Robin would probably elect to do battle with their children's school boards, trying to get educational justice. Both Don and Robin would fail.

Let's face it – the school boards have a monopoly on elementary education. And monopolies are not noted for their flexibility, responsiveness, or efficiency. Just ask John Bachmann.

When his grade 8 daughter was not being challenged by her school's math program, Mr. Bachmann asked the school to give her a grade 9 math book so she could work ahead. Granting this request would have given the school zero extra work or trouble – as Mr. Bachmann, a former high school math teacher, was willing to take full responsibility for his daughter's program. Nevertheless, his request caused school and board officials tremendous headaches and generated multiple phone calls and meetings with the school principal, the school's math teacher, three other principals, and the superintendent.

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In order to resolve this massively-difficult dilemma, the school board ultimately found it necessary to involve several senior officials. Permission was eventually granted in the course of an interminable meeting involving six educators and Mr. Bachmann. He estimates that the entire process cost taxpayers at least \$1000.

This kind of bureaucratic mindlessness is reminiscent of the inefficiencies that plagued the Soviet Union. Highly-centralized monopolies tend to bring out the worst in human nature, causing decent people to do stupid and even cruel things.

A case in point is Kathryn Craig. Because her son Gavin is deaf in one ear, his schooling was a disaster from the start. Even though Mrs. Craig tried to work with Gavin's teachers, her requests and suggestions were routinely ignored. When she asked, for example, that Gavin be seated where he could hear the teacher, Mrs. Craig would return to find him sitting beside the open door with his good ear to the noisy corridor. When she asked that that he be permitted to use an FM system (a gadget which transmits the teacher's voice to individual students), her request would be grudgingly agreed to – but shortly afterwards the equipment would mysteriously break or go missing.

Even though Mrs. Craig tried every possible means of getting help for Gavin – such as endless meetings with school staff, support from experts on hearing impairment, medical and psychological evaluations, legal procedures, consultations with superintendents and trustees, appeals to the ministry of education – nothing worked. Finally, after seven years of fruitless effort, Mrs. Craig decided to home-school Gavin.

Although more spectacular than most, Mrs. Craig's case is, alas, typical in the sense that common-sense solutions are usually denied, ignored, or abandoned. It is very, very difficult to bend the school system to one's will. If you are masochistic and enjoy frustration, then this is definitely for you. But – please – before setting off down this long and winding road, first arrange for your child to

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get help from outside the system while you pursue your search for the Holy Grail.

The first stop on your journey is the principal, Mr. Polished. Before heading in to see Mr. Polished, you should go through the same preparation as you did for Mrs. Enigma – namely, you try to put yourself in his shoes. Because Mr. Polished is new to the school this year, he has inherited all of his teachers, some of whom have been at the school for many years and are poised to retire the day they reach their maximum pension benefits. In order to qualify as a principal, Mr. Polished needed little or no training in personnel administration, primary instruction, testing, or remedial teaching.

Because his background is phys ed, Mr. Polished knows nothing about how children learn to read. One thing he is sure of, however, is that it is his responsibility to convince parents, some of whom are very sceptical, that his school is doing an excellent job of instruction in this best of all possible school systems. Mr. Polished thus puts a premium on team spirit and cheering on the home team.

Lastly, Mr. Polished is aware that if you decide to withdraw your child from his school, his salary, prestige, and promotion prospects will be unaffected.

Hmmmm. Mr. Polished is unlikely to take kindly to criticism of his staff – especially now that 63 other parents, by actual count, have already been in to complain about one or other of his teachers. Worse, even if Mr. Polished agrees with your criticisms, there's not a whole lot he can do. His problem teachers are probably impervious to helpful feedback and coaching, and it's just about impossible to fire a teacher.

Is there really any point in asking Mr. Polished for help? If yes, what should you be asking for exactly?

I know I am supposed to be the one supplying the answers in this book but, honestly, I can't think of many things you could

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reasonably expect Mr. Polished to agree to. Oh, all right. Perhaps you could ask that Jack be:

- Jumped to the head of the waiting list for the resource teacher (assuming you have reason to believe the resource teacher is competent);
- Switched to another grade 4 class (assuming one is available and you have reason to believe the teacher would be an improvement);
- Assigned a teaching assistant (assuming you have reason to believe the teaching assistant would be helpful); or
- Placed in a special class for high-needs kids (do you really want this?).

Mr. Polished has really very little room to manoeuvre. The school system has so many cracks in it that it's impossible to prevent students from falling through. That's why some caring principals actually advise parents to put their struggling children in private schools.

Mr. Polished, being much more sophisticated than this, gives you a lot of double-talk about how the school is doing everything possible to meet Jack's needs. He tells you that you can trust him to see what he can do. Trust me, it won't be much – as you will belatedly realize after several more months fly by. Which brings us to the next stop on the appeal trail. Meet Dr. Hierarchy, your assistant superintendent.

Dr. Hierarchy used to be a grade 7 geography teacher before she got her doctorate in educational administration. She has never read any primary, or even secondary, research on reading instruction – but she has attended plenty of sessions where “experts” (academics from faculties of education and senior administrators) have told her that child-centred instruction is best in every possible way. Those who oppose it, she knows, all want children to be strapped, put in the corner, and taught in the style of the 1930's. They also don't like children.

## *Exhausting the System*

A personable and charming woman, Dr. Hierarchy meets with you at length, appears very sympathetic, promises to look into the matter, and ushers you out of her office with a smile. Nice woman, too bad you'll probably never see her again. To be fair to Dr. Hierarchy, she is out of her depth. She doesn't understand or acknowledge reading problems, and so she prefers to believe that Mr. Polished is on top of the situation. Still looking for villains? There are none in this story.

And so, after a few more months go by, you arrive at Last Chance Saloon, wherein resides your trustee, Ms Caring. Ms Caring is a 54-year-old social worker who sees her role as providing support for her colleagues in the teaching profession. She thinks the school system is just wonderful and says so frequently. In the course of your brief telephone conversation with Ms Caring, you learn that she prefers not to get involved in cases like yours, since she has complete confidence in Mr. Polished and Dr. Hierarchy. She urges you not to be so adversarial and to start trying to work with the system. She adds that your problems are not serious compared with those she sees in her work. And as she hangs up the telephone, she completes the appeal circuit.

Now, I admit I have caricatured Mr. Polished, Dr. Hierarchy, and Ms Caring. Obviously, not every principal, superintendent, or trustee fits this profile. Nevertheless, I believe I have captured the essence of the process. The details vary – a few additional consultants and other minor players wander on and off stage – but the outcome is always the same. Even if one of the players departs significantly from my stereotypes, it doesn't make any difference. Inertia is built right into the system.

For example, let's pretend that your trustee is one of the new breed – bright, aware, informed, concerned. Even then, Mr. New Breed will be unable to help you. Individual trustees have no

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authority, and reform trustees are consistently outvoted by old-guard trustees who stick like glue to the status quo.

Most parents get discouraged and quit after talking to the principal. A hardy few persist as far as the superintendent, and only a handful go all the way to their trustee. A few intrepid individuals refuse to take no for an answer and ask to appear as a delegation to the board. They might as well ask the Queen to give them a hand with their marital difficulties!

I have been present at many school board meetings where petitioners come, hat in hand, to crave a boon from their elected trustees. These requests have run the gamut – from power line location, to French immersion issues, to bussing, to traditional schools, to school boundaries. I have never witnessed – and rarely even heard of – a case where trustees granted a delegation's request. Typically, trustees view themselves as representing the school board to the parents, not the other way around.

Regardless of the level at which parents finally get the message, they all still end up with the same problem – what to do about Jack? His behaviour has been getting worse and worse. Now in grade 5, still reading at a grade 2 level, Jack has been caught smoking, and his friends' idea of a good time is setting fires.

Of course, as always, I advise you to get outside help for Jack right away. He is getting harder to reach with every passing day. Quite apart from all the anger and despair, his bad habits are getting more and more entrenched, plus his learning gap is widening all the time. He is now almost four years behind grade level.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, you have become addicted to banging your head against the school board wall. For a refinement of this exquisite torture, why not try asking for a formal evaluation of Jack's learning problems. Here is how it works in Ontario, where it is called an Identification, Planning, and Review Committee (IPRC).

## *Exhausting the System*

The first thing you need to know is that educators hate IPRC's and they work very hard to keep them a secret from parents. Even if you learn about IPRC's from the parent grapevine and ask Mr. Polished to set one up for Jack, he probably won't do it unless you put your request in writing – *for that is the letter of the law.*

The good news about an IPRC is that it gives you a legal say over Jack's program. The bad news is you will be outnumbered, bullied, manipulated, deceived, and patronized in the process, and your legal say won't be worth the paper it's written on.

Even so, you decide to run right down to the school and present Mr. Polished with a written request for an IPRC for Jack. After he has finished trying to talk you out of it, Mr. Polished will reluctantly set the ponderous machinery in motion.

You learn that you have the following choice of labels to stick on Jack: autism, behavioural exceptionality, educable retardation, giftedness, hearing impairment, language impairment, learning disability, multi-handicap, orthopaedic and/or physical handicap, speech impairment, trainable retardation, and visual impairment. "Learning disability" you think. Aha! That's probably what's wrong with Jack. He's got a learning disability!

The trouble is that the term learning disability is a convenient catch-all that leads nowhere. Basically, it is a way for the school to blame Jack instead of itself for being four years behind in reading. Application of the learning-disabled label is not terribly useful, in that there is no known cause, treatment, or cure, but at least it gives educators a nice warm feeling.

The months crawl by, and at last the big day arrives for Jack's IPRC. Arrayed against you round the table are 14 individuals: Jack's grade 5 teacher Mr. Benign, Mrs. Enigma, Mr. Polished, the vice-principal, Dr. Hierarchy, the school's three resource teachers, two psychologists, and three consultants. As the session progresses, you begin to get the distinct impression that a script is

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being followed, that the outcome of this meeting has already been decided.

Two hours later, everyone present (except you) has agreed that Jack should be identified as a behaviour problem and started on Ritalin right away. As well, he is to be placed on a zero tolerance discipline program whereby the minute he behaves “in an inappropriate fashion” he will be removed from his classroom and left to cool his heels in the office for the rest of the day.

And his reading problem? Oh, not really serious, according to the IPRC committee. Mr. Benign is doing a fine job, and if Jack would just start behaving himself and paying attention, he would soon catch up. It’s this behavioural business that’s the problem.

Perhaps I’ve laid it on a bit thick, but the educators do hold all the cards and they know it. They stack the deck beforehand and honestly believe they’re doing it for Jack’s benefit. Most IPRC’s are a waste of time.

After you have left the room, those present will agree that most of Jack’s problems stem from his overly-attentive, overly-demanding, and paranoid mother.

Just to even the odds a bit, here are a few tips courtesy of Kathryn Craig. They apply specifically to Ontario, but the rules tend to be similar in most jurisdictions.

- Children are entitled to services from junior kindergarten until graduation from high school (or age 21). Deaf, blind, autistic, and hard-of-hearing children can begin to receive services from the age of two, since this is a crucial age for learning language.
- Lately, the ministry has been encouraging school boards to use Individual Education Plans (IEP’s) rather than IPRC’s, and the principal may tell you this is the preferred course of action. Its

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drawbacks are that it has no legal status (as an IPRC does) and parents have no right to be involved in developing it.

- If parents request an IPRC by writing to the principal, by law one must be granted. If the school wishes to hold an IPRC, the principal must notify the parents in writing. Many school boards have a pamphlet explaining the IPRC process.
- School staff must complete an educational assessment of the child prior to the meeting. Parents are entitled to see the assessment, but in some cases they will have to ask for it. This assessment gives a good idea of the school's plan for the child.
- Be sure of what you want for your child before you go to the IPRC meeting. First, the group will have to decide whether or not the child is an exceptional learner. Then, the school officials will want to consider "placement" (should the child be in a special class and, if so, which type and for what period of the day?) If the IPRC committee insists on considering only a secondary problem (such as a behaviour problem which has resulted from the non-treatment of a primary problem), then the child will be no further ahead.
- When you go to the meeting, you will usually find a minimum of six educators present. You should consider taking along at least one other person, because it is easy to become emotional during an IPRC. Learning disability associations, autism associations, and some gifted associations have trained advocates who will go in with you to help you.
- Bring along any evidence you need to establish your position, for example private assessments, research, etc. If you think Jack needs something different from what the school is recommending, be prepared for strong resistance – for example, a school board psychologist who will argue that your child is not really gifted, despite his high IQ. After all, if these educators were willing to give you what you want, they would have done so by now!

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- Once placement has been agreed on, the education plan should be discussed. This is when the educators should be arranging for Jack to be taught phonics. Usually at this point however, they get quite uncomfortable and propose to play things by ear. But if your child doesn't get what he needs in the special classroom, why bother putting him there in the first place?
- Schools in Ontario are required to prepare an Individual Education Plan (IEP) within 30 days for each child who has received an IPRC, and a copy of the IEP must be forwarded to the parents. Because the IEP part of the process cannot be appealed, it is crucial to ensure your ideas are reflected there. If your school board is one of those that choose not to prepare IEP's, you should notify the Special Education Department of the Ministry of Education.
- If you are not happy with the decision rendered by the IPRC committee, you can take it home and think about it. You have the right to refuse to ever sign the decision, but it means you have no legal status.
- The IPRC decision must be reviewed every year. You should be notified in writing about the date for the next review.
- The definition of exceptionality and the placement decision can be appealed by either party. Parents must give 15 days' written notice to the secretary of the board to appeal a decision. An IEP cannot be appealed.

I also recommend that you visit the Mothers from Hell web-site\* for 10 tips on surviving an IPRC. For example, they suggest that you bring a gift for the first educator who says something nice about your child. Of course, you may never get a chance to bestow your gift, but it's the thought that counts....

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\* [www.mothersfromhell2.org](http://www.mothersfromhell2.org) (click on Humor)

## *Exhausting the System*

You have now spent 18 months trying to work with the system. You began with Mrs. Enigma in September of Jack's grade 4 year, and the progression through Mr. Polished, Dr. Hierarchy, Ms Caring, and then the IPRC has brought you to March of Jack's grade 5 year. Finally, you grasp that it is hopeless. Before turning your back on public education entirely, you should consider switching Jack to another public school.

### ***Switching Public Schools***

Just as your contributions to your health insurance plan permit you to patronize any doctor you choose, so too should your tax payments entitle you to patronize any school you choose. And sometimes, you even can. But, in order to end up with the school of your choice, you may have to fight your way through a maze of red tape.

Your first challenge is to find a good public school in your area. When looking over the possibilities, don't automatically rule out schools that belong to other school boards. There can be enormous differences between school boards, as many a shocked parent has learned after a transfer. Janice Hazlett, for example, moved in the middle of the school year from a board where her daughter Melanie had been offered an enrichment program to another board where Melanie was found to be so far behind her classmates that her new teacher was afraid the child might have to repeat grade 1. The teacher actually asked Mrs. Hazlett if Melanie had been at school during the previous five months!

Some school boards do offer academically-intensive alternative schools (more often than not, they are high schools). A few boards, such as Edmonton and Calgary, actively encourage school choice. However, most school boards assign students to a neighbourhood school and allow them to leave that school only under exceptional circumstances. However, there are ways around this policy for those who know the ropes.

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When trying to pick a good family doctor, you would normally begin by asking around, talking to your friends and neighbours, especially those who are members of the medical community. It's exactly the same when looking for a good school – you begin by sounding out other parents, especially those who are educators. Parents who have already withdrawn their children from Jack's school might also be helpful. Where are their kids now? Are their parents pleased with the new school?

Up until recently, it was tricky to get information on how individual schools are performing and, in previous editions of this book, I filled you in on how to file a Freedom of Information request for this information and how to interpret it. No longer necessary! Several think tanks now make this information available as a public service – the Fraser Institute, the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, and the C.D. Howe Institute. Ontario schools are ranked by two of these think tanks (Fraser\* and C.D. Howe\*\*).

You should bear in mind that schools in good neighbourhoods *should* get very good results – after all, many of their students enjoy supplemental teaching in their enriched homes and from paid tutors. The C.D. Howe rankings have a neat feature whereby schools' performance is expressed as a percentile that considers how well schools should do considering their students' socio-economic characteristics. A school with a percentile of 50% is performing exactly as you would expect, given its students' backgrounds. A school with percentile of 90% is adding more value than 90% of the provinces' schools with similar demographics.

Once you have talked to other parents and studied the school rankings, you should be ready to start shopping for a school. Just as you presumably investigated several preschools be-

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\* [www.fraserinstitute.org/reportcards/schoolperformance/ontario.htm](http://www.fraserinstitute.org/reportcards/schoolperformance/ontario.htm)

\*\* [www.cdhowe.org/pdf/signposts.pdf](http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/signposts.pdf)

## *Exhausting the System*

fore choosing one for Jack, so too you should check out the best candidates for his new elementary school. Some schools may disqualify themselves right away by not treating your request to visit as sensible and normal. When approaching principals, you should be sure to ask to visit the school and spend some time in the classrooms. To find out everything you ever wanted to know on this subject, read *Learning about Schools: What parents need to know and how they can find out* by Peter Coleman, a former professor at the University of British Columbia. Here's a short excerpt from this book.

