

## **Study smarts**

By Randy Ray

As most parents know, convincing a child or teenager to study for a test or exam can be a frustrating exercise.

Kids will come up with any number of excuses, including: “It’s music, there’s nothing to study” or “I’ll study at school” or “It’s an open-book test, what’s the point of studying?”

Despite the importance of doing well to show teachers and parents they have a grip on their material, the fact is, most students don’t like to study and many don’t know how.

An educator once told me that about half of all students who enter Grade 9 don’t know how to study and those who do pore over their books for long hours but go about it the wrong way. Needless to say, it shows up in their marks and is likely to affect their performance at college or university.

The educator, a veteran of the local school system, said students have trouble with studying for two reasons: The elementary system has provided them with little specific instruction on study techniques, and many teens are distracted by part-time jobs, video games, social networking and sports.

So what’s a parent to do when kids shun their books and notes in the days and weeks leading up to a quiz, test or exam?

Elska Malek, Language Enrichment Coordinator at Elmwood School, a Junior kindergarten to Grade 12 independent school for girls, where tests take place one or twice a month per subject, says job one for students is to know the format of the test they are studying for, such as multiple choice, true or false, or essay-length questions.

Knowing that, they can develop a study strategy, she says, such as use of cue cards for multiple choice style tests and writing out answers for tests that will demand detailed essay-type answers.

Malek suggests students, with the help of their parents, should develop a time management schedule that clearly points out the date of upcoming tests, work

required prior to writing day, and time needed to study for each. The schedule should be in a chart that breaks the week prior to the test into an hour-by-hour schedule.

“This allows the student to see what she has to do and how many times. Often, students feel overwhelmed by big tests and the time needed. By putting it all down on paper, they can see it and have a sense of control,” she says.

Malek, and fellow educator Deborah Gutierrez, principal at Fernhill School, an independent school catering to students from nursery school to Grade 3, agree parents must get involved in the process of studying.

“Parents should check in with the student and know what kind of information will be asked on a test,” says Malek, who advises parents to avoid peppering their kids with questions out of the blue.

“Doing rapid fire questioning in the car can undermine the studying a student has already done. Parents should get a sense where the child is at and let her know ahead of time that they want to take part in studying... rather than coming out of left field (with questions), mom or dad should make sure they offer help that is needed,” she says.

Gutierrez suggests parents should query their kids on what they have been studying in class and what a particular unit is all about. At that point, she feels it is quite appropriate for parents to use various opportunities to talk about the material that must be learned and do some informal quizzing.

“If you ask questions after the child has studied...and they get the right answers, it builds confidence and it helps with bonding. It also shows parents where their kids are at in the studying process,” she adds.

Both say parents must play a key role in ensuring their children are comfortable and free of distractions when it is time to study.

Gutierrez says parents should establish routines and stick to them: that means not forcing them to study the minute they arrive home from school but rather allowing them time to unwind and eat a snack before hitting the books. She urges parents to allot a certain amount of time and make sure the kids use it.

Studying can take place anywhere, even at the kitchen table, provided there are no distractions, such as siblings playing video games a few metres away or everyone else in the family watching a Senators game and leaving the student on the outside, says Malek.

Whatever space is chosen should have bright lighting, a large flat surface to lay out study materials, plenty of paper and pens and zero distractions such as computers, I-pods and cell phones. A bed should never be used because most students fall asleep when they're horizontal.

“When studying for a test you need to give it all of your attention,” says Malek. Should kids be allowed to study with their friends?

Yes, says Malek, provided a student has put in a solid session of studying and has a firm grip on the material. “After that they can get together and compare their highlighted notes, consolidate their cue cards and generate more useful material,” she says, noting however, that group studying must be managed and supported by parents to ensure time is used efficiently.

Should extra-curricular activities be postponed when tests are taking place?

It depends on the student, says Malek. If time is properly budgeted and the studying gets done, let your kids attend hockey or piano lessons on the nights leading up to their tests. “If there is a hockey tournament and a test the next day, parents have to draw the line. A student will always want to do everything, so it becomes a balancing act. Academics should come first but I suggest parents and students sit down, draw up a strategy and figure out what works.”

It's not difficult to pinpoint which students study and which don't. Those that do usually achieve grades 25 per cent higher than students who keep their books closed, says Malek.

“Not only do those that study properly get better marks, later in life they are better time managers ... they can wring more hours out of a week and because they are better organized they will get their work done, always knowing they have time for other things. Those that are more organized have more control over life and more confidence,” she says.

*This article originally appeared in the January 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper*