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## For the Love of Learning

By Susan Stiffelman

From the beginning of their lives, children are passionate learners. Dampen a toddler's efforts to explore something that's captured her interest and she will burst into tears or push her way past you to satisfy her curiosity. She wants to know what the dog bone tastes like, discover how far the toilet paper on the roll will unwind, or see what happens when she tries to feed peanut butter to the cat. A child's passion for learning and discovering the world around her is unrivaled as she arrives on Planet Earth, wired to learn everything she can about her environment.

So often, parents notice that their children's interests in learning start to lessen "around the age of five or six." Probably not coincidentally, that's when most children start going to school. As much as we hope our children will enjoy the challenges and joys of their formal education, it doesn't always work out that way. As parents, it's ultimately our responsibility to do everything possible to encourage our children to retain their love of learning, so that they can carry that inborn, confident sense of curiosity into creating a rewarding and satisfying adult life.

Some children naturally feel comfortable in the classroom, and our role as parents may seem simple: supporting them as they fall into step with the teacher's agenda and assignments, helping them infuse their work with creativity, and encouraging them to perform beyond the expectations of school. These kids may develop frustration about school related to boredom. Other children may beg to stay home day after day with one complaint after another, perhaps because they just don't do well in the traditional classroom setting. A challenge of our role as parents is to try to discover the emotions behind our children's resistance. Start by really listening to your child's frustrations and fears about school. Instead of giving advice or arguing about his feelings and opinions about the teacher, class or assignments, focus on these three magic words, "Tell me more." This is a great way to take the first step in helping children with any problem by communicate that you're alongside them and that you're their advocate, rather than their adversary.

Talk about your child's feelings and opinions, and then set aside ten minutes to brainstorm solutions together. Let your child be the scribe and take care to write down every idea, no matter how silly. Let it be a fun process. Encourage both silly and "serious" solutions. If your child says her teacher is too mean or serious, you might suggest that she ask her teacher why she seems so sad. As you discuss the pluses and minuses of each idea, ask your child whether each solution will really solve her problem. Challenge her to come up with a solution that will make her feel better in the long run.

Teachers are often so busy teaching to the group that the needs of many children get overlooked. Nevertheless, seldom is a teacher too busy or unwilling to find some photocopied sheets of homework to encourage a child's interest. A child who asks for what he needs is seldom turned down. The goal is to figure out what the child needs. Encourage your child to find time to talk with his teacher about the solutions you have generated together. Remember that you are in the process of teaching your child how to take responsibility for creating the environment that he or she needs to be successful in the world.

Part of what makes us human is the unique set of passions and talents we possess and it's crucial that children have a chance to shine and manifest their gifts, especially in arenas that aren't included in a traditional classroom curriculum. Teach your child that intelligence is much more than just being good at math or reading, and celebrate their passions and interests. When they see themselves for their uniqueness and take opportunities to express their special gifts, that fierce inborn love of learning stays strong and continues to shine brightly.

### About the Author:

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