“Three quick tests of any school can easily be made. First, how large is it? Large schools are rarely good schools ... The ideal high school, scholars believe, enrolls between 500 and 600 students. The ideal elementary school is between 300 and 400. Second, what do parents chosen at random say about the school? ... Third, when you visit the school, what first impression does it make upon you?” (p. 143)

Let's assume you checked out a number of schools using Dr. Coleman's protocol and have settled on the Hilda Neatby Public School, an oasis of academic excellence in the middle of a desert. You satisfy yourself that not only is the grade 5 teacher a gem, but so too are the grades 6, 7, and 8 teachers. You are on Cloud Nine.

What might be wrong with this picture?

- There may not be room for Jack at this school. It is common for good schools to be bursting at the seams.
- Some school boards insist that parents send their children to their assigned school.
- The principal of Hilda Neatby is free to refuse Jack admission.

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Are you ready to sell your house and move into the Hilda Neatby catchment area? Lots of people do this, despite the premium prices commanded by houses in this area due to the school's excellent reputation.

Another caveat is the fact all principals are subject to frequent transfers, regardless of their own wishes. In fact, it's quite likely that the current principal, Mrs. Paragon, has already been at Hilda Neatby for several years. Because principals have to wait for the deadwood teachers to move on before they can recruit better teachers, it takes a long time to build an excellent school. Many school boards have a policy of moving principals every five years or so, and Mrs. Paragon may well be due for a transfer any day now. Although it takes years to build a good school, it takes a much shorter time for a bad principal to destroy a good school.

Far from carefully nurturing the delicate blossoming of an excellent school, education officials often go out of their way to crush the promising buds. Take, for example, Parkview School in Lindsay, Ontario – once a middle-of-the-road school with average test scores. In 1993, the school's new principal, Lynn Hatfield, began working with the teachers to raise the students' academic achievement. Over the next three years, the children's scores on standardized tests rose steadily, until in 1996 the school ranked first in the board. In the middle of that school year, board officials acted promptly and decisively. With no warning and despite the fact that Mrs. Hatfield and her husband had just bought a house near the school, Mrs. Hatfield was transferred to Bobcaygeon, a 45-minute drive away.

Clearly, there are no guarantees that Hilda Neatby will continue to prosper. You might want to quiz Mrs. Paragon about her career prospects.

If you decide to ask for a transfer to Hilda Neatby, you are going to have to be crafty about it. The last thing you should do is divulge your real motivation – namely to get better schooling for

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Jack. You must never, never, never suggest that Jack is being poorly served at his current school – as most educators hate comparisons and purport to believe that all schools are delivering an excellent service. Instead, you must find a non-educational reason for your wish to transfer Jack. For example:

- The school is close to his babysitter's house or your place of work.
- Jack's best friend goes to the school, and the emotional support will be beneficial.
- The school offers a program (like strings or soccer) that Jack wants.

You must also bear in mind that it will be entirely your responsibility to get Jack to and from Hilda Neatby every day. The school board probably won't let him ride the bus even if it goes right past your door, as parents are not encouraged to play musical schools. Even with all these caveats, however, it is frequently a good idea to switch schools.

Although I expect you're getting the message by now, I'll repeat it anyway. You can't just heave a sigh of relief and get on with your life as soon as Jack starts to attend Hilda Neatby. Vigilance should be your watchword, and you must be prepared to work closely with the school, supporting the teachers and overseeing homework. If you've made the right choice, you will start seeing changes in Jack within a few days.

### ***Switching to a Charter School***

If you live in Alberta, you have an exciting new option available: charter schools. These schools are public schools with a difference. Although they are fully-funded by the government (and therefore do not/can not charge tuition), they are mostly free of the massive amounts of red tape which gums up most public schools. Charter schools often carve out a niche for themselves, such as dramatic arts or Mandarin immersion, and a sizeable percentage

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cater to kids with learning difficulties. To get a better idea of the potential of these schools, you might like to view the Society for Quality Education's YouTube video of three Calgary charter schools\*.

If you're not lucky enough to live in Alberta (and can't move there), you might want to ask your elected provincial representative about bringing charter schools to your province. A charter school like Calgary's Foundations for the Future Academy would probably be just the ticket for Jack.

I wish I could promise you that you will be able to find a suitable public school in your area. However, I never promised you a rose garden, and in the next chapter I talk about what you can do about the weeds in your back yard. Even if do you find a public school solution for Jack's problems, you should read on. There's more to learn.

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\*[www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjWpqmaiNoI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjWpqmaiNoI) (Part 1 of 3)

## *Dancing with the System*

### **Chapter 3**

## **Dancing with the System**

Waiting in the wings is your daughter Jill, just turned five. Next September, she is due to begin her educational career in kindergarten. What have you learned?

Clearly, the first lesson is that you shouldn't just automatically enrol her in your neighbourhood school. You wouldn't pick your lawyer on the basis of her office location, would you? Now that you know how to choose a good public school, you can use your new skills to benefit your daughter too. As you have found to your sorrow, it's very difficult to turn a bad school around. Far better to choose a good one in the first place!

For the purposes of this chapter, let's assume that you have found a happy home for both Jack and Jill at the Hilda Neatby Public School. Is your mission accomplished? Can you turn Jack and Jill over to the school's teachers with a light heart and a clear conscience and wait for them to emerge from grade 8 completely ready for high school?

*Here's how one foreign nanny describes Canadian parents.*

**They lock up their money and their jewels –  
and then they give me their children!**

While parents bear the primary responsibility for their children's education, in most cases they choose to delegate their children's formal education to teachers. As in every situation where a task is delegated, the buck still stops with those who delegate. In a sense, parents enter into a contract with the school. On the one hand, the school is responsible for teaching the curriculum to the children. On the other hand, parents are responsible for complementing and reinforcing the school's lessons. If both parties do

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their part, the children are assured of an excellent education. In most of this book, I am focusing on educators' responsibilities but, for the record, here is the other side of the contract. Parents should:

- Always send their children to school unless they are sick;
- Ensure that their children are rested, fed, and suitably-dressed;
- Provide reasonable help with homework; and
- Accord education top priority, supporting and reinforcing the teachers.

Involvement in your children's education pays off. Such activities as helping kids with homework and getting on their case about poor marks are clearly beneficial. Not so obvious, however, is the fact that your involvement at the school also helps – anything from teacher interviews to basketball games to class trips!

Apart from sending the message to your own kids that their education is job number one, your involvement tells the teachers that you are paying attention and will be the first one in line if anything goes wrong. In addition, the personal contact makes it easier to raise concerns when the time comes – and more likely that the story will have a happy ending.

It's sad but true that many parents don't make much of an effort to get involved. Worse, they pull back further and further the older their kids get – a tendency which seems bizarre in light of the high-stakes nature of high school. In Asia, for example, most parents tend to get even more involved when their kids hit the big time.

The usual suspects are partly to blame here: parents too busy or too irresponsible, naive innocence, ignorance, a culture that believes in giving kids their heads early, and more. Nevertheless, the schools must also shoulder part of the blame. After all, the vast majority of parents start the schooling game with great enthusiasm, eager to take part and help out. Before long, however, they have become the apathetic bunch that educators proceed to complain about. Why?

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As with most things, there is no simple answer. Some current educational arrangements, however, are helping to keep parents at arms' length. For one thing, today's complex and remote administrative structures and autocratic bureaucrats tend to drive parents away. Another problem is that few teachers have ever received training on how to communicate with parents and draw them into their children's education.

But probably the biggest culprit is child-centred learning. Many parents are bewildered by the new teaching methods and the jargon used to justify them. They can't seem to find out what their kids are supposed to be learning, let alone whether or not they are being learned. The shortage of textbooks, the elasticity of standards, the lack of work coming home, the computerized report cards – all help to keep parents at arms' length. Worse, some well-meaning teachers actually discourage parents from helping their kids at home on the grounds that the students may be confused by conflicting approaches. The result? More distance.

Nevertheless, as Jack and Jill's parent, you must overcome all of these obstacles and find a way to make yourself useful at their school. As far as I am concerned, the main reason for volunteering at your kids' school is to make friends with the staff and get a handle on what is going on. Volunteering to help with the fun fair or going along on a few school trips won't be as effective as a regular gig in the school. Helping with photocopying or attendance check gets you into the office, which can be insightful. But even better is to volunteer in your kids' classrooms, if their teacher will let you in.

In addition, an often-overlooked possibility is to volunteer in the library. Your offer of assistance is almost certain to be accepted, since not many people are willing to shelve books and process new titles. And, because most teachers bring their classes to the library at some point, you have a ringside seat to gauge their effectiveness.

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If you play your cards right, volunteering at the school will allow you to establish a working relationship with many of the classroom teachers, which may pay off big time down the road when teacher-choosing time comes around.

As most parents know intuitively, a good teacher can make all the difference. Recent research tells us that the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher can be a full year of achievement in a single year. Because the teacher is so important, the most significant contribution a parent can make is to nudge her child into the right class. When spring arrives, bringing the annual roll of the dice (which teachers will Jack and Jill have next year?), you should be paying close attention.

Your first action should be to consult Jack and Jill's current teachers, since they probably have a pretty good handle on the strengths and weaknesses of their colleagues, and they may be happy to tell you which teachers are likely to be the best match for your children.

Depending on how much confidence you have in their opinion and based on your personal knowledge of the teachers in question, you might decide to accept your kids' teachers recommendations and ask them to place Jack and Jill in the appropriate classes the next year.

If you have any reservations, however, you should investigate further. Seek the advice of several other parents with personal knowledge of those teachers. You are also completely within your rights to ask to interview the various candidates and observe them in their classrooms. After all, you know your own children better than anyone else, and you would be acting irresponsibly if you didn't safeguard their best interests. Especially when they are young, children are extremely vulnerable, and their teachers are a very influential part of their lives for a whole year. Would you hire a baby-sitter for even one evening without checking her out thoroughly?

## *Dancing with the System*

When John Pippus and his wife asked to interview one of the grade 6 teachers at their son's school, the principal turned them down on the grounds that it was against school policy. Says Mr. Pippus: "That was the straw, after many, many other straws, that pushed us out of the public system and into the private system."

After weighing all the factors – teachers' recommendations, your own impressions, other parents' reports, classroom visits – you make your decision and proceed to lock it in. The best way to cinch the winning teachers for next year is simply to ask this year's teacher to make the necessary arrangements. Be sure to do this before the start of June when next year's placements are typically decided.

If for some reason you miss this deadline, it becomes a much bigger deal. Other teachers' egos come into play, and now you will probably have to deal with the principal. Placements can still be changed at this time, mind you, but it's much more complicated.

If, perish the thought, you wait until the following September, only to discover that Jack has drawn Mr. Ad Lib and Jill has Mrs. Ad Hoc, you're in deep trouble. It is very, very tricky to switch kids out of classes at this stage. For one thing, class compositions are carefully calculated, with consideration being given to a lot of different factors (like class size, the number of exceptional students in each class, sex balancing, and the need to separate certain children). For another, you are probably not the only parent demanding her child be switched. What is the principal supposed to do – put 40 kids in with Mr. Chips and only 10 with Mrs. Lib?

Getting the best possible teachers for Jack and Jill is the single most important contribution you can make to their schooling. After all, merely *attending* Hilda Neatby won't do it for them if their teachers are Mr. All-At-Sea and Mrs. Waiting-for-

## *How to Get the Right Education for Your Child*

Retirement. Conversely, they may do just fine at John Dewey if they get Ms Crackerjack and Mr. Socrates.

Don't get me wrong. The choice of school *is* important, for two reasons. First, since there are more good teachers at Hilda Neatby, the kids' odds of getting a good teacher are better. Second, principals at good schools generally aid and abet good teachers' quests for excellence, while bad principals, for a variety of reasons, often thwart their teachers – perhaps by forbidding the use of teaching methods and materials, failing to protect teachers from school-board busy-bodies, and scheduling frequent assemblies, fun days, special events, and other distracters.

Nevertheless, the teacher is the key. A good teacher will somehow confound all the system's attempts to kneecap her.

Once you have managed to secure good teachers for Jack and Jill next year, what should your role be? Your children's schooling is like a long-running stage show. The students are the actors, while the teacher is the director. Of course, the play can't go on without the backstage crew – the other staff at the school, the bus drivers, the textbook publishers, etc. And you? You are the producer. As such, your role transcends changes in director and crew, and your responsibility doesn't end until the show closes.

That is why I suggest that you arrange introductory interviews with each of your children's teachers during the first two weeks of school. Jill Ragotte was glad she had when her grade 3 son's teacher told her that Erik was making a great start. He had seen a book on her desk and said, "Oh, that looks interesting. May I read that?" Naturally, the teacher concluded that Erik was a "motivated reader". Mrs. Ragotte explained that Erik, manipulative on occasion, had already read that particular book several times. She went on to tell the teacher that Erik would benefit from firm, friendly instruction. The teacher, a good one, followed her advice, and Erik had an excellent year.

## *Dancing with the System*

As the producer of Jack and Jill's education, it is your job to constantly monitor the situation. After all, it's much easier for a parent to keep track of only two children than it is for a teacher to keep track of 25 children. Thus, if Jill starts to get a bit behind in introductory finger-painting, you are right on top of it and helpfully draw it to her teacher's attention right away.

In order to get a real handle on the situation, however, you need to be familiar with the "curriculum". A surprisingly large percentage of teachers (like just about all) don't cover everything they are supposed to. In May of Roger White's grade 7 year, because his school kept scheduling dances, assemblies and other non-academic activities during his math class, Roger's mother decided to compare his class's progress to the grade 7 curriculum. She found they had so far covered approximately 50% of the curriculum! When Mrs. White raised her concerns with the principal, he was not at all worried. Sez he, "It doesn't matter. There's a lot of repetition in the curriculum and, if they don't get around to something this year, they'll get to it the next year."

With attitudes like this common among educators, it's no wonder more and more parents are monitoring their kids' progress. In the past, parents could rely on their children's report cards to give them a general idea of their progress. Now dubbed "progress reports" (note the built-in bias), most modern report cards are almost completely devoid of meaning.

- Mostly computerized, they consist of stock phrases such as "participates well in class" and "gets along well with his peers".
- Anything negative is avoided, since that might damage the child's self-esteem.
- The focus is on the students' attributes rather than their achievement – as if the school is responsible for its students' characters!

## *How to Get the Right Education for Your Child*

Consider the following grade 2 report which Martha Tracy received the day before a devastating interview with her son's teachers at which she learned he might fail his year. (Don't look for grades or even check marks: this progress report was totally anecdotal and is reproduced in its entirety.)

### **French**

Alan is a quiet, friendly student who shows a positive attitude toward learning. He is a well-informed, inquisitive young man and therefore participates often in large group activities. He enjoys sharing pertinent facts with the class and extending the ideas of others. Alan works well independently and in a group although he does have some difficulty keeping his activities organized.

Alan enjoys listening to French stories, poems and music and consequently he is increasing his vocabulary daily. Alan is at the beginning stages of reading. He continues to build a sight vocabulary and recognizes words in stories. He has made steady progress in the writing component of the French language arts and is now writing known words and trying to incorporate these words into sentences.

Interest and enthusiasm were evident during our mathematics activities and Alan has successfully mastered all the skills and concepts presented. He enjoys working on the computer and uses his time wisely.

Alan is producing satisfactory results in the grade two program. Next term we will concentrate on reading, highlighting the phonetic decoding skills. I also will encourage Alan to speak as much French as possible in the classroom to improve both his verbal and written ability in French.

### **English**

Alan is an eager, enthusiastic participant in class. He is a confident speaker who shares his opinions well. He explains how to do something in methodical steps and demonstrates a good knowledge of his environment.

## *Dancing with the System*

Alan reads fluently at an independent level. He reads a variety of books at our library corner. When he is unsure of a word he uses context clues which are often effective. Some help is necessary, however, when phonic clues are needed. Alan must be encouraged to look more closely at vowels and blend the sounds to decode an unfamiliar word more effectively.

Alan writes imaginatively. He uses inventive spelling in his journal and more awareness of proper punctuation and capital letters and less (sic) reversals of letter are evident.

Our goals for Alan include extending his use of phonics as a means of encoding and recording his own ideas and editing some of his writing to help him be more aware of standard forms of spelling and sentence structure. Alan is encouraged to ask for assistance if he is unsure of a direction. Difficulty in following a series of directions or recording a dictated sentence has been observed.

Alan participates freely in songs and movement activities. He responds accurately to tonal and rhythmic patterns.

Alan enjoys and participates in creative activities with various art media. With discussion he has shown more awareness of body proportion.

