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Scholastic Skills for Learners

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Abstract:

Success in school enhances the self-esteem of the child. Most parents and teachers are concerned and worried if children do not perform well in academics. Poor school performance may result in suicide, school refusal, drug addiction, anxiety, depression, psychosomatic disorders, stress on the adolescent and parents, school absenteeism and dropout, sexual promiscuity, aggressive behavior, and even runaway behavior. Research from India has delineated poor study habits as a major cause of poor school performance in 50% of cases¹. Hence there is a need to inculcate good study habits for academic achievement. This article will be helpful for teachers, parents, special educators, and researchers to better understand the scholastic skills of learners.

Keywords: *Self-esteem, Academics, School refusal, Drug addiction, Psychosomatic disorders, Absenteeism and Scholastic skills.*

Introduction:

Study skills are strategies that enable a learner to acquire knowledge or information, retain it, use it practically, and express it in 'testing situations' like exams. They are like tactics used by sportsmen while playing games¹. Educators regard the age of six years until the completion of adolescence as a critical period in achievement drive. It is the time when the children form the habit of being achievers, overachievers, or underachievers. It has been reported that the level of achievement behaviour in childhood is highly correlated with achievement behaviour in adulthood. Hence if children work to their maximum capacities in school, this habit persists lifelong and spreads to all areas of the children's lives and not to academics alone.ⁱⁱ Parents, teachers, and special

educators should motivate and teach students, the skills of working to their maximum potential to achieve success in school.

Zig Zagler has aptly said that motivation is the fuel that drives the engine of life. A child with a high motivation to study learns study skills much more easily than a child with low motivation. And to develop a high motivation, the child has to love and enjoy learning and imbibe the importance of education. Parents and teachers lay the foundation for this exhilarating feeling of 'joy in learning' at a very tender age. This article shall describe various learning skills during infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool years and later during school and college education.

Learning in Infancy, Toddlerhood, and Pre-school Years:

The essential skills needed for schooling include the 3 Rs- reading, writing, and arithmetic. Children should be allowed to learn activities at their own pace, some may learn to recite rhymes at 15-months and some at 2-years. Parents and teachers should keep themselves updated about normal child development and not pressurize their children. In the early years, most of the learning should take place at home through the medium of play. At a later age, classroom teaching supports learning.

Can children learn in utero? Mythology mentions that Dhruva learned Vedic shlokas and Abhimanyu learned about the Chakravahu (चक्रव्यूह) in their mother's womb but medical literature has yet to report such a miracle! It has been scientifically proved that a baby can hear and feel in utero. So immediately after birth, the baby bonds well with his parents. From birth until the first few months of life, the baby uses the five senses of touch, smell, hear, see and taste to learn about the world. Parents should stimulate these senses appropriately by talking, singing, rocking, and cuddling their little ones.ⁱⁱⁱ They should also show colourful toys preferably of different textures and chimes to them.

Exposing the baby to the wonders of nature is another fine way of stimulating the young one. Walks in or out of the pram, gazing at greenery, listening to the chirping of birds, sounds of splashing waves, and bathing in sunlight for a few minutes, allow the baby to appreciate and love nature at a young age. Parents should do these activities with their infants in a quiet alert state and not when they are cranky or hungry or wet. They should guard against overstimulation of the infant.

In the early years, parents should form a scaffold for learningⁱⁱⁱ. They should teach, guide, and help the child in learning new tasks with a lot of patience and love until he/ she can do it independently. This new learning could be making a house from blocks or completing a jigsaw puzzle or even cleaning a bicycle.

Reading:

Language development opens the gateway to the treasure of knowledge as it is an essential prerequisite for reading, writing, and even arithmetic. Reading out stories, showing picture books, reciting animated rhymes, shlokas, bhajans, acting out action words like 'jump', 'run', speaking

slowly with emphasis on phonetics, can stimulate language acquisition and a love for reading. Asking a 5-year old child to tell the story in his/ her own words with actions and sound effects is an enjoyable method to test his/ her comprehension and understanding.

Writing:

Around one and a half years of age, a child is able to grip a fat colourful crayon or a chalk piece. Parents should allow the child to scribble on paper or the blackboard and appreciate the efforts of the young writer in making. Drawing strokes and alphabets in the sand is another way of encouraging writing skills in a 2 or 3-year-old child. Children between 3-5 years, enjoy paper tracing, making letters from clay dough, and joining dot- to- dot. It is only around 5-6 years that a child is able to grip a pencil firmly between the thumb and index finger. Painting with fingers, stamping pictures of various objects, stringing beads, and making a collage by pasting pictures and clay moulding between 4-6 years of age improve the dexterity of fingers. Parents and teachers should always remember to make these activities fun-filled with a lot of mirth, laughter, and encouragement.

