

Gradebusters

How Parents Can End
The Bad Grades Battle

STEPHEN SCHMITZ, PH.D.



Baltimore, MD

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*To my mother, Evelyn Schmitz, and my mate,
Patricia Walker—good mothers who have moved
on to lead vibrant and fulfilling lives*

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INTRODUCTION

Self-help books often disappoint the people who buy them. Looking for practical advice and detailed instructions, readers are often introduced to a world of pop psychology, therapeutic introspection, and new-age mysticism, when all they wanted were some simple instructions for fixing a problem. They read on and on, but come away with only vague, flimsy ideas for problem solutions. I have written this book not as a theoretical text, but as a highly practical and usable action plan.

Throughout my years as a counselor and parent trainer, I have been amazed at the degree to which school problems can affect homes and families. Many times, I have dealt with well-meaning parents agonizing over the lethargic school performance of their kids, and fretting endlessly about their child's future career, college, and success. But while participants in my parenting classes often anguished over the bad-grade mess, their children took failure lightly, resenting and complaining about their parents' interference. Tragically, the most responsible parents suffered the greatest, and their homes were filled with arguments, shouting, threats, punishments, and even late night tears, but adolescent attitudes and school grades refused to budge. Finally, parents and I began to share practical ideas about bad grades, and found solutions to the problems surrounding apathetic learners.

I have worked with many sorts of clients: juvenile delinquents, post-incarceration addicts and alcoholics, parents of children with behavioral disorders, abandoned and abused adolescents, disturbed children, teen gangsters, and families of autistic children, among others. Working in educational and therapeutic services is a wonderful and rewarding career. At first, some clients are angry, resentful, and filled with anxiety. Many face seemingly insurmountable emotional and social problems. Others seem downtrodden and despondent, wondering if

there is a reason for living. Months later, I see the same clients again, and I feel like I barely know them. Their eyes sparkle. Their speech is filled with merriment and laughter. They tell me about their successes, victories, and blossoming relationships. Their lives are marked with passion and vigor. Life has become interesting and fun again. They seem truly reborn.

There are failures, too. My daughter recently ran into a client, Roland, whom I had met in a recovery center. Jogging in the park one day, she recognized and approached him. Roland was homeless, confused, and sleeping under the bushes. For several days, I searched the same park for him, but to no avail. I contacted the local shelters—also to no avail. His arrival in my daughter's neighborhood park, and his subsequent mysterious disappearance, still haunt me. I wonder what went wrong in Roland's life to cause his relapse into misery.

Counseling is a high stakes business. People come to a therapist because they are unhappy and want to live joyously. Many clients spend miserable years full of anxiety and turmoil. They never realize that the real source of happiness and contentment lies within. It is the therapist's job to tap into that inner source of contentment.

As a beginner, I arrogantly thought that therapeutic successes were the result of my expertise. I blamed myself and felt responsible for failures like Roland. I saw myself as a sort of psycho-mechanic, capable of removing destructive emotions and installing better ones, like a garage mechanic might take out a leaky radiator and put in a new one.

With experience and maturity, I have come to realize that the client does the work and effects the change. Therapists provide guidance, but clients create their own emotional health.

For clients, the work of change is difficult. Yet, they must be willing

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to produce change if they are to embrace the new, better life they seek. Holding on to old habits, ideas, and values won't work because they are the very mental liabilities that got them into trouble in the first place. Therapists and social workers can often tell which clients are going to make rapid progress because they are the ones who seem ready to accept the necessity of change, regardless of how uncomfortable it may be.

Change is especially difficult for dedicated parents because they are willing to sacrifice and tolerate anything for their kids. It seems ironic, but the most hard-working and idealistic parents are the toughest clients because their notions of good parenting, backed by their passion and dedication, are so inflexible.

Parenting is a hard job for all of us. I believe that there is no right way to parent, because there is no single sort of child. Most parents experience success in some areas of child-rearing, and suffer failure in others. Every child is unique. A struggle with poor grades does not reflect on your parenting skills. You are not struggling alone. Bad grades are a common problem, and they probably are not your fault.

But, you do have the ability to face the facts and decide you are ready to accept change. You *can* put the bad-grade mess behind you and get on with enjoying the better things in life. The beginning lies in recognizing that you have innocently allowed negative habits and ideas to influence your relationships with your kids, and that organizational and attitudinal barriers stand in the way of your children's progress. They must be removed.

My most liberating moment as a parent was when I realized that I needed to change certain things. I did not have the power, or the right, to control my children's development, or to raise them in my own image

or likeness. Yet, I could set limits to ensure my own emotional health. I could control my relationships with my children to secure and cultivate my own sense of well-being. Good mental hygiene was my responsibility and my right.

If school grades are causing you stress, anger, and anxiety, isn't it time you took care of yourself, too? You can take charge of your emotional health and cultivate your own sense of well-being as soon as you take charge of your child's education. But, you must accept change if you are to embrace the new, better life that you seek. Haven't you had enough? There is a way out, and the time to find it is now!

CHAPTER ONE

Are You Fed Up?



