On Your Mind, Winter, 2019

**By Jonathan C. Robinson, Ph.D.**

**Education Issue**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

My twins are now 3 years old. I’m getting heat from family and well-intentioned friends to get them into pre-school, even though I’m a stay at home mom and running after those rascals is my full-time job. So, from a developmental perspective, when do children start learning? When are they ready to start school? Will I do more harm than good if I keep them home until the law requires them to be in school, the first grade? Signed, Just Curious

Dear Curious,

Good for you for not just bowing to friend and family pressure. How and when you get your lovelies in school is a big decision, and one that you don’t have to make alone, although you do have veto power.

First things first. Children start learning in utero. Yep, even before they are born. Neurologically, as soon as brain cells form and grow, they work. They are taking in information and spitting out actions. It’s true that classical music soothes a restless tummy baby, and your preborn child does hear his daddy talking to your belly. From pre-birth through their entire lives, your twins will continue to learn.

Second, your twins will tell you when they are ready for more formalized schooling. If you have educational toys and games they love, and they are glued to Sesame Street for the entire show, their actions show they are ready for school. If they mostly play nicely with their peers, listen to grown-ups, and follow direction, they are ready for school. These are the goals of pre-school anyway.

Finally, you will not cause your kids irreparable harm by keeping them home until they are ready, or until first grade. If you have a high school diploma yourself, you can even home-school them. In Georgia, about 25% of school-aged children are home-schooled. Between you and me, though, I’m not trying to teach my teen high school physics and chemistry. ☺

However, if your kids are routinely rowdy, listen only after you yell at them, and if your me-time is in short supply, then send them to school. School will likely both settle them down and give you daily R&R. Being the mother of pre-schoolers, you are one of my heroes.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

My middle school daughter says she hates school! She comes home crying at least twice a week. She refuses to do her homework. Her grades are dropping. She was so sweet, engaging, and full of life and a great student in elementary school. What happened? What can we do to help her? Signed, Desperate

Dear Desperate,

Your daughter has hit the proverbial “wall” of middle school. Many kids fly through elementary school but get overwhelmed with the changes and challenges of middle school. Multiple teachers, each class requiring homework, pre-adolescent attitude and heartbreak. Yep. That’s the “wall.”

Both you and your daughter will get through this stage. Help her take a deep breath (you too!!), calm down, and make a plan. It starts with your de-coding her despair. She’s giving you conclusions (“I hate school.”) and solutions (It won’t matter if I don’t care and blow off homework.)

You will start a meaningful conversation with your middle schooler by sidestepping the words and zooming in on her feelings. This is called active listening. It will both help her calm down and engage her in her problem-solving, with your encouragement and support.

Also, if this behavior and attitude has gone on for more than 6-8 weeks, it might be more than a mood. It might be a symptom. To be sure, take her to her physician (hopefully female?). A thorough physical will rule out anything medical. Also, check the hormone box. She’s at the age where she might be starting her period, which just compounds everything.

Finally, if, after your best efforts and ruling out medical issues, the attitude and behaviors continue or intensify, consider psychotherapy. There are on-line lists of capable child & adolescent clinicians who can come along side both of you to help you make sense of, and good choices about, the circumstances. Hang in there. I’m praying for you and your family.