Arithmetic:

Arithmetic is best learned by its application in daily life. A baby learns the first concept of shape, texture, and size by handling his/ her dress and toys. Stacking toys helps infants to understand sizes. A two year can be told about various shapes by pointing to a full moon as a circle, a box as a rectangle, and an egg as an oval. At around 3-years, the child begins counting and by 5-years may be able to recite numbers 1-10. A three-year-old can be given the simple task of counting mangoes or oranges or bananas in a fruit basket. Children also enjoy learning rhymes with numbers in them like, 'one, two buckle my shoe.....' Parents can take a 4-year old along for shopping to introduce the concept of money, weights, sizes, and checking prices.

Creativity and Creative Thinking:

The seeds of creative thinking can be sown in a child's mind at an early age. Children are 'natural' creative thinkers as they are free-thinking minds bubbling with ideas. They have not yet developed the ability to censor their thoughts with notions of 'possible' or 'impossible' or 'right' or 'wrong'. Parents should encourage this 'new age' thinking and allow active but safe exploration of the world. Parents can encourage their 3 years old in creating a new story or dramatize a story or give a different ending to classics or folk tales. They can ask their child to discover new uses of simple things like a pencil can become a rocket in a story or an empty bowl can become a hat for a doll or a ball can become earth and a smaller ball, the moon. Pretend play between the ages of 2 and 4 years also enhances creativity and social skills. Parents should allow the child to play 'house' or 'kitchen' or 'doctor' and even join in the play when asked to. Parents and teachers should try to give simple and lucid answers to their constant barrage of questions like 'why does it rain?' or 'why does the sun rise?'

Memory:

Memory and reasoning should also be nurtured. A child responds to his name by 6-7 months. By 12-18 months, the child understands and can be taught the names of simple objects like cars, tables, and chairs. For 2-year-old, stacking toys and for 3-years old, building blocks stimulate creativity, reasoning, and memory. The child is able to identify colours at 3-4 years and can be given the task of matching colours. A 3-year-old can fit pieces of a 4-10 pieces jigsaw puzzle and can move to complex ones at a later age. The ability to follow and remember simple instructions indicates the memorizing and comprehension ability of the child. A 2-year-old can be taught to carry out a simple task of keeping her book in the rack after using while a 3-year-old can be taught a little complex task of keeping all his toys in his closet after playing. A child can be taught to self-feed at 18-months and to undress and dress by 3-years of age.

If parents or anyone parent can spend adequate time with the children and appropriately stimulate them, then a preschool is not required. The children can then begin regular schooling at 4-5 years of age. But if both parents are professionally engaged and unavailable, then a caretaker or a teacher in a play home has to undertake the role of a parent and keep the child purposefully occupied with stimulating activities.

School and College Education:

As the children enter regular school, the parents should continue to play an active role in their quest for knowledge. They should take a keen interest in all academic and non-academic activities. Parents should maintain a good rapport with the teachers and be in regular touch with them about their children's performance. If something is found amiss, the parents and teachers can work as a team to find a solution to the problem.

The parents should preferably allocate an exclusive space at home for studying. They should encourage regular studying, organize time and pay special attention to homework completion. At the same time, parents should aim for the all-around development of their children. At 6-years of age, a child can be introduced to formal training in music and dance. Physical activity and participation in sports, healthy eating, and sleeping habits should be encouraged at all ages. Parents should continue to make learning enjoyable and practical for the child. They should encourage the reading of classics and encyclopaedias, playing board and business games, doing experiments, browsing through an atlas, and assisting and applauding the efforts of the child in this quest for knowledge.

Nowadays computers can play a major role in enhancing scholastic skills. Young children can be taught the alphabet by using the keyboard. Educational games and puzzles can improve creative thinking, problem-solving, language, and mathematical skills. Children with poor handwriting can use the computer to express themselves.

The Internet is a window to the world and the latest knowledge. It should be used only under

parental supervision.