Alan is enjoying our physical education program. He participates in all activities with enthusiasm, co-operation and an appropriate level of skill development.

Alan is working well in the grade two program.

On the face of it, this would appear to be an excellent report card. Cleverly concealed, however, are five cryptic hints that all is not well. Before you read on, see if you can find them.

### **Answer to Report Card Decoding Exercise**

French, lines 5-6

**“although he does have some difficulty keeping his activities organized”**

*Real Meaning – his work is a mess.*

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French, lines 8-9

**“Alan is at the beginning stages of reading.”**

*Real Meaning – he is at least one year behind.*

English, lines 7-10

**“Some help is necessary, however, when phonic clues are needed. Alan must be encouraged to look more closely at vowels and blend the sounds to decode an unfamiliar word more effectively.”**

*Real Meaning – he can’t read.*

English, lines 11-13

**“He uses inventive spelling in his journal and more awareness of proper punctuation and capital letters and less reversals of letters are evident.”**

*Real Meaning – he can’t spell or print either.*

English, lines 18-19

**“Difficulty in following a series of directions or recording a dictated sentence has been observed.”**

*Real Meaning – he can’t even follow directions.*

In their well-meaning attempts to build their students’ self-esteem, teachers are actually setting up their students for a cruel awakening at some point in the future when they learn they can’t meet the standards of secondary or post-secondary institutions or employers. Continuous empty praise makes most students less inclined to strive for excellence. In any case, it’s difficult to improve without honest feedback. Acceptance of sloppy and inaccurate work teaches students that hard work and precision are unimportant.

Although the theory is that high self-esteem will lead to higher levels of accomplishment because the students feel good about themselves, in fact the reverse is true. Real, lasting self-esteem is the result of real accomplishment. The best way to foster academic self-esteem is to foster academic achievement.

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Incidentally, children are not fooled by flowing rivers of easy praise. *They* know who the smartest kids in the class are.

Unless you were able to find the secret clues in Alan Tracy's report card, you would be foolish to attach any importance to child-centred report cards. Even old-fashioned teachers are forced to report this way. The truth is that report cards have become a waste of everyone's time and energy. More helpful are informal conversations and interviews with teachers.

By the way, the report cards are not the only link between home and school that is being strangled by child-centred learning. Several other traditional methods of staying on top of your kids' progress are also being foiled by the new approach.

### **Old-Fashioned**

- Parents were able to help their children with their homework and often were able to nip problems in the bud.
- The students' assignments were marked and sent home promptly, providing valuable feedback.
- Textbooks were routinely brought home, and interested parents could get a handle on the year's course of study.
- The government published a curriculum with detailed and specific information on each grade's expectations.

### **Modern**

- Homework is given sporadically and often in the form of time-consuming and too-difficult "projects".
- The students' assignments are seldom corrected. Instead, their work is gathered into a "portfolio" at the school and sent home months later, if ever.
- Textbooks tend to be poorly-organized, confusing and scarce.
- The curriculum is so non-specific that it gives little idea of what students are expected to learn in each grade.

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An old standby which is still a source of reliable information is Jack and Jill's student records. In Ontario, they are called Ontario Student Records (OSR's), and every student has at least one. Most school boards have a second file (called a "psych" file) for their exceptional students, and this file is held at the school board headquarters. The psych file is usually much more detailed than the one held at the school. As Jack and Jill's parent, you have the legal right to examine their files.

Kathryn Craig was glad she checked her son's records. When she looked through the psych file at the board offices, she discovered the results of testing she hadn't known about. Further, she learned that some of the officials' decisions had been based on a mistaken belief that Gavin suffered from attention-deficit disorder. Conspicuously absent from the file was the letter from Gavin's doctor stating that he did not have this disorder.

Parents typically are permitted to look through the file on the premises – that is, they are not allowed to take it away, but they are permitted to make copies of relevant documents. Sometimes much relevant information is recorded *on* the file jacket itself. If you would like to add a document to your child's file, simply write, "PLEASE ATTACH TO THE OSR/PSYCHOLOGICAL FILE" in block lettering along the top page. Similarly, if you wish to correct inaccurate or out-dated information, you have the right to do so. Any item you object to or don't understand should be discussed with the principal. Keep a copy of all correspondence. Parents who encounter problems may wish to consult a lawyer – these are *legal* rights. Occasionally, schools do get a bit confused about to whom the children in fact belong.

A third source of useful information is individualized testing. Most school boards have their own testing experts on payroll, but these experts usually have long waiting lists. (If you are feeling mischievous, you might like to ask your principal why so many children need to be tested.) Requests for testing which have been

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initiated by the teacher/school are much more likely to be honoured than those from parents. In either case though, you may have to wait several months. The private sector is much quicker.

Throughout this chapter, I have been making the assumption that you are dealing with a fairly functional school. If your kids are in such a school, then a reasonable approach to problems has a chance of working. A vigilant parent can probably guide ordinary children over, under, and around the manifold cracks in child-centred learning in your average school.

There are some schools, however, where all bets are off. Take St. Francis of Assisi Separate School in Stroud, Ontario.

This school opened its doors in January, 1994. Under the leadership of a wonderful principal, the grade 1 teachers wrought seeming miracles using a phonetic reading program called *Open Court*. By June, every grade 1 child was reading, and almost all were one to two grade levels ahead. The teachers were thrilled. The parents were delighted. The children were bursting with pride.

The community, too, sat up and took notice. As word spread, some parents started to baptize their children into the Catholic faith so they could go to St. Francis. But the school board was not pleased. The problem, they said, was that *Open Court* was not on Ontario's list of approved textbooks. (There are no phonetic readers on the list.) And so, a reign of terror began at St. Francis.

During the 1994/95 school year, the superintendent began to supervise the principal *very* carefully. For example, the principal's authority to purchase teaching programs was removed, and she was required to attend a whole language workshop. Despite officials' best efforts to cripple the school's reading program however, the grade 2 students and the new crop of grade 1 students racked up incredible reading scores. The parents were solidly behind their principal and raised \$10,000 (in a blue-collar commu-

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nity) to buy more *Open Court* materials (since the school board wouldn't pay for them).

In September, 1995, the principal began a long-planned leave of absence, and a new principal and vice-principal were assigned to St. Francis with orders to shut down *Open Court*. Because the parents and teachers were so attached to the program, the new principal realized she couldn't ban it outright — at least, not right away. The new principal did, however, prevent the parents from spending their fund-raising money on workbooks and paying for grade 3 *Open Court* readers for the original cohort of children who had now reached grade 3. In addition, there was an extra class of grade 1 students at the school in 1995/96 that had to go without. The next year, a new whole language reading program was purchased by the school.

St. Francis had become what I would term a dysfunctional school. I think it is probably safe to say there would be no point in asking for help for Jack's reading problems at St. Francis.

And the original principal? When she returned from her leave of absence, she was demoted to a half-time principal and banished to a school on the far side of the school board. She was also forbidden to enter St. Francis of Assisi Separate School ever again. It's not just kids who get beaten up.

This saga illustrates perfectly the theme of the following section — to wit, it's very difficult to get anywhere without a cooperative principal and school board. Even when parents band together in school councils, they are still essentially powerless.

School councils are more and more common these days. In Ontario, as in many other places, they were mandated by the provincial government in response to complaints from parents who were being shut out of their children's education. In most cases, the councils have only advisory powers — which means that they can be (and almost always are) ignored.

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Now let's have a little quiz. Let's pretend you're the new principal at St. Francis of Assisi and the school council advises you to use *Open Court*. Do you take their advice? Why or why not?

Because of the built-in powerlessness of school councils, I feel like a fraud giving tips on how to make them work. The bottom line is that every school council is at the mercy of its principal. If you are lucky enough to have Thomas Jefferson as your principal, then the following pointers will work like a dream. If, on the other hand, your principal is Emperor Hirohito, then you are really wasting your time.

Nancy Wagner learned this lesson the hard way. She and an ever-dwindling group of moms grew more and more frustrated at the limited scope allowed them by their children's principal. After yet another fund-raising venture that saw the parent committee mechanically agreeing to every purchase suggested by the principal, the parents on the committee held an informal meeting to discuss making their role more meaningful. When the principal heard about this meeting, he hit the roof.

First, he called a staff meeting where the small group of women were painted as anti-teacher agitators. Then, a number of non-committee parents were asked to attend the next meeting of the committee in order to back up the principal's position. Here, amid weeping teachers and parents, the principal held a snap vote to disband the committee, with only the bewildered parents who actually belonged to it voting to continue. The principal concluded the meeting by making it clear that the balance of the fund-raising money would be at his disposal.

In Ontario, school councils were set up with the primary responsibility of providing input into their school's annual improvement plans in response to provincial testing. Regardless, you would be hard-pressed to find a school council in the province that is ever consulted about what its school might do to improve academic achievement. Rather, the primary role of most school coun-

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cils is fund-raising – just like the old PTA's. Although the legislation stipulates elected school councils, in most cases the members are now simply appointed. Tellingly, the first year of Ontario's school councils did see vigorous competition among dozens of candidates for election to the school council. Interest, however, waned rapidly once parents got the picture. Before long, there were no elections whatsoever and many schools with no council at all.

If you have the misfortune to sit on a school council which is loaded with compliant parents and teachers' spouses, then my advice to you is to resign. Topics which interest you, such as standardized testing, academic excellence, and proven teaching methods, will somehow never find their way onto the agenda. You are doomed to endless discussions about the best colour for the bunting in the school gym.

If, however, your school council is made up of a bunch of open-minded and well-intentioned individuals, you may have a chance to be effective. It is likely your principal is a reasonably democratic person – otherwise, he would have ensured that council was populated mainly by useful idiots.

For our purposes, let's assume your principal is Mahatma Gandhi, and he has gone out of his way to encourage high-quality parents to sit on the school council. Interest is high, and there are several other council members with a focus on basic skills and high academic standards. Since Mr. Gandhi believes in democracy, you can safely sit back and wait for the school council's first meeting. No doubt it will happen shortly.

With a less democratic principal, however, it might be prudent to get together with some of the other councillors before the first meeting and agree on a few things. For example, you might want to:

- Meet with the principal as soon as possible to discuss the first agenda;

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- Be certain to elect your chair at the first meeting in order to start easing the principal to one side;
- Establish a limit on how long any one person can speak (some principals are expert filibusters); and
- Strike some sub-committees at the first meeting, one of which should be a “curriculum” committee. (It will be good exercise for the sheriff to ride herd on four or five groups all going in different directions.)

If you are not elected chair of your school council, may I recommend that you volunteer to be the secretary? Because it’s a job which most people avoid, your offer will probably be accepted with open arms. Next to the chair, the secretary is usually the most influential member, *because the secretary writes the minutes*. Nuances, loose ends, indecision – all are grist to your mill as you carve in stone your version of what was decided (as opposed to what the principal thinks should have been decided).

The third most important position is that of treasurer – if, that is, your council can get its hands on any of the funds they have raised. The best way to get respect is to have cash in your pocket. In addition, you should acquaint yourselves with the particulars of the school’s discretionary budget – the several thousand dollars the principal gets from the school board to spend on whatever he wants. There is absolutely no reason why you shouldn’t be giving advice to the principal on how to spend that money. You never know, it may turn out that the school council would prefer to spend the surplus \$5,000 on phonetic readers and sequential math textbooks, not a 50-inch plasma television.

But the key position on the council is the chair, because (at least in theory) the chair sets the agenda and controls the discussion. A weak chair will be putty in the hands of your average principal. Thus, the sole criterion for choosing the chair should be whether he or she has the ability to keep a meeting on track and ensure everyone is heard. It shouldn’t really matter if a chair thinks

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the school needs to be painted bright purple – as long as he or she runs the meetings competently. The role of the chair is to facilitate discussion and reach consensus, not to impose personal views on the committee.

Fast forward to the school council's fourth meeting. The sub-committees have just made their reports, and the Curriculum Sub-Committee (of which you are the chair) is recommending some major initiatives. They are:

- A curriculum night every September where parents are briefed by their children's teachers about such things as the year's textbooks, themes, and trips, as well as receive a written hand-out listing the grade's curriculum objectives;
- A series of public meetings featuring experts on proven teaching methods;
- A science fair and an essay competition;
- Standardized testing at the end of grades 1, 4, and 8; and
- Non-computerized report cards.

Let's assume your silver tongue is enough to get all of the sub-committee's recommendations passed by the school council. What now? Even Mahatma is going to blanch at the prospect. "Power to the people is all very well," he is thinking to himself, "but this is ridiculous."

Just so that there will be no misunderstandings, the school council instructs you to draw up detailed recommendations, including suggested timelines. This report is duly presented to Mr. Gandhi with a request that he respond in writing by a given date (perhaps you could work out a mutually-agreeable date with the principal beforehand).

I don't want to shock you, but I would be remiss if I didn't point out that Mr. Gandhi may be tempted to miss his deadline. In fact, I would go so far as to say he may prefer never to respond at all!

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And so, just to help him stay focused, this would probably be a great time to update the community on the school council's activities. Why not ask the Publicity Sub-Committee to publish a newsletter? Interspersed with the usual announcements about school doings, you could report on the Curriculum Sub-Committee's suggestions and the date when Mr. Gandhi will be responding. You might also include things like a report on how the school's fund-raising and discretionary funds are being spent, the school's test results, enrolment over the years, and statistics on pupil and teacher attendance.

I have the sinking feeling that by now many of my readers have concluded I am hopelessly pessimistic and cynical about the resistance which school councils encounter and the lengths to which it will be necessary for determined parents to go. All I can say to my critics is: please, go ahead and try it your way. Feel free to sprinkle around sweetness and light and a few gentle hints to the principal of how things could be made just a tiny bit better. And if it works, then hey! That's wonderful.

I would expect this approach to work in a tiny minority of schools – say, one percent. In other schools – say 94% — nothing will work. That leaves roughly 5% of schools where my suggestions may come in handy. In which category does your school belong?

If you are expecting to improve Jack and Jill's education by working with the school council, then in my opinion you are doubly naive. Affecting an entire school is much harder than affecting just one teacher, and even that is very tricky as I have already illustrated. Obviously, you don't have a whole lot to lose, but a realistic expectation would be to hope for change in time for your grandchildren, or perhaps your great-grandchildren. That's why I now pick up my constant refrain. You remember how it goes, don't you?

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If things are going seriously wrong with your child's schooling and the teachers are still not taking the appropriate steps, don't wait for spring. You have to take matters into your own hands. Read on to find out how.

## Chapter 4

### **After-Schooling Your Kids – Parental Version**

Finally, you've decided to take my advice! Jack is now in grade 5, still reading at a grade 2 level, still very angry and unhappy. He is also very weak in other subjects – spelling, composition, penmanship, math – all the basic skills, in fact. At last you have grasped that he is in urgent need of strong teaching – teaching which is obviously beyond the capability of his present school.

The first decision you have to make is whether to help Jack yourself or pay someone else to do the job.

#### **Doing It Yourself**

##### **Pros**

- You know Jack better than anyone else does, and thus you can tailor your teaching to his strengths.
- It is more convenient – you can fit it in whenever you have a few free moments, and there's no transportation involved.
- It is cheaper.

##### **Cons**

- You probably have no training as a teacher, and possibly no aptitude.
- You and Jack may not be all that patient with one another.
- It is time-consuming.

In this chapter, I assume you decide to do the job yourself. The earlier you begin, the better. Remediation gets harder the longer you leave it and, at this late date, it's not going to be easy! So, let's break it down.

First, you have to zero in on Jack's most serious problem. This step is a piece of cake. Jack needs to learn to read. Second, you need to get your hands on a good remedial reading program.

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This step is easy, too. The Society for Quality Education makes my own remedial reading program, *Stairway to Reading*, available free of charge at [www.teachyourchildtoread.ca](http://www.teachyourchildtoread.ca).

All you need to do is print out the material and follow the instructions. Be warned, however. Although I guarantee that *Stairway to Reading* will teach Jack to read, it is not a magic pill that you give him at bedtime and he wakes up the next morning able to read. You and Jack must be prepared to give it your best shot, working hard for an absolute minimum of 50 hours.

As you get organized to use *Stairway to Reading*, you should start preparing Jack for the coming ordeal. Now totally convinced he is too dense to ever learn to read, Jack is not going to welcome yet another chance to demonstrate his stupidity. Explain to him that the reason he didn't learn to read at school was that the teachers didn't teach him the way he learns, but that you are going to use a method that will work. It never seems to occur to kids that this is a criticism of those teachers; so don't worry about undermining the school.

Set aside a quiet area of the house and tell him that the two of you will be working there for an hour every day, no exceptions. And you must be sure to carry through with this rule with both yourself and Jack. Prepare a big wall chart to keep track of Jack's progress. There are 40 lessons in *Stairway to Reading*. Each time Jack is promoted to the next lesson, put a star on the chart. Bribes are good too. Perhaps you could offer him a special treat once he has earned a given number of stars. After all, you yourself are embarking on this project because you are anticipating a pay-off down the road (Jack learning to read). But since Jack is already sure he will never learn to read, he needs a *real* reward.

