

My children are 10 and 9, and one of them loves school, and the other loves only lunch and play time.
Or so I thought until recently.

My 9-year-old is a typical boy who wants to play and socialise. On the first report this year, his teacher wrote, "Colin has a hard time settling into the classwork in the morning."

"That's because Colin would rather settle into running around the playground and battling pretend swords with his buddies than do the five math problems he has waiting for him at his desk every morning," I thought when I read the comment.

Of course, however, the teacher was right. He needs to work when it's work time. I talked with him about this and on the next report card, the teacher wrote that he was doing a much better job of starting the day off right.

"Yay!, Progress!," I rejoiced.

His report card marks were mostly above average, too, so I was happy. But his classwork was inconsistent – sometimes failing and other times flawless. I reviewed worksheets that the teacher sent home that were full of errors so that he could learn from his mistakes, quizzed him from study guides for tests and read with him nightly. I was patient when he needed time to work on answers and calm when he made errors, and everything went along pretty smoothly day after day and week after week.

I bragged to friends that we were having a "good year," based on the lack of discipline problems and the earning of good marks.

What I didn't realise was that my son was growing in other ways, thanks to school and maybe me, just a little bit.

First, he was assigned an in-class project, which worried me. The at-home projects took quite a bit of work, from me prodding him to choose the type of project to pushing him to gather supplies and begging him to both start and finish the project.

How was my little guy going to do this on his own?

It turns out, quite simply: He had a sheet listing the project choices and when I gave him the options, he immediately decided he wanted to make a poster with the life cycle of a frog. And he warned me that we needed to go to the shop for the poster board right away because he had to start working on the project soon.

Who was this short person responsibly passing along deadline information I didn't even see on the assignment sheet?


We got the poster board, and he promptly took it to school. A few days later, while I was in the school for another reason, I walked by his classroom and spotted him in the Thinker's pose. Seriously, he had his hand on his chin, and he was hunched over. The kid was working hard on that poster – with no help from a classmate, teacher or volunteer. Wow!

He came home and told me how he had one idea but abandoned that for another, and he was happy with his final poster. When he brought it home, I noticed the lettering wasn't perfect and the life cycle not completely centred (as I would have demanded and caused a fight over!), but the information was correct, and he added some creative flair to the design, which made the board uniquely his own. He was so impressed with himself. The perfect mark he received seemed almost beside the point. (Please read Dr Spencer Kagan's article in this issue for more on the perils of grading.)

Near the end of the year, when all the important, mandatory testing was done, Colin's class split into small groups and worked as producers, directors and actors on plays. They designed simple scenery and turned donated supplies into costumes and rehearsed their lines diligently. Every day for four days, he spoke of nothing but that play, and when showtime finally came, my usually shy-in-front-of-people-he-barely-knows son spoke his lines clearly and with confidence.

"He did really well!," my husband said, with more than a bit of surprise in his voice.

The tears are forming in my eyes again as I think about it: I had been happy with the school year before, based on my son's report, but I was more grateful for the moments when I had witnessed growth that showed how engaged he was with learning. My son had succeeded in the traditional ways with his marks, and was also becoming independent and enthusiastic.

The final event that sold me on his emerging love of learning: He told me how he likes when I take him to the aquarium, the air and space centre, and the zoo. (See Maggie Dent's articles for more on engaging students in this way.) He looked happy when I took him to these places, but to hear that he enjoyed it (and that he wants to be a pilot, thanks to the flight simulator at the air centre!) was confirmation that he wouldn't nominate me for the worst-mum award. At least not this year. 



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