School Success Mantras:

What really spells out success in school and college? It definitely pays to follow the success mantras namely, eating healthy, sleeping adequately, playing regularly, managing stress, having regular health check-ups, following study skills, and having a nurturing home and school environment. Regular annual health check-ups help in the early detection and treatment of diseases and in completing immunization to ensure good health and reduce school absenteeism. The parents should opt to admit their children to a school that develops the overall personality of the child. Children who are not comfortable with English do well in the local language medium schools. A high student: teacher ratio also impairs learning. Children flourish in schools that have encouraging and sensitive teachers.

Nurturing Home and School Environment:

A nurturing environment enables a child to perform well in school. A nurturing home environment is one that is motivating, inspiring, stable, and supportive^{iv}. A home where there is harmony between all family members. In a 'nurturing' home, the parents follow an authoritative parenting style with assertive communication skills. They have 'realistic' expectations from their children. They avoid comparisons with other children and always try to build the self-esteem of their children. They appreciate the effort and do not focus only on the end result in terms of marks scored. Above all, they are good role models and teach life skills to their children to meet the challenges of life. They help children to nurture strengths and overcome weaknesses and thereby sustain the motivation of the child to study in a tension-free atmosphere.

Parents should provide a learning atmosphere at home with plenty of interesting books and educational toys that should satisfy the child's innate hunger for knowledge. They should try to link lessons with applications in daily life. They should encourage the child to use all three learning modalities- visual, auditory, and kinesthetic^v. They should help him/her to set SMART goals i.e., Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound goals^{vi}. For a child studying in 10th std, the immediate short-term goal could be passing 10+2 and a long-term goal could be getting through the JEE, NEET, and other entrance examinations. The parents should help the child accordingly. They should continue to instill a sense of joy in learning. The children should be told that 'exam time is celebration time- it is a celebration of learning'. Such messages usually take away the fear of exams and improve scholastic performance.

And in spite of all the help and support offered by the parents, if a child falls, they should continue to love him/her unconditionally. They should teach their children that 'actions fail, people don't', there is always a second chance... to improve on mistakes and move ahead in life! Failure in one exam does not mean that one has failed in life!

Academic Challenges in Adolescence:

In adolescence, there are four main academic challenges.

- Firstly, the student has to learn much more compared to primary school- in both content and complexity.
- Secondly, much more is expected from the student by teachers and parents in terms of 'good' marks. Parents and teachers strongly feel that scholastic achievements have a direct bearing on the adolescent's career selection and thereby future well-being.
- Thirdly, for the adolescent who eagerly seeks peer and family approval, academic achievement enables him to do so.
- The fourth challenge is a developmental one- the adolescent's limbic system (emotional center) matures much before the prefrontal lobe (center for judgment and organization)^{vii}. That is why he/she may need help in terms of planning his/ her schedule and controlling impulses and emotions that may distract him from studies. So, an adolescent needs proper guidance in this period to achieve his potential. Parents and teachers can help the adolescent in many ways to organize the study curriculum appropriately. Adolescents who are in the process of developing formal logical operations and abstract thinking will be able to follow these skills if they are taught in a simple and practical way.

Study Skills:

Study skills are learning strategies that help the child to study in an organized manner and perform to his potential in school and college. These strategies have to be implemented right at the beginning of the academic session and need to be followed regularly to ensure stress-free learning! A detailed description of all study skills is beyond the scope of this module. This module will focus on practical tips that parents and teachers can teach to perform to their optimum best. The module does not deal with remedial education issues for children with learning difficulties. But even these children benefit immensely by following organized and healthy study habits. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** A few important study skills are discussed below. They can be broadly classified into three categories^{viii}:

1. Preparatory Study Skills:

These skills are prerequisites for academic success. They enable the student to appropriately prepare for acquiring knowledge. These skills are as follows:

○ **Time Management:**

Time management improves efficiency and avoids last-minute anxiety. Parents can help children to make a daily timetable by asking them to list time spent every day in sleeping, grooming, meals, errands, school, television, meeting with friends, play, and hobbies^{ix}. The spare time left would be for studies. They can also ask the children to list a few activities which they

feel are a waste of time. Reducing time on these activities would give them more time to study. While making a timetable, it is also important to have some unscheduled time that can be used in case of an emergency. The study time can then be split into time slots for revising each subject and doing homework. A separate timetable should be made for the weekends; keeping appropriate time for relaxation, play, and leisure. The schedule should be reviewed weekly and changes could be made according to the schedule of exams or extracurricular or sports activities.

Parents should allow the children to make their 'own' timetable and not dictate it to them. This will increase the likelihood of children following the time schedule.