Typically, kids resist at first but, as soon as they realize that this time they really are going to learn to read, they become cooperative. I'm not saying Jack will ever reach the point where he begs you for extra lesson time – just that things get easier. As a

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reading tutor myself, I am pleased to say that some of my younger students actually run from their car to my door on arrival!

The most important principle of any reading program is that the student must be able to sound out unknown words. Trying to teach someone to read without phonics is like trying to teach someone to read music without teaching the notation. Progress is often slow at first, as kids struggle to learn the letters' sounds and get the hang of blending the sounds into words, but an initial investment in the basic principles of reading will pay off handsomely later on.

Judy Sumner is a nurse by profession, but she was forced by circumstances to become a tutor. She first became interested in teaching when her grade 1 daughter didn't seem to be catching on to reading. Ms Sumner and her husband, a neuroscientist, went to an information session at their school where some Whole Language consultants gave them the usual fantastical spiel involving chanting and pretending to write stories. Ms Sumner and her husband Case Vanderwolf just sat there with their mouths open. As one Montessori teacher said to me: "The first time I heard Whole Language explained, I thought I had somehow missed something."

With their science backgrounds, Ms Sumner and her husband are not impressed by hocus-pocus. Dr. Vanderwolf proceeded to check out the research on learning to read, discovering that the theory of Whole Language had no scientific underpinnings and had long been known to be an inferior method. But when Dr. Vanderwolf sought to enlighten school board officials along these lines, he was given the cold shoulder.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Ms Sumner was busy teaching her two daughters to read. Like so many other parents, she found it surprisingly easy. After word spread about how Ms Sumner had fixed up her own children, other worried parents started sending their kids over for help. One thing led to another, until Ms Sumner graduated to salvaging children at a private school.

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Chances are you will not have a lot of trouble teaching Jack to read. Of course, you will have to break down his initial resistance, but bribes are very helpful for this. As well, Jack will probably have a number of bad habits, such as guessing at words and skimming for overall impression, which will be a pain in the neck but which hard work persistence can probably break.

While learning to read is not all that hard for most kids, there are a few kids who have a really tough time learning to read. If he is really unlucky, Jack will turn out to be one of them.

Don't despair, however. As Siegfried Engelmann says in his book *The War Against the Schools' Academic Child Abuse*: "I have never seen a kid with an IQ of over 80 that could not be taught to read in a timely manner (one school year) and I have worked directly or indirectly (as a trainer) with thousands of them."

Jack *can* learn. Even children with IQs from 70-80 can learn to read simple text with a little more time, patience, and repetition. It's not rocket science! To tell you the truth, teaching just one child at a time is pretty easy. All you have to do is identify the problems and work on them one by one until they have been solved. Then, once a student has learned a new concept, he needs to practise, practise, practise, until he is fluent in it. These skills must become automatic. It may take a while for Jack to master the early skills, but after a while he may surprise you by how quickly he begins to progress.

By the time Jack is reading at grade level, his printing should be getting better as well, since it should be taught concurrently with reading. As you progress with reading, you will also be automatically working on spelling. Once printing and spelling are under control, you can start working on what you have identified as Jack's next most-serious problem.

At the back of this book, you'll find helpful articles on several topics – from number facts to mapwork. The most important

### *After-Schooling Your Kids – Parental Version*

thing to remember is that virtually anyone can achieve a high level of proficiency in virtually anything if he or she works hard enough. In fact, there is a challenge here for you as well as Jack. Jack can become a good reader if he works hard enough at it, and you can become a good teacher if you work hard enough at it. There is no such thing as a born teacher.

Not long after you begin teaching Jack to read, you should begin to see improvements in his behaviour. Within a day or two, he will start daring to believe he is not hopelessly stupid. Make sure you help this process along by praising him, building him up. Structure the lessons so that Jack's responses are correct at least 85% of the time.

You should always show amazement and delight at what Jack can already do and how quickly he is mastering new work (that's one reason you start with easy stuff).

Once things are running smoothly with Jack's program, it's time to start teaching Jill to read as well. Most four-year-olds can pick up reading quite easily and have a good time in the process. In some circles, teaching kids to read before they get to kindergarten is known as schoolproofing, and it is very effective at doing just that. Phonetically-taught students usually thrive in child-centred classrooms. Just for fun, ask a grade 4 enrichment teacher how many of her students were already reading in kindergarten. I predict that, if she knows, her answer will be at least 75%.

It's not that these kids were all so smart that they learned to read at a young age – just the reverse! Most of them had been taught to read at a young age and that made them smart. A lot of enrichment students have mothers (many of them teachers) who had the confidence to take matters into their own hands and teach their kids to read at home. It's usually pretty easy. Sometimes, the job is even done by an older brother or sister.

Teaching Jill to read will be much easier than teaching Jack (because you have no bad habits to undo and no negative attitudes

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to overcome), but it will have its own challenges. Jill may be curious and excited about learning to read but, on the other hand, she does have a shorter attention span and can't sit still for as long. Because she is less mature than Jack, you will need a different reading program.

I suggest the playful approach used in *How to Teach Your Child to Read in 10 Minutes a Day* by Sidney Ledson, a Toronto educator. I also highly recommend the *Primary Phonics Readers* (available from Educators Publishing Service) as supplementary readers. Young children get a huge kick out of these readers. Other useful materials are listed at [www.schoolproofing.ca](http://www.schoolproofing.ca).

Jill's sessions should be short – 10-15 minutes each – and leave her begging for more. The two of you should have lots of fun together. If, like me, you're a quite boring type of person who has trouble finding the element of fun in every job there is to be done, you will greatly appreciate the ingenious ideas in Sidney Ledson's book.

You might also consider recruiting Jack to help with Jill's program. He will probably get quite a kick out of being more advanced than she is, and the extra practice will be good for him.

Nancy Wagner and her son Matthew took my advice to teach three-year-old Aidan to read using Mr. Ledson's approach. Aidan's program was pretty disorganized – taking place as it did between two busy households when someone found a couple of minutes to work with him, and punctuated by the discovery that Aidan needed glasses and the arrival of a baby brother.

Nevertheless, just before Aidan turned four, he began to read on his own. By the time he was four and a half, he was burning CD's, programming the PVR, and setting up profiles – with passwords – on his grandmother's computer. No one had shown him how to do any of these things.

### *After-Schooling Your Kids – Parental Version*

This chapter is dedicated to parents with more time than money. If you have more money than time and would prefer to have someone else teach your kids, read on.

## Chapter 5

### **After-Schooling Your Kids – Tutorial Version**

In case you're not yet convinced that child-centred learning is a disaster for some kids, take a minute and look over the "schools" section of your *Yellow Pages*. Sensing a market opportunity, more and more entrepreneurs are promising to improve kids' learning – often for a hefty fee. The fact that so many parents are willing to part with their hard-earned money is eloquent testimony to their children's distress. In addition to these businesses, there are also an incredible number of individual tutors, often retired teachers, who are working with neighbourhood children for a more modest fee.

In earlier versions of this book, I recommended that parents start by arranging for their kids' achievement level to be tested. The idea was to confirm that help was needed and also to establish a benchmark that later testing could be compared against. Often, however, expert testing is very expensive and time-consuming and, instead of measuring a student's achievement level, focuses on a gazillion sub-skills, like "visual-auditory learning", "analysis-synthesis", and "concept formation".

Obviously, it's not going to do Jack much good if you discover that his "visual matching" skills are weak, but it will be very useful to confirm that he's reading at a grade 2 level. Regardless of the fancy diagnosis, the indicated treatment is always the same as far as I'm concerned – provide high-quality instruction and practice until the student is achieving at grade level or better.

Luckily, a number of free do-it-yourself achievement tests have become available in the meantime, and I suggest you take full advantage of them. To determine Jack's reading level, you can use

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the diagnostic test in *Stairway to Reading* \*. The appendix includes a quick and easy spelling placement test (page 118). For math, Saxon Publishers offer free placement tests on their web-site \*\*.

Most learning centre franchises offer achievement testing. The usual caveats apply. Some centres, for example, have a policy of not giving parents a written copy of their child's results. If you do decide to have Jack tested at a learning centre, remember that this is a business and they would like to sell you their services. You must be informed.

In addition to the learning centres, there may be other enterprising individuals such as local teachers and administrators who would be delighted to test Jack for a small fee (the more comprehensive the testing, the more expensive it is). Some universities offer this service, for example, as do some private schools. In addition, you may be able to find psychologists in private practice who do testing.

As ever, there are no guarantees. Before you turn Jack over to a tester, do your homework. Interview the tester and inquire about his/her qualifications (some have very little training). Ask for references. Talk to other parents. Be sceptical. Bear in mind that a misdiagnosis – whereby either a problem is missed or the wrong problem is identified – may be more harmful than no diagnosis at all.

Let's say that Jack is now in grade 5, and testing has revealed he is reading at a grade 2 level. In addition, he is still declaring war on school and the world in general. His hostile attitude, combined with his inability to read, is not going to make him an attractive prospect to employers, thus narrowing his career pros-

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\* [www.teachyourchildtoread.ca](http://www.teachyourchildtoread.ca)

\*\* <http://saxonhomeschool.hmhco.com/en/resources/result.htm?title=Placement&search.x=43&search.y=15>

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pects considerably. A disproportionate number of illiterates drop out of school, get pregnant or get someone else pregnant, and turn to drugs and/or crime. Penal system officials in Florida, for example, plan future prison needs on the basis of the areas's grade 4 reading and math scores! If Jack doesn't get help soon, he is in danger of becoming a statistic.

Assuming this prospect doesn't appeal, you are really going to have to roll up your sleeves and fix Jack's reading problem. With so much conflict between the two of you these days however, you don't feel up to teaching Jack yourself, and so now you are wondering how to find a good remedial teacher.

- There's the elderly lady down the street who is helping several of your neighbours' kids.
- You've heard about a Japanese program called Kumon which kids can do mostly at home.
- There's a psychologist in Maple who has a fantastic track record salvaging kids.
- A new Sylvan Learning Centre franchise has just opened up downtown.

Any or all of these options might work. Which one should you choose?

Let's start with Mrs. Philanthropy, the retired teacher who is tutoring the neighbourhood kids for \$10 an hour. At that price, of course, it's an incredible deal. In addition, the set-up is really convenient – no driving, no waiting around. You're very tempted, but you wisely decide to investigate a bit more. After all, this may be Jack's last chance. You've got to get it right this time.

So you make arrangements to interview Mrs. Philanthropy. Here are two possible conversations. The decision is not difficult.

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<b>What are your qualifications for teaching reading?</b>	
I was a home economics teacher for 30 years.	I taught grade 1 for 30 years. I estimate I have taught 900 children to read.
<b>Have you ever had a student who couldn't learn to read?</b>	
Oh, certainly. Some poor little kids are so learning-disabled they will have to use a tape recorder all their lives.	No.
<b>What methods and materials do you use?</b>	
Oh, I use a little of this and a little of that. Sometimes, I read to the children and get them to draw a picture about the story. Or sometimes, we watch a movie together. The important thing is to make reading fun and easy.	The materials depend on how old the student is and how severe his problems. I choose from among several good systematic phonics programs and readers. In terms of methods, I use direct instruction. I teach a lesson and then have my student practise it until it has been completely mastered. I then provide extensive practice integrating new learning with old.
<b>What do you do when a student refuses to co-operate?</b>	
So many of the children have attention-deficit disorder these days! I ask their mothers to get them started on Ritalin or else I just can't cope with them.	I don't usually have this problem after the first session or two, because the kids are typically so delighted at their progress that they become extremely cooperative. The children want to learn to read, you know. But if I have to, I can be pretty tough.

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<b>Why do you tutor the children?</b>	
Oh, it gives me something to do. I get lonely sometimes, you know. I adore little children – they're so cute!	I love it – who wouldn't enjoy turning kids' lives around? Along with my grandchildren, this is the most important part of my life.
<b>Can you give me the names of some parents whose children you have taught?</b>	
I'm sorry, but that would be a violation of their privacy.	Yes, of course.

The next possibility on your list is Kumon Reading. This program is a kind of hybrid – Jack does most of the work at home but it is meted out and evaluated at the Kumon Centre once a week. Here's how it works.

The Kumon program consists of thousands of carefully-sequenced worksheets which drill reading, spelling, grammar, and comprehension. Students are required to complete ten worksheets a day, done to a high standard and completed within a given amount of time. At the beginning, the sheets take only about 10 to 20 minutes a day, but their length and difficulty gradually increase until they can easily take up to an hour a day.

As a rule, you would be expected to bring Jack to the Kumon Centre once or twice a week so that his progress can be measured, he can do that day's work there, and then receive the next batch of at-home worksheets. The Kumon teacher prefers you to mark Jack's assignments at home each day (because of the immediate feedback), but many parents bring the unmarked worksheets with them on their weekly visit. If so, the work gets marked while the student sits in the Centre and does that day's assignment. The cost is around \$100 a month.

The Kumon method has the advantage of being relatively inexpensive and flexible. In my opinion, however, it is not as well-suited to teaching language as it is to math – since its main goal is

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to develop the automatic aspects of the basic subjects. Initially conceived for drilling arithmetic skills, the math program gives the students an excellent grounding in computation – the skills and facts get hard-wired into their brains, leaving the students free to devote their entire mental desk space to problem-solving. If kids stick with Kumon Math past their grade level, they usually do exceptionally well in math at school.

On the other hand, both programs, but especially the math, are pretty boring. In addition, because the students may have to redo the same worksheets several times before they reach the standard and are allowed to progress, they can sometimes get discouraged and frustrated. Bottom line: some kids hate doing Kumon more than they hate changing the baby's dirty diapers.

Moving right along, you next consider a professional remedial teacher.

By the time Ryan Bowering had reached grade 5, he was in deep trouble. Despite the fact that his parents had started asking for help for Ryan in grade 1, he was still reading at a grade 2 level. His mother was so desperate that she took the advice of a total stranger (me) and signed him up at \$30 an hour with an unknown tutor named Grant Coulson who was a 30-minute drive distant.

And it was worth every penny! Less than a year later, after about 100 hours of instruction, Ryan:

- Was reading at grade level;
- Was happy to go to school;
- Was feeling quite good about himself; and
- Had become quite outgoing.

According to his mother, Ryan was a changed person.

The ability to get results like this is the only reliable guide to a good remedial teacher. And Dr. Grant Coulson has hundreds of similar cases to his credit. Reading, writing, math – you name it! For example, Dr. Coulson tells the story of the 11-year-old boy

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who came to him unable to add  $5 + 3$  without counting on his fingers. After 98 hours of instruction, this student was doing math at a grade 9.5 level.

Dr. Coulson's apparent miracles were achieved by using proven teaching methods. There is no mystery about which methods work. The only mystery is why educators reject these methods. If you happen to live near Maple, Ontario, then deciding what to do about Jack should be a no-brainer – assuming you can afford Dr. Coulson's fees (a lot more than \$30 these days, unfortunately).

I did ask Dr. Coulson what parents should do if they can't access his services. His advice was succinct: "Look for the data". In other words, when trying to size up a remedial teacher, ask to see the records of other students whom he or she has helped. Furthermore, an effective teacher will be confident enough to give you a guarantee of some kind.

A fourth possibility is a learning centre, such as Sylvan. These franchises are very successful, with nearly 1200 learning centres in Canada and the US. They offer remedial teaching in all the basic skills, such as math, reading, writing, and study skills, for all grades through school graduation. An on-line tutoring service is available as well. According to their web-site, fees vary but can be as low as \$88 a month.

When new students arrive at Sylvan, they are given standardized testing (for a price). The parents are then informed of the results, and an individualized program is proposed. The average length of stay is around 56 hours, or about seven months. When I was doing my research for this book, I asked one of the Sylvan franchisees to send me data on student progress. Although I asked twice, I never received the information I requested.

Just as at John Dewey, everything depends on the teacher. If Jack happens to get a good teacher at the learning centre, then

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he's in luck. As always, you are going to have to do the usual checking around before signing on the dotted line.

- Talk to the parents of some students at the centre in question.
- Interview the teacher(s) Jack would be assigned to. Ask about their experience and qualifications.
- Ask to see data on that centre's track record.

After all, if Jack takes lessons there for one year, you will probably end up spending several thousand dollars. Would you spend that amount renovating your basement without checking the contractor's references?

In case you haven't noticed, there is a recurring theme in this book, namely:

### **THE TEACHER IS THE KEY.**

The difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year. Students who are unlucky enough to draw three bad teachers in a row are statistically toast.

Regardless of where you search for help – at the school, down the street, across town, or in another city – you have to hold out for a teacher who gets results – and can prove it.

The kind of supplementation described in these two chapters is known in some circles as after-schooling. Of course, after-schooling has its drawbacks, since it generally takes place when the kids are tired out, having already put in a full day's play at school.

