

Homework or Monopoly?: Time, Energy and Priorities

By Arleta James, PCC

This is the third post in our ongoing series of blogs related to Time, Energy and Priorities. The first focused on making time for family dinner—together—as a whole family. The second pointed out the benefits to parents of a good night's sleep.

With school right around the corner, this blog focuses on homework. It is quite common, in families comprised of a child with mental health issues—AD/HD, PTSD, RAD, Bi-Polar Disorder and so on—that reading, writing and arithmetic consume an inordinate amount of after-school time. Parental tempers flare as the child with a history of abuse, abandonment and neglect simply lacks the motivation, compliance, attention or skills to finish calculations, projects and worksheets in a timely manner. Evenings become a battleground. Conflict ensues. Parents are exhausted. Little fun occurs. The typical kids flee to friend's homes or lock themselves in their rooms—they won't be seen until breakfast!



Homework battles require some re-thinking. Let's start with some basic information about what lends to success in adulthood:

- Unless children achieve minimal social competence by about age six, they have a high probability of being at risk throughout life (McClellan & Katz, 1993).
- Indeed, the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not school grades and not classroom behavior, but rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously at risk (Hartup, 1992).
- The risks of inadequate social skills are many: poor mental health, dropping out of school, low achievement, other school difficulties and poor employment history (Peth-Pierce, 2000; Katz & McClellan, 1991).

Overall, social skills top the list of what is needed to achieve a good quality of life as one matures.

In addition:

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

- Social competence is rooted in the relationships that infants and toddlers experience in the early years of their life. Everyday experiences in relationships with their **parents** are fundamental to children's developing social skills (Peth-Pierce, 2000).
- In particular, **parental** responsiveness and nurturance are considered to be key factors in the development of children's social competence (Casas, 2001). Children who have close relationships with responsive **parents** early in life are able to develop healthy relationships with peers as they get older (Peth-Pierce, 2000).

The child who resided in a birth home or orphanage wherein he was neglected and/or abused was consumed with his own survival. Toys there were minimal as was quality adult interaction. This child enters an adoptive family with limited ability to play. The expectation that the adoptee will make a playmate for the children already in the family is quickly shattered. In fact, it is not uncommon that neglected children 8, 10 or 12 years old are still parallel playing. They have not developed the skills to know how to enter a group. They are unable to take turns, lose graciously or play a game according to the rules. They ignore the wants and needs of other children. Frequently, they flit from toy to toy. They are unable to choose an item and sit for a period of time to enjoy the item. Other children simply sit among their toys not knowing exactly what to do with the toys. Their play is often filled with themes of their life experiences.

Often, the first response is to enroll children in an organized sport. In reality, as the aforementioned facts make clear, parents are a child's first playmate. As such, evenings in the home with a traumatized child may be best spent engaged in play—Monopoly, puzzles, Trouble, Uno®, flashlight tag, imaginary play, Legos®, Play Doh, collecting lightening bugs, musical chairs, hide and seek or monster. Making crafts or baking brownies is also a fun, enjoyable activity that requires social engagement. When the son or daughter with a history of complex trauma has learned to play nicely with Mom or Dad; brothers, sisters, classmates and neighborhood kids will find enjoyment in his or her company. Friendships and closer sibling relationships will become possible.

Mothers and fathers may want to consider setting the timer when it comes to homework. Give the child an adequate period of time to complete his assignments. Then, **calmly** pack up the homework and move on. (Actually, most kids, after about three months, will begin to comply with this time period.) Anytime parents cease reacting angrily to homework struggles, the homework is more likely to get finished. Children who have suffered abuse and abandonment fear intimate attachments. Anger makes them feel safe—it creates distance in relationships. The traumatized child thinks, "If I don't get to close, it won't hurt so much when you dump me or hurt me." Poor quality homework or incomplete assignments almost always guarantee an argument. Again, a change in the emotional response of the parent is essential. A calm response increases the level of parent-child attachment. Children who are attached want to do their homework because they want to please their parents.

Parents can also consider various accommodations via a 504 plan or an IEP. For example, a reduced amount of homework may enhance the family atmosphere. If a worksheet contains twenty math problems, likely calculating the answer to ten problems demonstrates an understanding of the concept being covered.

In conclusion, parents want to consider striking a better balance between academics and social skills development. Giggling, joking, teasing and playing are as essential as **and** essential to the three R's