○ **Concentration Skills:**

Parents can help their children to concentrate better by arranging for a 'study niche' for them^x. It could be a separate room or a corner of a room. It should preferably have a table and chair. Studying on a sofa or bed should be discouraged as that puts the mind in a state of relaxation and drowsiness. The study area should be free from distractions like TV, computer, radio, fridge, and phone. It should be well lit and ventilated. During study time, the parents should make sure that the children are not disturbed by siblings or other relatives.

It is preferable to study at the same time every day so that studying becomes an effortless enduring habit like taking a bath or brushing the teeth in the morning. It is essential to define goals before study time, like planning to study one Physics chapter in 40 minutes rather than having a vague goal like reading as many chapters of Physics as possible. Having a definite goal helps to build concentration and focus. It has been researched that an individual remembers best what he has read in the beginning and at the end of the study period^{xi}. Hence taking breaks after 40-50 minutes, helps to sustain concentration and improves memory while continuous reading causes fatigue. Parents should insist on a daily revision of lessons at home. They should also ask the children to clarify doubts rather than leaving the clarification to just before exams. This will help the children to be thorough with their learning.

2. **Acquisition of Study Skills:**

These skills develop expertise in gathering and retaining information and knowledge. These include the following:

○ **Enhancing Memory:**

It is well known that there are 3 types of memory^{xi xii}:

- Sensory Memory- Lasts only for a few minutes and consists of what one imbibes by senses of hearing, visualizing, feeling, etc.
- Short-term Memory- Lasts for 24-48 hours. If a student pays attention to the teacher or to the reading material, the information imparted or learned gets stored in the brain for a couple of days. Most children who study for a few days to hours before the exam using

this type of memory for answering the exam questions. No wonder all the knowledge is lost or deleted after exams are over!

- Long-term Memory- Lasts for weeks to months and even a lifetime. All students need to store maximum knowledge in this type of memory. This will avoid distress and tension just before the exams.

Strategies to enhance long term memory include:

- Understanding the study material well, repeating, reviewing, and revising what has been learned once at regular intervals - weekly, fortnightly, and monthly to stamp it in the memory^{xi}.
- Using the method of association in the form of a mind map can also improve memory **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Flashcards can be used to record facts like formulae in Physics and Maths, the number of bones in the body, the smallest bone in the body, kings of the Mughal dynasty, their date of accession, death, etc. Flashcards are useful for a quick revision of facts especially prior to exams with multiple-choice questions.
- Another useful technique is the use of mnemonics^{xi}. For example, to remember the eight planets, students can use the mnemonic- My Very Elegant Mother Just Showed Us Nine- the 1st alphabet of each word stands for the name of the planet- Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune.
- SQ3R method is used to improve textbook comprehension^{ix}. The steps are as follows:
S-stands for survey in which all the key points and diagrams of a particular chapter are browsed over.
Q-stands for questions in which each bold heading in the chapter is converted to a question
R-stands for reading in which the answers are read and then written in the student's language
R-stands for recall in which the student understands and memorizes the answer. The student is asked to master one subheading and only then start reading the next one.
R-stands for review in which the whole chapter is revised through questions and answers.

SQ3R method does not hold good for English and Maths. For excellence in Maths, children need to practice sums repeatedly.

- **Classroom and Homework Skills:**

Parents and teachers can teach children to listen well in class. They should teach them how to hear and think in the class by asking them to correlate what they have been taught

with the previous knowledge^x. They can also guide them to take good notes in class, revise notes after the class, and update the notes using textbooks and reference books. The parents should assist the child if needed in completing homework and ‘use’ it to improve learning.

3. Expression Study Skills:

These skills enable students to demonstrate knowledge in tests and include exam-taking strategies.

Parents should ensure that children get enough sleep and healthy nutrition, especially during exam time. They can ask them to keep all their things like pencils, pens, pads, etc ready a day before the exam^{xiii}.

On the day of the exam, parents should feed the children a light nutritious breakfast and tell them to say positive self-motivating statements like ‘I’ve studied regularly throughout the year and I shall do well in the exams’ⁱⁱ. They should ask the children not to do any last-minute discussions with friends to avoid confusion. They should teach them to ‘time’ the question paper and leave a few minutes at the end of the paper for revision. They should train them to write legibly and neatly. They should first attempt those questions that they know the best.

After the exam, the parents should refrain from discussing the answers and mistakes and should instead allow the children to prepare calmly for the next exam. Mistakes could be discussed and corrected after the completion of all the exams.

The study strategies described above can be easily adopted by the students and taught by the parents and teachers to improve academic performance.

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