

Even if you never heard the phrase “fading the prompt,” you have been fading the prompt for years. When your children were very young, you prompted them to “Say thank you.” Then, when they were a bit older, you faded the prompt and simply asked them: “What do you say?” And then, a year or two after that, you merely gave them a look, raised an eyebrow, and they knew to say “thank you.” We help them when they need our help but we *reduce the help* to allow opportunities for the development of independence, competence and autonomy.

Before age 9 or so, they usually need the reminders to show us what is in their backpack, to know what the next day’s schedule is, to take out the garbage, to feed the cats. However, at about age 10 or so, we begin to rob them of needed opportunities if we do not begin to fade the prompts.

Imagine a fourth- or fifth-grader who is somewhat disorganized, loses track of when an assignment is due, finishes something but forgets to hand it in, waits until Sunday night to begin working on a project for Monday. Now, imagine a parent who rushes in (with a tense, worried, frustrated or angry voice) and rescues, enables, and ensures that the assignment gets done, the planner gets used, projects get started in a timely manner, etc. Sound like good parenting? Please do not be too quick with your answer.

Too often in my twenty-eight year career I have seen under-achieving high school students who had parents who reacted exactly as above. These parents meant well but inadvertently prolonged their children’s academic problems by robbing them of the dignity of their own struggle. This is because the parenting strategies for the short-term are different than the strategies for the long-term. Even though things would be tidier if we took care of everything, we must avoid strategies today that may hurt our children in the future.

*Yes, their next report card will be better the more we do, but they are the ones in their grade. It is important that they learn to be organized, to keep track of assignments and deadlines, to hand things in, to plan ahead; but they will not learn how to do these things if we do it all for them. In fact, they may learn that they don’t even have to learn these skills because they have “the cavalry” behind them, watching and waiting to roar in and bail them out. And they may sense our tension or anger in a way that hurts them more than our help is worth.*

Holding them accountable is a strategy for the long-term. Using our adult voice (the same voice we use with our neighbors and co-workers) is a strategy for the long-term. Imagine being a half-step behind them rather than a half-step ahead of them. Expect them to struggle with organization (follow through, task-completion, anticipating deadlines) and when they do, give them a consequence, give them some advice, and wait. And wait. And wait some more. Keep the house library-like (no screens) on school nights. Don’t sign them up for too many activities. Don’t sign yourself up for too many activities either! Be encouraging (“You’ll figure out how to take care of your school responsibilities.”) rather than discouraging (“How many times do I have to tell you to do your homework!”). Take them off the team if their grades drop. Don’t let them have friends over until they are current with their responsibilities. Parent attentively and actively but do not so much for them that you interfere with the development of needed skills.

Their progress may be slower and more uneven than we would prefer, but it is slow and uneven progress that leads to permanent growth. If you become impatient and make academics (or daily chores) a source of parent-child tension, you may find that you took a temporary problem and accidentally made it permanent. But with a patient and attentive approach, their fourth- and fifth-grade struggles provide important learning opportunities to develop the skills they will need for sixth and seventh grade, and for the rest of their lives.