There is another alternative, as a growing number of parents are discovering. They have opted out of the system entirely – either by enrolling their children in a private school or by choosing to home-school them. My exploration of these options is up next.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Going for Broke – Private School**

It is far easier to compare the performance of different cars or find out the ingredients of granola bars than to get information on the quality of private schools.

Most private schools are as unaccountable as the public schools. Unless schools voluntarily give their students standardized tests and honestly report the results, it really is very difficult for parents to discover whether or not a given school is doing a good job. Lots of them aren't. After all, private schools are in competition with a very weak competitor (public schools). In order to attract customers, the private schools have to offer service that is only slightly better. And, for the most part, that is what they do offer.

After all, the private schools are dragged down by many of the same handicaps as the public schools.

- Their teachers have been trained at the same woefully-inadequate faculties of education.
- They draw from the same pool of dreadful textbooks.
- They are constrained by the same provincial policies and regulations.
- They are influenced by the same erroneous philosophy.

Dr. Mark Holmes, a prominent Ontario educator, tells the story of visiting one of the province's elite private schools in Toronto where several teachers, not knowing Dr. Holmes' views, apologized for not being more child-centred – yet. They were moving in that direction, despite being worried that the parents might not be ready!

Private schools are yet another example of how private enterprise is capitalizing on the child-centred mania in public schools. In 1976, there were only a handful of private schools in

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Ontario. When I published the first edition of this book in 1998, there were not quite 700. And now, in 2009, there are over 900.

The schools are endlessly varied. They include religious schools, Montessori schools, academically-intensive schools, sports schools, on-line schools, music schools, and much more. And that's good! Obviously, not all students are the same, and the more choices they have, the more likely they are to find a suitable school. Similarly, parents have different aspirations for their children – some are looking for a school that will prepare their child for a career, while others might want a liberal arts orientation or a strong moral emphasis. There should be schools for everyone.

Janyce Lastman is a Toronto independent educational consultant who, among other things, helps parents find the best private school for their child. A lot of what Mrs. Lastman tells parents is common sense but, because so many people get caught up in the mystique of private schools, I will run the risk of boring you by repeating some of her comments.

- The older children get, the more their needs diverge. By the time they arrive at high school, no school could realistically expect to meet the needs of all its students. The children are just too different from one another.
- And, of course, unless your own children are like peas in a pod, you may find that they would be better off if they attended different schools. Much as you might prefer to send them to the same school, it may be better for them to be separated.
- Private schools, much more than public schools, offer a specialized type of education – often catering to a particular category of student, such as gifted, rebellious teen, or under-achieving. So when parents go shopping for the right school for their child, they must be very clear about what each school is offering.
- Also in the category of obvious-when-you-think-about-it advice from Mrs. Lastman, is the bad news that you're never going to find the perfect school. Just as no school will be right for all

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children, similarly no school will be 100% right for any one child. Mrs. Lastman suggests that parents be content with a school which fulfils about 75% of their requirements. The perfect school exists only in your dreams.

The only sure things in life are death and taxes, they say. All anyone can do when looking for a good school is to try to improve the odds of finding a good fit.

### ***Day Schools***

You can readily locate your local private schools by consulting the *Yellow Pages* under “Schools – Academic – Elementary and Secondary” or going on-line. A lot of schools will be ruled out on the grounds that they are:

- Too far away; or
- Don’t offer grade 5; or
- Require knowledge of another language; or
- Are too specialized; or
- Are too expensive; or
- Have an unacceptable religious affiliation.

Unless you live in a big city, you are probably down to two or three possibilities right away. Let’s say you have narrowed down the list to the following three: Rousseau Hall, Elite College, and Oak Manor Academy. They all sound great, how to choose? In chapter 3, I talked about how to identify a good public school. Most of the same principles apply when it comes to choosing among private schools, but there are a few differences.

For example, you shouldn’t get all excited if the principal is nice to you. Unlike their public school counterparts, private school principals have an incentive to enrol additional students. As well, few private schools participate in the provincial tests (because they are too expensive), and so you can’t go on-line to see how well the school ranks provincially.

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Your first stop is **Rousseau Hall**, a new school which was founded just last year. The premises look great – spick and span and lots of glass. The students look well-dressed and come from posh homes. But soon, alarm bells start going off in your head. When you ask the principal about the students’ tests results, she laughs and says they don’t believe in standardized testing, since they can’t measure the really important learning and in any case tests are just a snapshot in time.

And when you ask to visit the grade 5 class, she laughs and says they don’t believe in grades since children should progress at their own speed. But the clincher comes when you walk through the school and see for yourself that they don’t believe in order or discipline either. You quickly cross Rousseau Hall off your list.

Next stop is **Elite College**, a large school, located on a nicely-landscaped campus. You like the look of the place – lots of lavishly-appointed classrooms, well-behaved kids wearing uniforms, a big gym... But when you ask the principal about the students’ results on standardized testing, he vaguely replies they haven’t done much of that lately. When you ask to sit in on the grade 5 teacher’s class, he responds that it’s against school policy. And, later on, when you discuss Jack’s reading problem with the grade 5 teacher, she assures you that Jack will fit in just fine in her class since many of her students have reading problems. Not exactly impressed, you put a big question mark beside Elite College and note the names of several parents at the school.

A word of advice for when you talk to these parents: you are looking for parents who are thrilled to bits with the school, since a really good school will make a huge difference, an improvement that is impossible to miss. If, on the other hand, the parents say things like: “Yes, I suppose Elite College helped Eleanor”, or “Yes, we’re pretty sure Jason is better off there”, don’t buy it! Remember, these parents are parting with big bucks to send Eleanor and Jason to private school, and so they are subconsciously

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motivated to believe they are not wasting their money. Jack doesn't need a school that's sort of okay – he needs a school that will save his bacon!

Let's say your conversations with Elite College parents tend to elicit only rather lukewarm endorsements. Moving right along, you arrive at the third possibility, **Oak Manor Academy**. By now, you're pretty wary, and the academy's appearance doesn't exactly reassure you. A bit run-down looking and bulging at the seams with students dressed in very simple uniforms, the building has clearly seen better days. Inside, the floors don't gleam, and the furniture looks kind of shabby.

Braced for another disappointment, you trot out your usual question about the results of standardized testing. To your surprise, the principal immediately hands you a three-page report showing the results of standardized testing for each class over the last five years. It's very impressive!

A faint hope dawning, you ask if you can sit in on the grade 5 class. Five minutes later, from your vantage point at the back of the class, you are amazed.

- That's very high-level math they're doing – why, it's algebra!
- The student work on the walls is excellent, especially the art – and there are no spelling mistakes!
- The textbooks, too, are different. Some of them actually come from Singapore!
- And the students – they are totally motivated and engaged!

Back with the principal, you confess there is no way Jack could keep up with that grade 5 class. The principal laughs and says that most public school transfers are in the same boat. As a result, Oak Manor scrimps and saves to provide a special transition teacher for them. The expense of this extra teacher forces the school to cut corners when it comes to maintenance and cleaning, but it's definitely worth it. Because the school council (which sets the tuition fees) wants to keep costs down, they pay their teachers

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less than the going rate. This is actually a plus, since it weeds out marginal teachers who are attracted to the profession by the prospect of high wages and generous vacation time. The principal of Oak Manor tells you she is humbled by the calibre of the dedicated teachers at the school.

In response to your anxious questions about the ability of the transition teacher to cope with Jack's grade 2 reading level, the principal reassures you that this is a very common scenario and that Jack should be up to speed in about six months. You fight down the impulse to sign him up on the spot – since you really should talk to a few parents at the school (as well as see your bank manager about a loan). But it certainly does look promising!

Of course, Oak Manor Academy exists only in your dreams. But you might be interested in a real live Toronto school.

By the time most students at the Giles School reach grade 5, they are several years ahead of the average Ontario student. At the Giles School, the main language of instruction is French, although students also learn English and, in some cases, Japanese. In grade 4, for example, they read and appreciate *The Hobbit* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

According to the headmaster, Harry Giles, the children learn so well for two reasons. First, the school uses proven teaching methods and has very high expectations. Second, most students start school aged three or four. By the time they are through their junior kindergarten year, they have completed Ontario's grade 1 curriculum.

Mr. Giles has found that there is a huge advantage to starting kids young. Just as you lose muscle mass if you don't exercise your body, so too do you lose neural pathways if you don't stimulate your brain. Mr. Giles has found that kids who learn to read at an early age do extremely well in school.

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The Giles School is exceptional, unfortunately. Thirty-plus years of child-centred learning have erased our collective memory banks of how much children are capable of achieving.

### ***Boarding Schools***

Let's assume you have scouted out all the private schools within reach and none is suitable. If you are wealthy, you still have the option of looking at a boarding school. You will be able to find most of them by Googling [province] boarding schools.

Generally speaking, most boarding schools have high standards. After all, parents don't send their kids away lightly, plus parents are definitely going to insist on exceptional results after parting with \$20,000 or so. In addition, boarding schools can usually turn kids around faster than day schools can – after all, they have the kids there all the time and can stay on top of them 24/7, enforcing homework and other desirable behaviours. On the other hand, no human institution is perfect, and there are always pluses and minuses.

Sometimes, a school can work miracles. Brad Peterson of Lethbridge, Alberta was a square peg in a round hole. He never really connected with school and, after he failed grade 8, things went from bad to worse. Desperately unhappy and destructive, he even moved out of his house for a time. For years, his parents tried one thing after another and, finally, they gave him an ultimatum – either leave home for good or go to a “bootstrap” boarding school in Ontario. He went.

The improvement was immediate. Forced to write a letter home on arrival, he took pains to do a good job and even used much better handwriting. On his visits home, his mother noticed a big change – he was much happier and regaining his self-esteem. His mother will never forget his graduation from high school – the joy of accomplishment, the students' pride in themselves and each other... Now Brad is the boy his mother always knew he was – a self-assured, wonderful young man who went on to graduate from

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university. The Petersons had to make financial sacrifices to send Brad to boarding school, but it was worth it. What value do you put on a child's future?

If you would like to go the private school route but find the financial prospect too daunting, you should apply for a scholarship from the Children First School Choice Trust\*. Some conditions apply. For example you must live in Alberta or Ontario, your child must be in elementary school, and your household income must be below a certain level. Scholarship winners are chosen by lottery.

There's only one more option left, but it's a good one. Read on to find out more about home-schooling.

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\* [http://www.childrenfirstgrants.ca/main/index.php?page\\_id=1](http://www.childrenfirstgrants.ca/main/index.php?page_id=1)

## **Chapter 7**

### **Doing It Yourself – Home-schooling**

The fact that David and Micki Colfax home-schooled their sons didn't appear to hurt the kids' career prospects much. All four went on to higher education, three of them at Harvard. One of them, Reed, went on to become a lawyer who specializes in civil rights.

As a result of home-schooled students' excellent track record, some American universities, including the Ivy League colleges, began to actively recruit them – even to the extent of offering them scholarships. These universities find that home-schoolers can really apply themselves and are excellent at independent studies.

While I can't promise you the same great results if you decide to home-school, chances are your kids will do better than the ones who stay in public schools. Home-schoolers typically score above the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile, meaning that the average home-schooled child does better than at least four-fifths of the population!

Canadian universities, formerly wary of home-schooled students, have recently started to come around as well. Naturally, they ask for reasonable evidence on which to judge their applicants' qualifications. The University of Guelph, for example, requires six grade 12 Ontario courses – which may be completed via correspondence, on-line learning, night school, day school, or any combination thereof – or acceptable test scores from the SAT Reasoning Test/ACT and three SAT Subject Tests in the appropriate subject areas.

Of course, not everyone commits to home-school her children for their entire elementary and secondary school careers. It's common for home-schooled students to attend regular high schools after completing grade 8 at home – and do very well!

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Some parents keep their kids home in the morning to teach them academics and then send them to public school in the afternoon for the fun stuff. And, oftentimes, children are kept home for only a year or two, sometimes to ride out a rough period at the local school.

There is no legal requirement to notify the authorities that you intend to home-school, although in the case of children already enrolled in a public school, a courtesy call to the principal would be appropriate. And it is usually just as easy to transfer a home-schooled child into a public or private school.

When Dawn Erb started grade 6 at a new school, it seemed like a nightmare from which she couldn't wake up. Not only was she unable to do the work, but her teacher ridiculed her in front of the class and accused her of being lazy and stupid. Soon, she was having headaches and tantrums, refusing to go to school. "It was hell", her mother says flatly. By January, Mrs. Erb was so desperate she pulled Dawn from her school. At that stage, she didn't know anything about home-schooling, not even if it was legal!

Before long, though, she had made a deal with a neighbour to tutor Dawn for four hours a day. Then, in the afternoon, Dawn would work on her homework at home. The tutor found that Dawn was working well below grade level. For example, she had to count on her fingers to find the sum of 2 plus 3. After a year and a half of tutoring, Dawn had pretty well caught up, and the following year she started grade 8 at a private school where she did fine. Suddenly, Dawn loved school and just hated to miss a day.

The moral of the story is that you needn't be daunted by the prospect of another seven years without the local school's handy baby-sitting service. Just think in terms of keeping Jack home for the rest of grade 5 so the two of you can have a chance to see how you like it. If you're really nervous, you can experiment for a few months by keeping Jack home one day a week. That way, you can see how you both like it without burning any bridges.

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You may be surprised. Some families find they like home-schooling so much they carry on with it a lot longer than originally planned.

Why do people home-school? In the old days, families generally chose to home-school for idiosyncratic reasons such as their desire to give their children a religious education or as part of their back-to-the-land experience. Increasingly, however, today's home-schoolers are fleeing public education because of their disappointment with it. Typically, they are looking for higher academic and moral standards, more dedicated teachers, and freedom from bullying. And, a recent development as the word spreads about home-schooling, more and more children are taking the initiative and begging their parents to keep them home.

Sometimes young children are unable to articulate what they need but manage to communicate their distress regardless. When Brenda Shaw was still in kindergarten, she was formally identified as gifted. Standardized testing that year revealed that she was reading at a grade 8-9 level and doing math at a grade 3-4 level. She was a happy, curious, lively little girl.

By the end of grade 1, she was a different child. As her mother Mary puts it, Brenda had lost her stuffing. Mrs. Shaw later learned from the bus driver that Brenda had cried herself to sleep every afternoon on the way home. Standardized testing revealed that she had actually lost ground – her test scores were now lower than they had been in kindergarten.

Mrs. Shaw tried everything. She worked with Brenda's teachers, joined the PTA, served on a special school board committee, and joined the Association for Bright Children. But nothing she did could stop the school juggernaut from running out of control. For example, at one point Brenda was subjected to enrichment sessions (although the school called them "remedial sessions" in a weird bid to foster egalitarianism) in which she was given the same 100 math questions day after day. After 15 days of this treatment,

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Brenda finally refused to solve any of the problems, and the school staff announced that she had a serious learning disability, possibly coupled with a behavioural exceptionality.

By December of grade 2, her mother had finally had enough, and so she decided to home-school her daughter. Fortunately, this story has a very happy ending. When she was in her late teens, Brenda was given the Canadian Adult Achievement Tests by a local school board. They had never seen such high scores. Brenda went on to become a gifted astronomer.

If you are like most people, right now you are thinking, “I couldn’t possibly home-school. I have no training as a teacher. I wouldn’t have a clue what to teach. I couldn’t possibly spare the time. My son and I get into fights when I try to help with homework. Jack needs to interact with other children his own age. The whole idea is ridiculous.” Here’s why you’re wrong.

### **I have no training as a teacher.**

Most teacher training is of no value – unless, of course, you count courses on the history of education, the advantages of child-centred learning, and how to make leaf collections. If you don’t believe me, just ask any teacher. Good teachers have figured their job out as they went along, which is what you’ve been doing every since Jack was born. And it’s a whole lot easier to teach one or two kids than an entire class. Just to get you started, the first document in the appendix lays out the basic principles of successful teaching.

### **I wouldn’t have a clue what to teach.**

With so many people after-schooling and home-schooling these days, the market has responded with an abundance of supporting material. Textbooks, workbooks, videos, computer programs – you name it and you can get it, even for free in some cases\*. The best way to find out about the possibilities is to plug into your local home-schoolers’ network. More about this later.

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\* <http://www.welltrainedmind.com/forums/showthread.php?t=45173>

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There is also lots of subject-specific information in the appendix to this book. And don't worry about the provincial curriculum – no one in the education system monitors compliance or even, frankly, pays it much attention. By way of illustration, ask yourself how scrupulous Jack's school has been about Jack's mastery of the curriculum.

### **I couldn't possibly spare the time.**

Amazingly, most home-schoolers spend only about three hours a day on academics, if that – yet most kids cover a minimum of a year's curriculum without breaking a sweat. As well, it may be possible to work out something with other home-schoolers in terms of taking turns or specializing in different subjects or arranging classes. And maybe dad could pitch in on occasion? Home-school moms quickly develop creativity and ingenuity.

