



If an Adolescent Begins to Fail in School

Many teens experience a time when keeping up with school work is difficult. These periods may last several weeks and may include social problems as well as a slide in academic performance. Research suggests that problems are more likely to occur during a transitional year, such as moving from elementary to middle school, or middle school to high school. Some adolescents are able to get through this time with minimal assistance from their parents or teachers. It may be enough for a parent to be available simply to listen and suggest coping strategies, provide a supportive home environment, and encourage the child's participation in school activities. However, when the difficulties last longer than a single grading period, or are linked to a long-term pattern of poor school performance or problematic behaviors, parents and teachers may need to intervene.

To intervene effectively, parents and teachers can be aware of some common indicators of an adolescent at-risk for school failure, including:

- Attention problems as a young child—the student has a school history of attention issues or disruptive behavior.
- Multiple retentions in grade—the student has been retained one or more years
- Poor grades—the student consistently performs at barely average or below average levels
- Absenteeism—the student is absent five or more days per term
- Lack of connection with the school—the student is not involved in sports, music, or other school-related extracurricular activities
- Behavior problems—the student may be frequently disciplined or show a sudden change in school behavior, such as withdrawing from class discussions
- Lack of confidence—the student believes that success is linked to native intelligence rather than hard work, and believes that his or her own ability is insufficient, and nothing can be done to change the situation.
- Limited goals for the future—the student seems unaware of career options available or how to attain those goals.

Parents often feel uncertain about how best to approach their adolescent or the school when their teen seems to be having difficulty. However, it is important to remember that adolescents need their parents not only to set appropriate expectations and boundaries, but also to advocate for them. When an adolescent is having difficulty, parents can assist by:

- Making the time to listen and try to understand the teen's fears or concerns
- Setting appropriate boundaries for behavior that are consistently enforced
- Encouraging the teen to participate in one or more school activities
- Attending school functions, sports, and plays
- Meeting as a team, including parents, teachers, and school counselor, asking how they can support the teen's learning environment, and sharing their expectations for the child's future
- Arranging tutoring or study group support for the teen from the school or the community through organizations such as the local YMCA or a local college or university
- Providing a supportive home and school environment that clearly values education
- Helping the child think about career options by arranging for visits to local companies and colleges, picking up information on careers and courses, and encouraging an internship or career-oriented part-time job
- Encouraging the teen to volunteer in the community or to participate in community groups such as the YMCA, Scouting, 4-H, religious organizations, or other service-oriented groups to provide an out-of-school support system
- Emphasizing at home and in school the importance of study skills, hard work, and follow through

Source: ERIC Digests