He who desires, but acts not, breeds pestilence.

—*William Blake*

The attractive high school freshman in front of me rolled her eyes and groaned plaintively. “You don’t understand,” she said. “This year, my teachers are *so boring!* They drone on about absolutely nothing for hours, and none of it matters. It’s all so stupid and pointless.”

This seemingly intelligent adolescent had earned top grades throughout elementary and middle school, but was foundering in her new high school studies. Her mother had brought her to me, complaining that, “All of a sudden, everything about school is totally negative. She doesn’t want to go, she doesn’t care about her grades, and I can’t make her study. She refuses to do anything about her schoolwork and grades, and she won’t listen to me when I try to get her back on track. She doesn’t care. The school doesn’t care. And I am sick and tired of caring when they don’t!”

Those of us who face daily battles with a school underachiever know all too well the frustration that comes from nagging, arguing, and constant supervising of our children. The chronic, exhausting cycle of blaming, the excuses for incomplete or inadequate work, the blatant disregard for threats and punishments, and the expressed contempt for anything having to do with school drives many parents to threats, tantrums,

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feelings of guilt, and expressions of despair. The sense of utter impotence and helplessness about their children's failure is profoundly disheartening. The overt apathy of children and their teachers is both maddening and galling.



Are You One of Us?

Academic underachievement is a problem for the whole family. Responsible parents face exasperating anger, guilt, and resentment because of their baffling inability to solve the “bad grades” dilemma. Students respond to school failure with feelings of frustration and disillusionment. Arguments ensue. Parents blame kids, and kids blame teachers, and teachers blame parents, but nothing happens—nothing changes—and the cycle of underperformance continues unabated. If this sounds like what goes on in your home, ask yourself if your underachieving child seems to fit some of the following patterns:

- Does your child blame poor scores on boring classes and pedantic, uninteresting teachers?
- Does your child blame you or others in the family for his or her low performance?
- Does your child claim to be a victim of incompetent teachers, or teachers who do not like, or carry a grudge, against him or her?
- Does your child try to sound like a victim of befuddled teachers and inept school administrators?
- Does your child rationalize poor grades by belittling the value of schooling, saying things like, “It’s all just stupid anyhow. I don’t learn anything there. It’s a complete waste of time.”

- Does your child, in outright rebellion, refuse to go to school, play hooky, ditch classes, or refuse to do classwork or homework?
- Does your child often feign illness on school mornings?
- Does your child try to convince you that his or her grades are typical? Does your child say things like, “Everyone in my class is getting grades like mine. The class is really hard.”
- Does your child claim to be mystified about why his or her grades are so bad?
- Does your child insist that he or she doesn’t know what to do to bring up his or her grades?
- Does your child tell you that he or she is trying as hard as he or she can?
- Does your child really not care if he or she does well in school?
- Does your child twist discussions about poor grades into arguments about your harsh and unfair parenting?

While you are at it, it might be helpful to take a cold, hard look at yourself and ponder whether you, too, might be stuck in a rut:

- Do you sometimes feel like you are trying to motivate someone who has already thrown in the towel?
- Do you blame your child’s poor grades on a lack of intelligence, “learning problems,” special needs or circumstances, poor schools, bad teachers, lack of resources, perceived advantages of the other kids, teacher biases, favoritism, or the excuse that a teacher is boring or “doesn’t like” your child?
- Do you buy into your kid’s blaming and excuses for lackluster performance?

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- Do you perceive low marks as a systemic failure, brought about by the abysmal performance of our nation's schools, falling standardized test scores, teacher shortages, scarce budget resources, overfilled classes, unprepared faculty, and the politicizing of classroom instruction?
- Do you recount the "good old days" when you were in school and things were better?
- Do you find yourself arguing, shouting, and issuing threats about school and grades?
- Do you spout old adages like, "Boys will be boys!" or "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," to try to minimize the gravity of your child's poor grades?
- Do you go to the school and take your child's side against the school's teachers and administrators, blaming them for your youngster's behavior or performance?
- Do you feel powerless to effectively intervene to stop the deteriorating school performance of your kids?
- Do you take personally your child's poor scores and your arguments about them?
- Do you become angry and resentful?
- Do you quit confronting your youngster entirely about bad grades in order to keep peace at home?

If the patterns of behavior revealed by these questions sound familiar, you are probably beyond frustration. You have changed tactics. You have waited hopefully for a new teacher, school, or academic year to turn things around. You have rationalized that your underachiever is just going through a "phase."

In fact, you have tried just about everything, and nothing seems to help. The teacher has little to offer in the way of suggestions or assis-

tance. Your child is struggling and getting nowhere, or even worse, is obviously not trying at all and does not care if you know it. Nagging your child seems to trigger anger and sullenness, but no improvement. You are at your wit's end. You are fed up with your child, the teacher, the school, and the whole mess!



There is a Way Out

If you are feeling fed up for the last time, if you are ready for real change, then this book is for you. It is a set of simple directions designed to change the school performance of your child for the better—academically, behaviorally, and socially.

