

Understanding our children's school experiences



By Marion Balla, The Adlerian Team

As parents, how much do you know about your child's daily school experiences?

How often do you ask the question "What happened at school today?" and hear the response "Nothing". This is a common occurrence in many households, especially if students are beyond Grade 4. Our children seem to change their attitudes and behaviours about school as they move through the grades. They seem to lose some of their enthusiasm and excitement about learning and have frequent complaints about homework, teachers, friends and the rules they have to follow.

As the new year begins, make a resolution to observe your children's reaction to returning to school, their adjustment in the first month and how they share their experiences with you.

What Canadian children say about school

A World Health Organization study Health Behaviour in School Aged Children completed regular surveys of thousands of students who attended Grades 6, 8, and 10 in eleven countries, including Canada. The survey produced the following messages:

- Canadian students were relatively satisfied with their school experience, with a decline in satisfaction as students moved into higher grades.
- Students perceived that teachers seemed to be less interested in them as a person as they progressed to higher grades. This seemed to correspond with more emphasis on academic achievement and subject specialization in the senior grades of school.
- Girls were more likely than boys to find their classmates kind and helpful.

- One half of the students felt their parents were willing to come to the school to talk to their teachers. This appears to be a decline of parental involvement with students beyond grade 5.
- Students reported that they felt parental expectations were higher than those of teachers. It may also be the case that parents play a larger role in setting unrealistic expectations for students than does the school.
- Safety at school has become a real concern for students. More males than females feel unsafe. It was interesting that as students entered higher grades, both males and females felt safer.
- Bullying behaviour was viewed as a common occurrence with more males being bullied than females. The incidence of bullying was viewed as a particularly harmful behaviour because it has negative implications for both those being bullied and for the bullies. This is a problem requiring immediate attention, according to the students.
- Students are experiencing heightened anxiety and concern about their present and future lives.

Our role as parents

School is hard work for our children. They must juggle multiple expectations from teachers, friends, self and their parents. Each day brings different experiences and challenges. Its important we walk in their shoes and show empathy when they complain about their stresses.

- Imagine a day where you are expected to sit, stand, wait, listen, focus, share, participate, question, read, write, play, communicate, problem solve, build friendships, respect and follow rules, etc..
- Imagine a place where you are working to fit in, accept others, hope they will like and accept you, cope with teasing, noise and possible conflict, manage yourself and others while responding to the demands of a school curriculum.
- Imagine a place where you have to understand the academic requirements, be evaluated by others, and develop life skills to cope with each new challenge.
- Imagine your children's feelings, reactions, behaviours, wishes as they proceed through the day.

- Imagine observing your children as they proceed through a school week, and experiencing their ups and downs, challenges and choices while meeting everyone's requirements.

It's important not to make assumptions that their world is easy even in kindergarten. Learning can be fun but also exhausting. On one day, school can be a positive, inclusive, stimulating experience. The next day, it can also be a frightening, lonely, and stressful experience.

Our work as parents is to listen, observe, visit their world of school and participate where possible. Our work as parents is to support and celebrate their management of school life. Our work as parents is to assist them to express their opinions, their feelings, their issues about school. Our work as parents is to appreciate that the excitement and enthusiasm with which our children start this journey will alter just as our attitudes seems to follow similar patterns in our work lives.

Our work as parents is to monitor our reactions to their school attitude and to prevent minimizing how difficult and stressful their days may be. Our work as parents is to remember our own challenges, fears, insecurities as we faced the external world and thus provide a safe haven where they can relax, refuel and lament about how demanding life can be as they prepare to become our future leaders.

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Please write to us at The Adlerian Centre at 1729 Bank Street, Suite 205, Ottawa K1V 7Z5, call 737-5553 or e-mail info@adleriancentre.com with your suggestions, reactions or ideas for this column.

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