### **My son and I get into fights when I try to help with homework.**

It's likely that Jack's anger and frustration are the result of being asked to do work that is too difficult for him. As home-schoolers draw their children away from the destructive orbit of public schooling, they find their kids become gradually more cooperative and eager to learn. Attention spans lengthen, and the students start to accept the value of things like accuracy, discipline, and hard work. Most home-schooled children are a pleasure to work with.

### **Jack needs to interact with other children his own age.**

Of course, children have to learn to get along with others, but nowhere is it written that this is best accomplished packed into a room with 24 of their agetates. In fact, it is highly questionable just how valuable the public school experience is, given the bullies, cliques, and gangs commonly found there. Most home-schoolers regularly socialize with other families for special cultural, artistic, or athletic activities. They find that their children benefit from rubbing shoulders with other people of all ages, including adults.

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The older children act as mature role models, and the younger kids provide opportunities to cultivate patience and tolerance. Home-schooled kids are typically poised, charming, and responsible, and siblings are often exceptionally close.

When Marg Hewson started to home-school her ten-year-old daughter Lauren, she worried that Lauren would miss out on the all-important “socialization” benefits that the public schools claim to offer. Mrs. Hewson was especially concerned about this because Lauren had been quite slow to make friends at her public school. It thus came as quite a surprise when Lauren made some wonderful home-schooled friends, of all different ages, and really started to come out of her shell.

Another unexpected bonus, by the way, was that Lauren suddenly became robustly healthy, with not even one bout of sniffles all year.

So, what’s a day in the life of a home-schooler like? Since every household is different and there is no set pattern – and no two days are ever alike anyway, I can’t give a conclusive answer to this question. For what it’s worth, however, here’s what Sally Brown and her daughter Jessica (aged 12) did last Tuesday.

7:45 am	Arthur and Scott (aged 16) left the house. Sally worked on a free-lance journalism assignment.
9:30 am	Jessica staggered out of her room, having just awakened.
10:15 am	Sally and Jessica started in on academics: math (algebra), grammar (diagramming sentences), spelling (words with silent letters), history (Roman civilization), French (conjugating verbs). In between, Sally cleaned up the kitchen, put in a load of laundry, made a casserole for dinner, watered the plants, etc.

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1:30 pm	Sally played tennis at the neighbourhood centre while Jessica had her swimming lesson and hung out with friends. Afterwards, they played a short mother-daughter game of tennis with Jessica's best friend and her mother.
3:30 pm	Sally dropped Jessica off for choir practice while she ran a few errands.
4:30 pm	Jessica read and talked to her friends on MSN while Sally worked on the next home-schoolers' newsletter and organized dinner.
7:30 pm	Jessica worked on her entry in the home-schoolers' essay contest, while Sally helped Scott with his homework and talked to Arthur.

Let's say you have decided to home-school Jack and Jill. Run, do not walk, to the telephone and call your local home-schooling network or networks (some areas have more than one). The easiest way to find the network(s) is to call up someone who is already home-schooling – if you don't know anyone, just ask around. Home-schooling is far more common than you may think. Alternatively, you can Google home-schooling.

Home-schoolers, for some reason, are incredibly well organized and resourceful. They lobby governments, support a legal defence association, put out newsletters, help each other, arrange joint activities for their children, and have a good time while they're doing it. Some home-schoolers pool their resources and teach each others' children cooperatively. A few even charge fees for teaching a group of home-schooled children (including their own). Home-schooling offers great flexibility.

To give you an idea of what these stay-at-home moms can achieve, let me tell you about a little conference staged by a group of home-schoolers in my area. They started small in 1993 – only 225 visitors and 12 exhibitors came that year. The next year, they

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attracted more than 300. Now, they attract more than 1000 people annually, not counting the scores of presenters, organizers, and exhibitors. The conference includes seminars and workshops on all aspects of home-schooling, as well as displays by educational vendors.

Attending a conference like this is an excellent way of finding good teaching materials. Talking to other home-schoolers is another: frequently, they pool their material and keep costs down that way. A third way is to consult a book like *Mary Pride's Complete Guide to Getting Started in Homeschooling*. Mary Pride also publishes an excellent and very readable magazine called *Practical Homeschooling*. In addition, Educators Publishing Service offers a number of excellent but inexpensive workbooks. The problem is not finding high-quality materials, but rather zeroing in on a few appropriate ones.

One special teaching tool is the computer. I'm going to assume you already have one in your home. There are two main ways that computers can help to reinforce and enrich your program, although there's nothing that can replace you, the teacher.

The first way involves computer software (programs) which you can buy or borrow. There are literally thousands of educational programs on the market – and some are considerably better than others. Once again, Mary Pride is on top of the situation with up-to-date reviews in *Practical Homeschooling*.

There is computer software available to help you teach everything from soup to nuts – from a cute little game which teaches your preschoolers the ABC's to highly-sophisticated logic and analysis programs for university students. Some, called shareware, are free or cost only a few dollars, while others can be priced at several hundred dollars. It is therefore essential that you become a discriminating buyer, picking and choosing with care. Always insist on a demonstration before you make up your mind to buy.

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Educationally-speaking, you should feel no obligation to rush children into computer use. After all, those of us who are over 30 had to learn to use them as adults, and some of us are pretty handy despite our “late” start. In any case, computer software is becoming more and more user-friendly, and it’s now possible to pick up the rudiments of most applications in a few minutes.

My own inclination, therefore, would be to go easy on computer exposure when your kids are little. You may want to have a few simple programs around so that your under-tens can practise academic skills like their times tables. After all, computers can cut down the need for flashcards and workbooks and make the inevitable drudgery less painful. I also highly recommend that you avoid stocking up on *non*-educational games, as their glittering fascination for most kids tends to cause educational software to gather dust.

Serious use of computers should not begin until kids are at least 10 or 12. Their first systematic exposure should involve learning the various applications, beginning with keyboarding skills. Too many schools are throwing their primary students into computer use which is over their heads, and so tots are forced to devise survival strategies, like hunt-and-peck typing, which allow them to keep their heads above water at the time – but which may interfere with subsequent learning.

A better way is to begin computer use with a course on touch-typing, following by lessons on your computer’s operating system and the various applications. It would also be a good idea to help young children appreciate the power – and the limitations – of the Internet.

Once the basic skills are in place, computers should be treated like any other tool, like pencils and books, for learning. Avoid the common mistake of encouraging children to use computers just for the sake of using computers. There is no magic attached to the beasts.

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Some pundits are predicting that the Internet and computer technology are going to blow public education as we know it out of the water. This is no doubt an exaggeration, but the potential for home-schoolers is enormous.

Here's another scenario, just to demonstrate that there are all sorts of ways to be a successful home-schooler.

Judy Labate is a very down-to-earth, common-sense type of person. When her daughter Natalie kept saying she wasn't learning anything in kindergarten, Mrs. Labate decided to check it out. She was astonished to learn that Natalie was accurately describing the situation. She still has a note of disbelief in her voice when she describes all the little girls mincing around on their high heels and setting the table in the play house. So Natalie didn't go back to school after Christmas.

Back then, Mrs. Labate was brand new to the education scene, and she didn't know a thing about teaching or curriculum – so she did everything the hard way. Apart from buying *Sing Spell Read & Write*, a phonics reading program, she made all her own materials and just followed her nose for the first few years. (Many home-schoolers pursue a set course of study, such as the ones prepared by Abeka, Bob Jones, or Calvert.)

Mrs. Labate didn't use their home computer at all in her school. She notes that kids have a great time pressing buttons and getting instant fun, and she is sceptical about how much solid learning is picked up in the process. Mrs. Labate figures that children need the discipline of buckling down to a task and staying with it until it has been properly done. It's hard to argue with her, given how well her kids did.

Natalie's brother Michael, who is two years younger than Natalie, got in on the act before long. When they were tested by the school board in grade 3 and grade 1 respectively, they were already beyond the grade 4 and grade 2 levels.

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The Labates held school three days a week, about five hours a day. They didn't start until October, and they finished up at the beginning of May. At Christmas, they took about three weeks off, and in March – well, they took March break quite literally, taking the whole month off. Three days a week, 24 weeks a year = about 72 days of school a year.

When the local school board asked to visit, Mrs. Labate decided to let them in. (In Ontario at least, home-schoolers are not required to submit to in-home inspection. Since there is no inspection of public schools, it would be hard to make the case that private and home schools should be any different.) School boards can, and very occasionally do, conduct formal inquiries to ensure that home-schooled children are receiving satisfactory instruction.

In theory at least, the school board personnel are there to offer support and helpful advice to home-schoolers. All too often, however, the home-schooling consultants know much less about instruction and curriculum than the home-schoolers they visit. Be that as it may, Mrs. Labate reports that her visitors were quite impressed by Michael and Natalie's progress.

And so we come to the end of the line. No more options. I wish I could tell you to read on to learn about all the free, effective, and responsive school just down the street from you, but you'd likely have to move to Alberta for that to happen. The only way we're going to get a lot of effective schools in Ontario is by embarking on wholesale education reform. More on how to go about this in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 8**

### **A Better Future for All Children**

Up to this point, my goal has been to provide information to parents who want to help their own children. The fact that you have persevered this far in my book shows you are willing to do whatever is necessary to rescue your child. He or she is lucky.

Unfortunately, not all children are this lucky. In Ontario alone, every year tens of thousands of children struggle in school. Although their parents desperately want to help their children, they don't know what to do.

It shouldn't be this hard!

There is an urgent need to modify the system to make it really easy for parents to help their kids. Even recent immigrants. Even poor parents. Even illiterate parents. Even single parents. Their children deserve the same access to a decent education as the children of resourceful parents like you.

Of course, the best way to help these kids is to make schools better. Everyone agrees on this. But opinions vary as to the best way to improve schools.

#### **More Money**

Many people think that what the schools need is more money, but few people realize that this theory has already been tested. In Kansas City, MO, a judge forced the city to spend nearly two billion dollars on its schools between 1985 to 1999.

With this money, the school board went on a spending spree. Among other things, it bought 15 new schools, higher teacher salaries, an Olympic-size swimming pool with an underwater viewing room, television and animation studios, a robotics lab, a 25-acre wildlife sanctuary, a zoo, a model United Nations with simultaneous translation capability, and field trips to Mexico and Senegal. The student-teacher ratio was lowered to 13 to 1.

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Despite all this spending however, test scores did not rise, the black-white gap did not diminish, and there was less, not more, integration. I admit that the Kansas City experiment is an extreme case, but its failure is similar to those of other jurisdictions that have tried to spend their way to better educational results.

### **More Accountability**

Other people think that the best way to improve schools is to bring in tough accountability measures, like a rigorous curriculum, high-stakes testing, and standardized reporting. These things too have been tried and, although they have had somewhat greater success than increased spending, accountability measures are at best a partial solution.

In Ontario, for example, the Mike Harris government brought in all of the accountability measures mentioned above – and then some. And the measures did seem to yield a modest improvement in student achievement.

But even before the Harris government was voted out of office, the mice started to get at their accountability measures. Ten years later, most of them had been neutralized: the curriculum and testing had been dumbed down; the school councils were mostly pussy cats; the Ontario College of Teachers had been captured by the teachers' unions; and teacher testing had been scrapped.

Ontario's experience is, alas, typical. Accountability measures, by themselves, are simply not enough to generate significant, lasting improvement.

### **School Choice**

Fortunately, there is a third way, and it is being used successfully in a number of countries around the world, such as Chile, Australia, many European countries and even parts of Canada. This third way takes into account the fact that most parents have no choice but to send their children to the neighbourhood school assigned by their school board.

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It's a funny thing. Most people understand that competition is a good thing when it comes to businesses, and even quasi-governmental institutions like the post office or the liquor store. Everyone knows that monopolies are unresponsive, inefficient, and expensive. We like the competition among drug stores, veterinarians, and cookie manufacturers because it means we get excellent service from these sectors.

However, for some reason, most people think that, even though it's bad to have a monopoly if you're selling software or providing banking services, it's okay to have a monopoly if you're providing education services.

But there isn't really any reason to think that the education sector is exempt from the forces that apply to the other sectors of the economy. An education monopoly behaves just like any other monopoly. In an education monopoly, public schools have a guaranteed stream of students and the funding they generate. It doesn't matter whether a school is doing a good job or a poor job – all schools receive the same amount of funding regardless of their level of service.

Even schools that are doing a horrible job can and do continue to short-change their students indefinitely. They literally have no incentive to improve their service. But things change dramatically when competition is introduced to the education sector. Other countries have more competition than Ontario, and their student achievement is better. Even within Canada, there are differences.

Back in the late eighties and then again in the mid-nineties, the province of Alberta introduced legislation designed to increase the amount of educational competition. At first, the Calgary school board chose to turn its back on the changed educational landscape and tried to carry on with business as usual. As a result, Calgary parents started withdrawing their children from the public schools and sending them to the various alternatives that had now become available.

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In spite of the fact that the city was growing, the Calgary school board began to hemorrhage students and was forced to close one school after the other. Finally, things got so bad that the Calgary school board did a complete about-face and introduced dramatic improvements, creating new schools to compete with the rival schools. Not surprisingly, many of the newly-created schools resembled the competition.

For example, to compete with a rival all-girls school, the Calgary public board started up an all-girls school of its own. The board also started a special science school similar to a school that was siphoning off a lot of its students, and fully five schools that used the very popular traditional approach used at the competing Foundations for the Future Charter School. These days, no surprise, the Calgary board is boasting that its enrolment is climbing.

The more school choices there are, the easier it is for parents to find schools that meet their children's needs. The beauty of it is – not only is school choice good for the students who choose alternative schools, but it's also good for the students who stay behind. Their schools improve too, because they are forced to offer a "competitive" service.

- The province of Alberta offers its parents the most school choice in Canada. Its students have the best academic achievement.
- BC and Quebec have the next most school choice in Canada. Their students have the second- and third-best academic achievement.
- The Atlantic provinces have the least amount of school choice, and their students have the worst academic achievement.

The only people who can bring in more school choice are our provincial elected representatives. Unfortunately, these individuals are often unwilling to stick their necks out (thereby antagonising the powerful education lobby) unless they are convinced that it will translate into a lot of votes.

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It pays politicians to be cautious, since bold policies can be fatal. However, the experience of other jurisdictions shows that carefully-crafted education reform policies can be winning strategies.

In Sweden, for example, a right-wing government introduced a voucher system in 1991, enabling free choice among public and private schools. This policy was so popular that the succeeding Social Democratic government found it impossible to withdraw it, despite its previously-held scorn for private schools.

Many governments around the world have introduced similar policies. In addition, some North American governments are starting to cautiously introduce more school choice, but progress is slow – due primarily to the power and determination of vested interests like the teachers' unions, the school boards, and the faculties of education.

It will probably take the united voices of thousands of parents before a North American government will have the courage to take the plunge – and therein lies the rub. Many of today's parents and teachers are young enough to have been educated in child-centred schools and so, educationally-shortchanged themselves, they have no idea how much more students could be learning in school.

Even so, people are starting to realize there is a problem. A recent survey by the Canadian Education Association found that just six percent of Canadians give their schools an A. Less than half say they have a lot of confidence in public schools.

Despite this lack of confidence however, few parents are urging their elected representatives to bring in radical reforms – because they are successfully gagged by the very educational problems which they would like to protest. You see, their priority has to be rescuing their own kids.

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Consider Debbie Drainie. After going through a year of pure hell, she finally found a better public school for her daughter – but there was a catch.

The new school was so popular that it didn't have space for students from outside the area; so the Drainie family had to sell their much-loved home and move to a new house in the school's catchment area. Because this new house was quite expensive (due partly to the school's good reputation), Mrs. Drainie had to pitch in and help with the family business. She would love to work for education reform, but she can't spare the time.

Neither can Susan Taylor – since she puts all her energies into home-schooling her two children. And then there is Mrs. Legion (a pseudonym) who is afraid to speak out lest her children's teachers take it out on her kids. If Mrs. Drainie, Mrs. Taylor, and Mrs. Legion, and all their friends and relatives, could find the time and the courage to speak up, the resulting outcry would wake the dead (and maybe even the government too).

The power of public indignation is considerable, as witness Rogers' total capitulation when it tried to mess with its customers' cable services. Too bad people don't care as much about their kids' education as they do about their TV shows!

Perhaps you would be willing to add your voice to the protest? If you live in Canada, your first step would be to gather information by visiting the web-site of the Society for Quality Education (SQE) ([www.societyforqualityeducation.org](http://www.societyforqualityeducation.org)). This organization, which I have the honour to serve as president, has the goal of improving student learning in Canada. SQE is based in Ontario, but it has contacts throughout Canada, the US, and internationally.

You can sign up for SQE's terrific on-line newsletter, which frequently contains teaching tips and information about good teaching materials. SQE's newsletter archives are a treasure trove of similar information. And SQE's blog is a terrific read!

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SQE is seeking:

- Public schools which reflect the will of parents and other stakeholders;
- Objective and truly-standardized testing for each grade, with publication of results;
- Wide dissemination of information about effective instructional techniques, especially in the course of pre-service and in-service teacher training; and
- The ability of parents and teachers to choose from an array of public and private schools with a wide variety of orientations.

If you agree with these goals, you can help by talking to other people, including your provincial member of parliament. You can also write letters to the editor and call radio phone-in shows. Additional copies of this book are available free of charge by telephoning toll-free 888-856-5535 (416-231-7247) or by sending an e-mail to [info@societyforqualityeducation.org](mailto:info@societyforqualityeducation.org).

If the current system is allowed to continue, our grandchildren are going to need help too. Change takes time and effort. Can you afford to wait?

## **How to Teach – General Principles**

Here are the general principles parents should keep in mind when teaching any new skill or knowledge. There is nothing earth-shattering in what follows – just common sense principles that you will immediately recognize as being right.

Not surprisingly, most parents apply these principles instinctively when teaching their kids to ride a bike or the names of flowers. For some reason however, many parents subconsciously place schoolwork in a different category. Learning is learning, however.

### **Go Step by Step**

All learning can be broken down into steps. This is true for all learning and all learners; however, the size of the steps will vary according to the learner's various attributes: aptitude, maturity, motivation, previous exposure, and so forth. You would never expect a child to learn to swim in one session. Rather, you would break the learning down into steps – getting comfortable in the water, putting his face in, floating on his stomach, kicking his legs, and so forth. Similarly, whether teaching spelling or the periodic table, you should split the topic up into steps. It is best to start with very small steps, as this builds up the learner's confidence. You can always increase the size of the steps as you go along.

### **One New Concept at a Time**

It is very difficult for learners of any age to assimilate more than one new concept at a time. Consider how well you do yourself when your tennis instructor tells you to change three things about your serve – or your son shows you three new things on the computer. So resist the temptation to throw in that neat shortcut or correct how your student holds his pencil. One thing at a time!

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### ***How to Teach – General Principles***

#### **Correct Sequence**

You should begin with the easiest step (getting comfortable in the water), and progress to the next logical step once this has been mastered. If your student is already comfortable in the water, you can immediately move to the next step — and the next and the next, until you reach the first step which gives your student difficulty.

#### **Clear Presentation**

To give your student the best chance of mastering the day's lesson, the new concept should be taught with great clarity and simplicity. If there is any ambiguity, your student may be frustrated or reach the wrong conclusion and actually be worse off after the lesson than he was before it — because now he will have to unlearn the misunderstanding before he can proceed. Far better to get it right the first time! After the lesson has been taught, immediately check to make sure that the student has grasped the new concept accurately.

#### **Practise, Practise, Practise**

In order for new learning to be retained, it must be practised to the point of overlearning and then integrated with old learning. It is normal for new learning to be forgotten by the next day. Simply reteach the new concept — it will probably come back quickly. Frequent, short sessions, separated in time, are best.

#### **Feedback**

Immediate correction of mistakes is a powerful teaching tool. If students are not monitored while they work, they can easily repeat the same mistake over and over again, thereby engraving the mistake on their brains and making it harder to unlearn. Positive feedback is even more powerful, and you should be making every

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effort to ensure your student mostly succeeds (at least an 85% accuracy rate). That's why you start with easy work and take small steps. Reinforcements can include verbal praise, showing off to Grandma, progress graphs, stickers, M&Ms, pennies, a trip to the movies, and so forth. The need for concrete rewards tends to fade as students progress.

All students can learn anything. This means that everyone — including you — can learn to be a good teacher. If you would like advice on how to teach something, please feel free to contact me for advice (519-884-3166, [mdare@sympatico.ca](mailto:mdare@sympatico.ca)). High expectations and good teaching can and does produce seeming miracles. You can do it!

### **Essential Elements of Good Teaching**

- Only one new item should be taught at a time, the student having already mastered all of the prerequisite learning.
- The new item should be explained with great precision and clarity, and the teacher should check frequently to make sure the learner has understood the new concept.
- The student should practise the new learning until it is automatic.
- Frequent, short, separated-in-time sessions are most effective.
- The teacher should check and recheck that the new learning has been remembered later on, as new learning is easily forgotten.
- Old learning should be revisited regularly, ideally in application to and in consolidation with new learning.
- The student should be encouraged and praised.

## *Appendix*

# **How to Teach Your Child to Read**

As far as I'm concerned, there are two categories of reading students – those who have already had some instruction and those who have not. This article applies primarily to the latter category, those who have had no previous instruction.

### **Already Had Instruction**

First, though, a few words about students who have already had some instruction. If that instruction was good enough for them and they are reading fluently, that's wonderful. These students do not need the pearls of wisdom that follow.

However, if a student's reading instruction was not good enough for him and he is struggling with reading, then he needs remedial teaching – and the sooner the better.

Full disclosure – I am the author of a free remedial reading program at [www.societyforqualityeducation.org/stairway.html](http://www.societyforqualityeducation.org/stairway.html). This program includes a placement test that diagnoses students' decoding skills and reading level.

If my free remedial reading program is followed faithfully, every student will learn to read and comprehend everything he could understand if it were read to him. There is a money-back guarantee.

### **No Previous Instruction**

Judging by my experience here in Ontario, it is usually better if students have had no previous instruction. As with so many things, it is very important to start reading off on the right foot. It is at the beginning that several vital habits are established.

The popular Balanced Literacy approach that dominates Canadian publicly-funded schools unfortunately asks beginning readers to read material they are not yet capable of decoding. As a

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result, these students are forced to look at words as a whole, guess at unknown words, and skim reading passages. Bad habits are formed that prove very difficult, sometimes impossible, to break later on.

The Balanced Literacy approach is the equivalent of encouraging a novice tennis player to hit the ball any way he can. He may manage to connect with the ball — even get it back over the net most of the time — but his form is apt to be faulty. The likely result is fossilized bad habits and a disinclination ever to lay the groundwork necessary for advanced performance.

The good habits that make advanced reading possible include processing every letter in every word, reading for exact meaning, and never guessing at unknown words. Students with these habits develop into mature readers for whom reading is as effortless and comfortable as breathing.

The importance of a suitable start to reading instruction has been proven by a seven-year study recently published by two professors (Joyce Watson and Rhoda Johnston) who compared methods of teaching reading in Clackmannanshire, Scotland.

They found that children taught by “synthetic” phonics (a very concentrated version of systematic phonics) were on average three and a half years ahead of their chronological age by the time they were 11. Boys outperformed girls, and the children who made the greatest improvement came from disadvantaged homes. Virtually all students became proficient readers.

These children received their phonics instruction only during their “reception” year (at the age of four). The instruction received by the control group was similar in every respect except for the synthetic phonics at the very beginning.

I believe that the best time to start reading instruction is when children are very young, perhaps as young as three years old.

## Appendix

### ***How to Teach Your Child to Read***

If phonics is presented to young children in a playful (but systematic) way, these preschoolers seem able to absorb the concepts almost organically, learning to read almost as easily and naturally as they learned to talk.

I'm sure I don't need to dwell on the importance of good reading skills in today's world. Without them, students will be unable to get a decent education, needlessly condemned to a marginal existence in a world rich with possibilities.

In Ontario, most parents would be foolish to place their trust in the neighbourhood school, given the prevalence of the Balanced Literacy approach in publicly-funded schools. Reading is just too important.

There are many excellent phonics programs that parents can use to teach young children to read. A few examples are listed below.

Amazingly (given the percentage of people who struggle with literacy), it is actually very easy to teach kids to read (spelling and composition are much harder). It's fun and rewarding and exciting. Go for it!

### **A Partial List of Good Systematic Phonics Materials**

- *The Ordinary Parent's Guide to Teaching Reading*, a book by Jessie Wise and Sara Buffington. [www.ordinaryparents.com](http://www.ordinaryparents.com)
- *Funnix*, a computerized program sold on CDs. [www.funnix.com](http://www.funnix.com)
- *Teach Your Child to Read in Just 10 Minutes a Day*, by Sidney Ledson, a book for teaching very young children.
- *Headsprout*, an interactive computer program with a money-back guarantee. [www.headsprout.com](http://www.headsprout.com)

## **How to Teach Your Child Number Facts**

*It is very important that students develop “number sense”. To be good at math, they need to be completely at ease with numbers, totally fluent. Without this facility, students are constantly forced to interrupt their higher-order thinking because they get bogged down in the mechanical aspects of a problem. Those who have to resort to counting on their fingers or punching buttons on a calculator may well end up thinking they’re “not good with numbers” and may rule out dozens of possible careers.*

*The Ontario curriculum used to stipulate (before its latest dumbing down) that students be able to recall addition and subtraction facts to 18 by the end of grade 2; multiplication and division facts to 49 by the end of grade 3; to 81 by the end of grade 4; and to 144 by the end of grade 5. If your child is not at this level, you might consider teaching him or her at home.*

### **Addition and Subtraction**

As with most new learning, you should break the task up into very small chunks and teach each one in a logical sequence, not proceeding from one to the next until the present chunk has been mastered. Begin by establishing what your child knows already, making sure that learning is solid. Then begin on the next item.

Work on one number family at a time. The associated number facts ( $4 + 1$ ,  $1 + 4$ ,  $5 - 4$ , and  $5 - 1$ ) should be taught together. The number pairs in the 5 family are 5 and 0, 4 and 1, and 3 and 2. For numbers greater than 10, work on only number facts involving single digits (that is, present  $6 + 8 = 14$ , but not  $11 + 3 = 14$  as memorization facts).

Let’s say that your child has a rock-solid command of the number facts up to and including 4. You begin, therefore, with the number facts for 5. To get your child’s attention, place five Smarties in a pile on the table.

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### **How to Teach Your Child Number Facts**

Now move one of the Smarties to the other side of the table. Point out that there are still five Smarties: four in one pile and one in the other. Write  $4 + 1 = 5$  on a dry-erase board or piece of paper. Now move another Smartie from the original pile to the new pile. Talk about how  $3 + 2 = 5$  and write that down. Repeat until all the Smarties are together again. Now repeat the entire procedure, only writing down the related subtraction facts. Now, let your child eat the Smarties.

Next, start practising with (pre-made) flashcards. At first, just work on the 5 family facts, subsequently integrating already-mastered facts like  $2 + 2$  and  $4 - 1$  into the drills. Try to make the flashcard activities fun by holding contests with siblings, having your child try to teach his teddy bear, timing him, letting him test you, and so on. Short, frequent practice sessions (five minutes) are more effective than longer, less frequent sessions.

Another good way to drill these number facts is to create Mad Minute sheets. On a sheet of paper, create a  $6 \times 10$  grid and print in 60 questions involving numbers up to and including the 5 family. Challenge your child to do as many as possible in one minute. Continue with this exercise until he can get all 60 correct in one minute. Graph his scores and let him see his progress.

### **Multiplication and Division**

The same principles that apply to addition and subtraction also apply to multiplication and division. First, establish where your child is in the sequence and proceed from there. Don't move on until he has learned the latest chunk thoroughly. With multiplication and division, the sequence is the 1 times family, then the 2 times family, and so on. Let's say your child has a command of the number facts up to and including the 5 times family. You begin, therefore, with the 6 times family.

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### **How to Teach Your Child Number Facts**

Show your child a grid of the facts he is setting out to master (if your child is in grade 4, for example, use a  $9 \times 9$  grid). Highlight the number facts he already knows. He will probably be surprised to see that there aren't all that many left to be learned.

Grade 4 students who know their facts up to and including the 5 family, for example, have only 16 sets of facts to go.

Turning to the 6 family, help your child to print the multiplication facts from  $6 \times 1 = 6$  through to  $6 \times 9 = 54$  on a dry-erase board. Taking each of the nine facts in turn, elicit from your child the related number facts (for example, for  $6 \times 4$ , they are  $4 \times 6$ ,  $24 \div 6$ , and  $24 \div 4$ ). Write these facts in three additional columns beside the original column.

Now introduce the (pre-made) 6-family multiplication and division flashcards and practise for a short time. As with addition and subtraction, make the sessions short, frequent, and snappy. Keep changing up the pace with Mad Minutes, contests, chanting the tables, games, timings, and so on. Once the 6 family is known well, add the earlier facts to the mix.

If a particular fact, let's say  $6 \times 6$ , is giving your child a lot of trouble, make that the fact of the day. Try to think of ways to attach this fact to the Velcro in your child's brain. For example, the number of combinations possible when you roll two dice is 36 ( $6 \times 6$ ). Try a silly poem, for example — "Got no lice, got no nits, six times six is 36". Point out that 36 contains a 6. For the 9 family, there are several ways to help students remember, including using the symmetrical and palindromic nature of the products (18, 27, 36, 45, 54, 63, 72, 81), all of which add to nine ( $1 + 8 = 9$ ,  $2 + 7 = 9$ , etc.).

As well, there are lots of free on-line computer games that you can find by Googling. Continue to practise the tables until the students' responses are automatic, instantaneous and accurate.

## *Appendix*

# **How to Teach Your Child to Print**

One of the many casualties of child-centred learning is penmanship. When it is left up to young children to “discover” how to hold their pencils and form their letters, they frequently come up with some very unfortunate solutions. One young student, for example, solved his problems with the letter “r” by printing an “n” and then erasing the unwanted section. Regrettably, this slowed down his printing quite a bit.

The way students grip their pencils is also important. To see the surprisingly wide range of methods out there, watch how young tellers and waiters wield their pens these days. Students with unorthodox pencil grips are at a disadvantage when the time comes to write three-hour exams. They are not able to write as quickly or as legibly, and they are more prone to muscle cramping. The “tripod” grip is the correct way to grasp a pencil (or crayon), and it should be taught to very young children when they first begin to make marks on paper.

The pencil should be positioned so that there is equal pressure between the thumb, the side of the middle finger, and the tip of the index finger. There are many excellent web-sites with tips on good pencil-holding practices. One example is [www.drawyourworld.com](http://www.drawyourworld.com). This web-site, along with many stationery stores, sells “pencil grips”, inexpensive training tools that can be attached to pencils. As with so many other things, it is much easier to get it right the first time. Students who have been allowed to establish a non-tripod pencil grip may resist breaking their bad habit, but it is definitely worth the effort.

Once a good pencil grip has been established, the student is ready to begin learning correct letter formation. The same principles apply: correct letter formation is important for speed, comfort, and legibility; and it is better to get it right the first time.

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### ***How to Teach Your Child to Print***

Once again, there are many good web-sites on correct letter formation. Information on the direction the pencil should be travelling in as it forms the various letters can be found at [www.psych-ed.org](http://www.psych-ed.org). This site also offers free downloadable lined paper and worksheets.

In general, students should learn to print letters in the same font as they will see in their beginning reading books. Lower-case letters should be taught before upper-case letters.

Printing should be taught and practised on special lined paper, with four guide lines. The letter “a” will sit in the middle space, while the letter “t” will occupy the top two spaces, and the letter “g” sits in the lower two spaces.

Most straight strokes travel from left to right (the exception being the letter “x”) and from top to bottom. Thus, the letter “b” begins with a downstroke followed by a circle, while the letter “d” is the reverse. (Be sure to separate the introduction of these two letters by at least two weeks to avoid confusion between them.) Letters that involve circles or semi-circles are mostly formed using counter-clockwise motions (the exceptions are “b” and “p”).

The letters should be presented one by one, in combination with their most common sound. If students say each sound while forming its corresponding letter, their acquisition of reading skills is symbiotically speeded up.

There is no agreed-upon best sequence of letter presentation. Since the letter “l” is the easiest one to form, it is a logical one to begin with.

Once the student is proficient at printing “l” correctly, top to bottom, through the top two spaces, saying its sound every time, it is time to introduce another letter. The letter “i” might be appropriate (first a downstroke in the middle space, then a dot in the top space), in combination with its short sound (/ĭ/ as in “pin”).

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### ***How to Teach Your Child to Print***

When mastery has been achieved, the letter “t” might be introduced (first a downstroke through the top two spaces, followed by a shorter stroke from left to right along the second line).

Once the student is solid on all three sounds, blending can begin. With the letters learned so far, the words “it” and then “lit” can be sounded out and written.

If the next letter learned is the letter “o”, for example, the word “lot” could be added. Then “d”, making “dot” and “tot” and “did” possible. And so on.

The exact sequence is unimportant, with the important exception that presentation of the letters “b” and “d” should be separated by at least two weeks, in order to forestall the common confusion between the two. The main thing is that the student learns to form each letter fluently, legibly, and automatically, so that when the time comes to print words he doesn’t have to squander any of his scarce brainpower on mechanical considerations.

Since children typically start making marks on paper long before they get to kindergarten, their parents are likely to be in the best position to ensure that young children get it right the first time.