Necessarily, your attitudes about children and schooling, and how you manage and discipline your youngster, will have to change. This book may ask you to do things that will make you uncomfortable. You will have to examine many aspects of your child's education, and even your child's teachers, from a new perspective. You will be called upon to accept new responsibilities that you may not want, or that you believe should be the job of others. You are going to have to learn to say, "No!" and mean it.

But, there is a way out, if you are really, finally, fed up with excuses, blaming, moping, guilt, and anxiety about the school grades mess, if you are willing to take certain steps, make certain sacrifices, and, finally, take charge of your child's education and your own sanity. Once you admit to yourself that you have finally had it, that you are sick and tired of rotten grades and ready for a change, substantial progress may be easier than you think.

Whatever you might be thinking at this stage of the game, one thing

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is for certain. Whatever you are doing now is not working. If you are genuinely fed up, then you should be willing to try something else. What do you have to lose by considering some new ideas about yourself, your child, and the school involved in your child's education?

Perhaps the most important principle of this book—a notion you must take to heart first and foremost if you really want to improve the school quandary you find yourself in—is:

If nothing changes, nothing changes.

You cannot continue to do the same things and expect different results. The same old nonsense just isn't going to work.



I have a dear friend, Barbara, a young professional who is an avid reader of self-help books. Doctors John Gray, Phil McGraw, and Richard Carlson—in her extensive library she has the complete collections of these celebrated authors, and many more besides. She is a cornucopia of popular diet information, new age philosophy, and ideas about the latest guru, and is always on the lookout for a better means of self-analysis or a new path to enlightenment.

Although she reads the books, she does not seem to change. Her attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors remain the same. She fails to see that the simple act of reading these books does not provide a remedy—the books can only improve her life if she actually takes the suggestions detailed in them and applies them to her daily life. She is engrossed in the abstract world of ideas, but change takes place in the here and now.

Buying and reading this book will be a waste of time unless you decide to take its suggestions to heart and apply them to your interactions with your son or daughter, their teachers, and the administrators of the school they attend. Reading this book will be useless unless you incorporate its suggestions into your ideas, beliefs, and opinions.

Change is uncomfortable and a lot of work. In the process of changing, you may have to accept some ugly truths about yourself and your child. Yet, if you have had enough of the excuses and apathy, and are ready to accept anything, even change, to finally get results at school, then read on.



Taking Charge

This book is about taking charge of your child's education. It is not a book about the plight of our nation's schools. Discussions of the latest educational research, national education policy, teacher training, psychology, and learning theories have all been cut to a minimum. Avoided altogether are lengthy discussions of facts and statistics. This book focuses solely on the strategies you need to employ and the actions you need to take to get your child back on track at school.

Nor is this book an academic text or a publication for professionals, although teachers may well find it useful and worthwhile. It is not about ADD/ADHD, Dyslexia, ED/EH, Developmental Disabilities, Special Education, or education of the severely disadvantaged. These kinds of learning problems are important and valid, and the bookstores are full of special books about these special problems.

This book is for other kinds of underachievers: lounge lizards too

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lazy to study; computer geeks who would rather surf the net than do their homework; athletes and cheerleaders who feel they have already “made it” in school; smart kids who see themselves as too brilliant to bother with mundane lessons—and many others who don’t fit these admittedly stereotypical, but real-life, types of kids. This book directly attacks the problem of kids who are not making it in school because their attitudes are getting in the way of their success.



Brad was a 10th grader whom I met when I was recruited as a consultant on his case. He had been placed in an alternative education program within a residential treatment center for behavioral disorders. His parents complained that Brad refused to follow home rules and parental instructions, played hooky from school, and was belligerent to teachers. Brad apparently refused to take all directions from parents, teachers, and other adults and spent most of his time as a recluse, isolated in front of his computer.

When I spoke to Brad, he freely admitted ignoring schoolwork and refusing to follow the directions of his adult caregivers. “I learn from computers,” he said matter-of-factly, “because school is not a challenge for me. I am super intelligent, and I really think I am too smart to waste my time in a school run for average kids. I have a genius I.Q., and I belong to MENSA, an organization for geniuses. I don’t think the teachers are as smart as I am; I know my parents aren’t. I have already mastered C++ and HTML, and I could probably find a good job anytime I wanted to. I think the kids at school are children. I have my own friends through the net. I can’t think of one good reason I should waste my time with a high school education. So, I just don’t go.”

It is important to note that Brad's problems were not what we traditionally term "learning problems." Brad had an *attitude* problem. His skewed beliefs about himself and his entitlements, and his apathetic outlook toward traditional education, were getting in the way of his progress in school.

This book is designed as a field guide for frustrated parents whose children have all sorts of attitude problems. It encourages parents to manage their children's lives in different ways. But it is really a "self-help" book because its purpose is to help parents overcome exasperation and bring peace into their households by winning the home-school battle. It is written for lay parents whose children are not achieving at school, and for parents who are seeking concrete strategies that will point themselves and their children in different, more academically productive directions. It explains in detail how to get children back on the road to achievement at school. It is a book for parents who want and need to take charge of their child's education.