On Your Mind

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**Education Theme**

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**Contributing Columnist**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 My 10 year old son has seemed to “hit the wall,” now that he is in the 4th grade. He seemed to breeze through kindergarten and on to last year in the 3rd grade. Now, though, he complains about homework, breaks his pencil out of frustration on writing assignments, and says he’s “stupid.” I know that’s not the case, but it seems he may need more help than I can give him. Any suggestions?

Signed,

Desperate

Dear Desperate,

 Thanks for writing. I can help. What you are describing is frequent and common at the start of the 4th grade in most schools. There’s a reason why 1st through 3rd grades are called “primary school,” while 4th and 5th grade is “elementary school.” The first three grades are getting children used to being in school, learning the basics, obeying the rules, and having fun as a group. Many kids, such as your son, do in fact hit the wall in the 4th grade. Expectations are higher. More homework is given. More effort is expected. So, be there for your son, acknowledging his frustration and being alongside of him as he struggles through the harder work. Stay in touch with his teacher, as she may have classroom observations that would help you tend to your son.

If he has some “classic signs” of learning disorder, such as letter or number reversals, halting pace of reading aloud, not staying in bounds on the page when writing, then you may want to have him tested. All schools now have a school psychologist whose job it is to test at-risk kids and help develop an individualized educational plan accordingly.

 A good psychoeducational evaluation has three components. First is IQ testing. This determines his level of cognitive functioning. I call that “what he’s got.” Second is thorough achievement testing, especially in reading, spelling, arithmetic, listening, and writing. This determines what I call “how he uses what he’s got.” Third is personality and behavioral functioning. Because mental health issues for children can present as learning problems, we need to distinguish between the two. The psychologist will go over the report thoroughly with you and make recommendations accordingly.

 Hope this is helpful. Write me again if you have questions. Hang in there with your son and things won’t seem so desperate.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 Just a quick question. With electronics and social media so omnipresent in our lives and in school, how can I keep up with what my 14 year old son is doing online? When I come in his room during homework time, he slams down his IPad screen and is rude to me. I ask what he’s looking at and he tells me it’s homework online. Sometimes, however, his “homework” looks a lot like World of Warcraft gaming. Thoughts?

Signed,

Hoodwinked?

Dear H,

 Catching your son lying to you certainly is a red flag. Confrontation and consequences are in order. However, online gaming is a part of life these days and does have some limited benefits in terms of stress management, if not carried to an obsessive or addictive extreme.

 A lot of middle and high school teachers have a class portal online, where you can check out homework assignments and upcoming testing and papers due. This will help you keep pace with what your son should be attending to. If he is a straight-A student, then his actions are telling you that his gaming is not intruding on his schoolwork. If not, consider family rules around homework completion. While a quiet work place in his bedroom is preferable, if he abuses that, then have him do homework at the kitchen table under your watchful eye. A basis rule is that homework is completed first, with parental sign-off. Only then can your son get into online gaming or other social media time. Researchers suggest no more than one hour of gaming and social media time per night and that before bedtime. Some families go to the extent of collecting cell phones, IPads, and laptops at bedtime to assure restful sleep. With these efforts, you will no longer feel hoodwinked.