

The First Pencil Box

Words To Share With Parents

By Dorothy Rich

His eyes are shining. Every number two pencil that he and his mother bought at the store is sharpened and ready for action. And so is he – eager, delighted with the idea of homework, a desk, a lamp, a blotter, lots of paper and pencils – a true kindergartener.

This boy is my older grandchild. He is ready for the voyage. I have seen other children get ready for this trip, my own and those I have taught over 40 years. I know about some of the smooth parts and the bumps and potholes on the road ahead. My eyes tear up (fortunately he doesn't notice) as I watch him at his new desk and see him clutch his new pencils.

I am thrilled for him but also anxious. I am frightened for him. I want to protect him from the harshness and the disappointments. I want to help keep the light on in his eyes – the light that often goes out or goes dimmer – as the school years move forward. Every teacher feels this, every parent.

The fourth grade slump is not pretty. The hands that used to pump up and down pleading for the teacher to “Call on me” are a long-ago memory. The eagerness of the first years at school wear away, and it's sad.

I know that there will be days when my grandson will come home from school (and it won't be too far into the future) – and use in these words or similar ones:

“I'm not as smart as some of the kids.”

“The other kids don't want me on the team.”

“I don't want to do my homework.”

“I don't want to go to school.”

And my heart will break because I will remember this kid with his first pencil box and his shining eyes. I will want to roll back the clock and I know that I can't.

Yet, I do want to say and do something that can help keep alive that early and wonderful enthusiasm... for my grandson and all the other kids who face the natural frustrations and stresses of school life.

While words can seem so weak when emotions run so strong, words have within them a power to heal and to make better. While words are not made of iron, they do form some protective armor, building children's abilities to think more positively and to deal more effectively with the growing pains inherent in the school experience.

Here are some (real, not make believe) conversations, with responses from parents, that help put across the MegaSkills children need to keep feeling good about themselves and about school and to keep making the effort that school requires, long past those early, eager school days.

“I Wish I Was Never Bored.”

Sure, I wish that, too. But, that's not the ways things work. When we watch TV or go to the movies, there is something exciting happening every minute.

In movies and on TV, the everyday stuff is edited out and all we see are the few moments when something interesting is happening. We might get the idea that there is never anything to be bored about. but, we don't see what happens all day long. We usually don't see the hero doing everything all the rest of us do like eating, sleeping, reading.

There needs to be time for quiet, for thinking for studying. Much of that is not going to be exciting, nor should we expect it to be. The truly exciting times in everyday life are the exceptions, not the rule.

Our children need realistic views about what to expect at school... and in life.

Why Do I Have To Do Things I Don't Want To Do?

Even adults don't always do what we want to do. I don't always want to make dinner or go to work. Some days I would rather go to the movies.

I do what I have to do, even when I don't want to, because our family needs me. And, because I love you. Here are some examples of what I do...even when I don't want to. Now you tell me some of yours.

“I Don’t Want To Redo That Paper Again. It’s Good Enough.”

Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. I just want you to know that I often have to do things over because they weren’t good enough the first time. I don’t believe everything has to be perfect, but it does have to be good. You need to give it your best effort.

Basketball players practice and practice. Musicians practice and practice. They know they have to keep working to do their best.

We need to be able to say: “That’s the best I can do today!” And if it takes more than once or twice to do “the best I can do” – then we need to do it.

“I’m Not As Smart As They Are”

Different people have different smarts. You are smart in ways I am not smart and I am smart in other ways. The same goes for the kids in your class.

Some kids can learn math but they can’t figure out music. Some kids can look at a word and know how to spell it immediately. Others have to spell it over and over.

We are all special in different ways. We do things differently. We think differently. We don’t have to be super-talented or a genius to do well. We have to use the gifts we have. We can’t expect to be like everyone else and we don’t need to be, either. The important thing is that we have the freedom to grow, to start from where we are and to keep on going.

Can I Get The Other Kids To Like Me Better?

Try not to worry so much about others liking you. Ask whether you like them. It's all right not to like them, even if they are the most popular kids in the class.

Let's talk together about what you can say to them. They may not get any friendlier but they'll know that they can't put you down.

I Feel Bad When I Get A Bad Grade

You want to do well. That's wonderful, and we admire you. But you need to know that we will love you even if you get a bad grade. Your value is not based on your grades. We want you to work hard and do the best you can, but you need to know that you are very special no matter what.

You Don't Understand

Maybe we don't understand everything, but we are trying. We know it's hard for you. We want you to know that when you feel bad, we feel bad. We want to make it all better, just like when you were a little child and you feel down at the playground. But we can't.

What we can do now tell you what we think, and hope you will listen to us. We hope you will talk with us, and we want to keep on talking with you.

There's No Guarantee

There's no guarantee that our children can keep those shining eyes about school and avoid the school slumps. Things happen that we have little to no control over – including the coming of adolescence, the confusing and often toxic messages from the culture beyond school and home.

What do we know is that positive words applied consistently with a consistent message of love and discipline are among our best guarantees that our children can emerge from school saying, "I want to learn more."

These are the best words that teachers and parents want to hear. That's what the first pencil box is really all about.

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