## **How to Teach Your Child to Spell**

*The words that follow can be used to determine the approximate grade level at which students are spelling. Dictate the words one by one, providing a sentence for each word but no other clues, until the student has spelled four words wrong in a row. Count the number right and use the chart on the next page to determine the student's approximate grade level.*

1. can	26. arrange
2. top	27. perhaps
3. good	28. search
4. six	29. publication
5. make	30. treasure
6. belong	31. total
7. soft	32. examination
8. that	33. really
9. sick	34. invitation
10. alike	35. minute
11. card	36. relief
12. stay	37. expense
13. easy	38. apparent
14. track	39. evidence
15. able	40. secretary
16. point	41. sincerely
17. collect	42. bicycle
18. picture	43. committee
19. bridge	44. employees
20. carry	45. perceived
21. aboard	46. orchestra
22. objection	47. enthusiasm
23. address	48. acquaintance
24. vacation	49. privilege
25. importance	50. proficiency

## Appendix

### *How to Teach Your Child to Spell*

#### Results at Mid-School Year

Grade Level	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Words Correct	11	18	24	30	35	39	42	44
With permission from Paul B. Hinds, <i>Reading: The First Domino</i>								

If your student tests out below grade level, you may wish to work on spelling with him at home. Since many school systems play down the importance of correct spelling until senior high school (when the boom is often lowered with no warning), it may prove quite difficult to convince your student of its importance.

It is true that correct spelling is beside the point on MSN or when handing in assignments to teachers who don't require accurate spelling. Nevertheless, correct spelling turns out to be *very* important for such things as university essays, computer instructions, and job applications. Furthermore, a good speller has an edge when it comes to written fluency.

In teaching spelling, it is important to keep two basic principles in mind. The first principle is that the goal should be to spell everything correctly the first time, as opposed to setting down the meaning hastily and then going back to edit afterwards. This means that students have to learn spellings to the point of automaticity — leaving them free to devote 100% of their brain power to the content of what they are writing. As long as students are unsure of a word's spelling, they will be forced to squander some of their precious mental desk space on mechanical details.

Words that have been learned for spelling dictation have not necessarily been learned to automaticity. Often, the word that was reproduced beautifully on Friday morning's spelling dictation will turn up misspelled on Friday afternoon's composition. This is an indication that more teaching and practice is needed.

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The second basic principle is the importance of immediate feedback. Every time a student writes something, he should be required to correct his mistakes right away — as soon as the misspelled word has been written, if possible. Prompt feedback is the most powerful teaching tool there is.

There are many good workbooks for teaching spelling. I usually recommend the Hayes workbooks: *Spelling Skills & Drills, Grades 1 to 8*, available from Artel Educational Resources Ltd., 800-665-9255. [www.arteducational.ca](http://www.arteducational.ca). Start with the workbook one grade BELOW your student's tested level. At only about \$5.00 each, these workbooks are a bargain.

The Hayes workbooks follow an orderly progression and help to provide Velcro in students' brains to give the correct spelling something to stick to. The workbooks teach such things as word patterns, roots, pronunciation, and homonyms. One minor problem with the Hayes workbooks is that they sometimes require students to correct deliberate misspellings. Since this is counter-productive (we should always be reinforcing the correct spelling), these exercises should be skipped.

Spelling improvement is a long-term project, but it definitely pays off in the end.

## *Appendix*

### **How to Teach Your Child Mapwork**

The year my daughter was in grade 6, I educated her at home. During that year, she learned many things, but the area in which she felt she made the most progress and about which she was proudest, was – mapwork!

Near the end of the year, my daughter happened to be playing a board game that required some knowledge of world geography. Her fellow players were public school students and, not to beat about the bush, she slaughtered them. Her victory made her feel really smart, and she later confided to me that she used to feel stupid because she didn't know where things were in the world. She had assumed this was the sort of thing that smart people just naturally knew.

These days, amazingly few public schools teach kids where things are in the world. The general feeling seems to be that it's unimportant to waste time on memorizing mere facts since they can always be looked up in reference material, like atlases and maps or on the Internet, whenever a specific bit of information is needed,

According to the dominant philosophy, the optimum way to teach geography is to teach students how to find information, as opposed to actually learning it – and, to the extent that geography is taught at all in public schools, research skills are mostly all there is in the curriculum.

As a reading tutor, I daily witness an almost total lack of geographical knowledge on the part of my public school students. Few of my students, for example, can find Canada on a globe. Even though my students' new-found phonics skills enable them to read fairly sophisticated words and stories, their ignorance of geography (along with a lot of other areas of general knowledge) means they are frequently handicapped in terms of comprehension.

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- Because my students have no idea where Spain or India is, they have no way of understanding why Christopher Columbus sailed west or why he was so surprised.
- Some place names, like Mediterranean (middle of the earth) and Mesopotamia (between two rivers) have a rich meaning which is lost on my students.
- My students' comprehension of planetary phenomena, like the destruction of the rain forests or high tides in the Bay of Fundy or earthquakes, is shaky because it depends on geographical understanding.
- The importance of many human creations, like canals and time zones and the Great Wall of China, can't be appreciated by my students because they lack the background.

To give structure to your program, I suggest that you use one of the excellent books available, such as *The Reader's Digest Children's Atlas of World Geography* or *The Kingfisher Children's Atlas* or *Children's World Atlas* (available at major bookstores for \$20 - \$30). It may also be possible to borrow a good beginning atlas from the public library (you can usually renew library books two or three times).

The idea is to find an atlas that systematically introduces the oceans and the continents and gives an overview of the countries in each continent. In addition to being an aid to teaching the political and physical features of the world, these books typically also explain useful conventions such as lines of longitude and latitude, scale, legends, gazetteers, etc.

Daily, or at least frequent, short sessions are best. You might be surprised by how interested your student becomes in the material and, ideally, you will frequently end the day's session with him begging for just a few more minutes.

## *Appendix*

### ***How to Teach Your Child Mapwork***

A globe is another excellent teaching tool. Kids enjoy fooling around with globes, and they are superior to maps in conveying the physical reality of our world – its roundness, its features like oceans and mountains, the continents’ true proportions without the distortions forced by two-dimensional representations.

There are lots of teaching aids available. If you Google “map games”, you will find a wealth of free on-line resources. In addition, many stores, for example Scholar’s Choice, carry map jigsaw puzzles, geographical board and card games, map quizzes, and so forth.

As you progress through the various countries, be on the lookout for ways to enrich and supplement what you are learning. For example, you might rent a movie set in the country du jour. Or borrow a picture book from the library. Or dress up in the country’s national costume for Hallowe’en. Or look for news items about that country in the newspaper or on the television news. Or, if you really like a particular country, why not plan a trip there and involve your student in the planning?

Your goal in teaching geography, as in other curriculum areas, is to create Velcro in the student’s brain for new knowledge to attach itself to. The more cross references and connections, the more likely the student is to remember the information. And, you never know, you may learn a thing or two yourself in the process!

## **How to Teach Your Child Vocabulary**

When it comes to academic preparation, one of the biggest – and most crucial – differences among young children is the size of their vocabularies. To say the same thing another way, the number of words a child knows is closely related to his IQ. Children who start school with impoverished vocabularies are at a terrible disadvantage. Though they may be perfectly capable of learning new things, their limited vocabularies mean that they fail to learn at the same rate as the other children.

Imagine you're in a university class and the professor says: "The pagrates justolize their babies every year." Others nod their heads sagely and write this insight down. You, on the other hand, totally miss the point! While you, an adult, would undoubtedly have the resources to find out what pagrates are and how they go about justolizing, four-year-olds don't have that option. They would just fail to learn this lesson, perhaps concluding that they are not as smart as the other kids and that school isn't what it's cracked up to be.

The easiest way to save young children from this fate is to give them rich vocabularies. The average child learns about 3,000 new words per year. So what can parents and teachers do to make sure that their students continue to add eight or nine new words to their vocabularies every day?

### **Talk to Your Children**

Whenever possible, draw children into conversation. Don't use baby talk or talk down, but rather use your full vocabulary. Encourage the children to respond in kind. It is important to expose them to many different kinds of experiences (going to museums, playing baseball, walking in the park, travelling to other places). During the outings and afterwards, talk things over using precise terms to describe what you saw and did.

## Appendix

### ***How to Teach Your Child Vocabulary***

#### **Read to Your Children**

Another excellent way to build vocabulary and general knowledge is for children to hear interesting stories that contain words and information they are unlikely to encounter otherwise. Reading to children is important because it exposes them to new words and knowledge – not because it will magically teach them to read. Stories should be at a challenging level and should continue as long as the children are receptive to being read to. There are several excellent books, such as those by Jim Trelease, that suggest suitable reading material. Alternatively, consult the children’s librarian at your local public library.

#### **Teach Your Child to Read Early**

Avid readers pick up new words through their voluminous reading, through chance encounters in the text. Reluctant readers become even more reluctant, as their meagre vocabulary undermines their efforts to understand what they are struggling to read. The best strategy is to teach young children to read before they start school. Sidney Ledson outlines an excellent program in his book: *Teach your Child to Read in Just Ten Minutes a Day*. Whatever method is used, it must have systematic phonics as its basis. Young children who are taught phonics are far more likely to become fluent, at-ease-with-print readers and spellers than children subjected to whole-word methods.

#### **Teach Your Child New Words**

New vocabulary can be explicitly taught – word of the day, word games, word roots, prefixes and suffixes, etc. As well, there are lots of fun games that kids can play on the Internet, such as those at [www.vocabulary.co.il/index\\_main.php](http://www.vocabulary.co.il/index_main.php). Educators Publishing Service ([www.epsbooks.com](http://www.epsbooks.com)) offers some terrific vocabulary workbooks called *Wordly Wise 3000*.

## **How to Teach Your Child Care and Precision**

Modern approaches to teaching kids to read, such as Balanced Literacy and its ugly stepmother Whole Language, deem it acceptable for students to construct an “approximate” meaning from the text they are reading. This means that it is fine for a student to read “pony” instead of “horse”, since the student has got the gist of the passage.

Similarly, students are encouraged to believe that the content of their compositions is much more important than their spelling, punctuation, and grammar. In mathematics, wrong answers are often not penalized, provided the student was using the right strategy and just got bogged down in the arithmetic.

It is obvious to most normal people that these practices are ridiculous.

- Even beyond the fact that reading “pony” instead of “horse” harms students’ decoding skills, it is clearly better for children to access the author’s exact words and pick up any nuances.
- Compositions that are riddled with spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors are very difficult for readers to understand. After all, the whole point of writing things down is to communicate with others!
- Understanding the process but getting the arithmetic wrong can be downright dangerous. A mistake might mean that a building will fall down or a patient receive too much medication.

Fuzzy teaching approaches are troublesome in that they harm students’ academic achievement. But there are further implications when it comes to the habits and attitudes that students develop regarding hard work, accuracy, and precision. It’s bad enough if a student is unable to produce high-quality work, but it’s even worse if that student is unwilling to make the effort necessary to *become* able to produce high-quality work.

## Appendix

### ***How to Teach Your Child Care and Precision***

Tending to think that their teachers know more than their parents, children generally accept their teachers' pronouncements as infallible. This makes it very difficult for parents to challenge the teaching approach *du jour*.

Moreover, there is something very appealing about doing things the easy way, guessing instead of working through it, and then getting a pat on the back even though it's a lacklustre performance. Convincing a child that the teacher is wrong about the value of slapdash work is like persuading him to eat broccoli and cod liver oil when all his friends drink pop and chew gum.

As adults, however, most of us are well aware of the importance of hard work and high standards. We know that authors and musicians spend years polishing their work. We trust our lives to the professionalism of pilots and surgeons. We realize that computers won't obey our instructions if a single letter is wrong.

Even though sloppiness is acceptable in school, the rules do change somewhere along the line. Kids who start out thinking that it's okay to be careless ultimately have a cruel awakening. Suddenly, they have to break the habits of a lifetime.

Many parents see this problem clearly. They know that it will be easier on children in the long run if they are started off on the right foot, with an emphasis on accuracy and high standards from kindergarten on. So what can a caring parent do to buck the trend? Here are a few ideas.

#### **Pick Your Children's Teachers**

Each year, try to pull strings to get your children placed in the classes of the most rigorous teachers at the school. They do exist.

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### ***How to Teach Your Child Care and Precision***

#### **Keep on Mentioning It**

Whenever the opportunity arises, point out to your children how someone suffered because of a lack of precision — for example, the counterfeiters who got caught because they spelled “dollar” wrong, or the airplane that ran out of fuel in midair because of confusion over conversion to metric.

#### **Walk Your Children through the Steps**

Inspect your children’s homework every night and insist that it always be done to a high standard.

#### **Bring in Role Models**

Arrange for other people to emphasize the importance of accuracy to your children, for example the accountant who calculates your taxes, or a university student who has been confounded by new expectations.

#### **Provide Tutoring**

Since it’s unfair to expect kids to achieve excellence without the necessary tools, ensure that your kids acquire the basic skills such as spelling, grammar, arithmetic, punctuation, and essay writing.

#### **Be a Role Model Yourself**

Always demand high standards of yourself, and you may be sure that your children will see that others respect you as a result.

Even if your children don’t immediately acknowledge the validity of what you are saying, you can be sure that a seed has been planted. Some day, it will bear fruit!

## *Appendix*

# **How to Help Your Child with Too-Hard Homework**

Homework has the potential to leverage teachers' limited lesson time. Let's say a teacher can spend only 30 minutes teaching her class how to add fractions with like denominators. Regardless of how good a teacher she is, it is unlikely that all of her students will be able to fully absorb this lesson and remember it the next day.

But if the teacher assigns an hour of homework devoted to this concept, then the extra practice means that it is much more likely that the students will be able to correctly add fractions with like denominators the next day. Certain conditions apply, however.

The best homework provides practice only on material that has already been taught (no new wrinkles, like problems involving adding fractions with unlike denominators). Also, it is important that students actually do the homework, and so compliance must be rigorously monitored. Lastly, homework must be corrected as soon as possible, so that students' errors are nipped in the bud before misunderstandings are solidified by repetition. A further virtue of timely correction is that the teacher can find out right away if yesterday's lesson was ineffective, in time to reteach it if necessary.

When the homework tool is used well, as outlined above, it is very valuable. Unfortunately, few faculties of education inform their students about the nature of good homework. Unaware of how to get maximum advantage from it, many teachers do not monitor compliance. Even if they ensure that their students complete their homework, many teachers do not correct it right away. But these are minor flaws compared to the mistake of homework that is not an extension of what the students have already learned.

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Not only do many teachers not use homework to consolidate the day's lesson, but also in some cases they assign projects that are far beyond most of their students' capabilities. For example David, a struggling grade 4 boy, was asked to read two novels by a particular author, an early novel and a late novel, and then write an essay on how the author's style had evolved. Clearly, this teacher was counting on the parents to help out (they did).

In this situation, parents are damned if they do and damned if they don't. If the parents do help with a too-difficult project, the teacher is misled about what the student is really capable of, thereby encouraging the teacher to continue to assign inappropriate homework. As well, the joint homework sessions can be quite stressful and eat up time that all parties would rather spend in a different way. The amount of actual learning on the part of the student is often questionable. On the other hand, if parents don't help out with the project, the student may get a bad mark and be embarrassed in front of his friends.

There is, unfortunately, no perfect solution to this dilemma. In the real world, most parents prefer not to rock the boat and so they compromise by providing massive help but leaving enough of the work to the child that the final product looks like his own stuff. This allows the teacher to think it was a good project because it induced the student to produce work that is over his head.

With all its disadvantages, the compromise approach is probably the best. There is no reason, however, why a parent couldn't send a note along with the completed project explaining that Johnny tried hard to compose the sonata for woodwinds, but needed quite a bit of help. If enough parents gave this kind of feedback to teachers, it might make them think twice about assigning their grade 3 class that project on recombinant DNA. It might also be helpful to hand teachers the information that follows.

## Appendix

### ***How to Help Your Child with Too-Hard Homework***

#### ***What Works:***

#### ***Research about Teaching and Learning***

***Student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign homework and students conscientiously do it.***

Extra studying helps children at all levels of ability. One research study reveals that when low-ability students do just one to three hours of homework a week, their grades are usually as high as those of average-ability students who do not do homework. Similarly, when average-ability students do three to five hours of homework a week, their grades usually equal those of high-ability students who do no homework.

Homework boosts achievement because the total time spent studying influences how much is learned. Low-achieving high school students study less than high achievers and do less homework. Time is not the only ingredient of learning, but without it little can be achieved.

***Well-designed homework assignments relate directly to class work and extend students' learning beyond the classroom. Homework is most useful when teachers carefully prepare the assignment, thoroughly explain it, and give prompt comments and criticism when the work is completed.***

To make the most of what students learn from doing homework, teachers need to give the same care to preparing homework assignments as they give to classroom instruction.

When teachers prepare written instructions and discuss homework assignments with students, they find their students take the homework more seriously than if the assignments are simply announced.

Students are more willing to do homework when they believe it is useful, when teachers treat it as an integral part of instruction, when it is evaluated by the teachers, and when it counts as a part of the grade. ***U.S. Department of Education***