

Tips for Teaching Your Struggling Student
(From a Homeschool Mom Who has Survived to Tell about It!)

Joy Dean

Do you have a child like this?

He (or she) sits down with a page of problems or questions in front of him. Two hours later he has done only three of them (and two of them are wrong!). He “studies” for a few minutes for a test or quiz and insists he knows the material, and then gets a very poor grade on the test. You have tried everything to get him to do his work. Rewards work only for a day or two, and now all you know to do is punish him and take away privileges—and you find you must do that daily, if not hourly. Your other children are missing out on activities because he did not get his work done. It seems that you do nothing but scold him. People have suggested that he has a “learning deficiency,” but you can see that he is very smart and that he has a very logical mind—in fact, he often shows a great deal of common sense. He can figure things out or fix something that is broken. He can sit for hours doing something he wants to do (so much for the “attention deficit”). He can remember every detail of a book or movie, and even at a young age he could direct you to Grandma’s house. You know there is no problem with his brain. So you conclude that he must be either lazy or rebellious. Yet when you talk to him, he really seems like he wants to try, and you are certain that he wants to please you.

I had a child like this! And I have spent many hours talking to other mothers who have one. I would like to share some tips with you that I believe will make a big difference for you and your student. First, I will explain the reasons this child is different, and then I will give you some guidelines and simple suggestions for teaching this child. Don’t get bogged down in the reasons or the guidelines. If you don’t understand them, just skip to the suggestions—they will work, and in time you will understand the reasons.

All Children Are Not Alike

All children do not learn the same way. Textbooks and teaching techniques are written for a certain type of learner. Many children are that type. Others have a mixture of learning styles but can adjust. If your child has not adjusted, then it is probably because he is not that type and cannot adjust without your help. I do not like to call this a learning deficiency, just a different learning style. Most schools and textbooks are structured for students who focus on learning details and then later put them together to make a whole concept. This child needs to see the concept before he can focus on the details. After his mind makes sense of the whole, he can understand and remember the details easily because they logically fit into the whole. But because his mind is not yet developed enough to grasp most concepts, he will have difficulty learning things that appear to him to be disjointed facts.

All children are not motivated the same way. Many children focus on short-term goals and are content just to move from one problem to the next or from one assignment to the next. If your child consistently fails to follow a “list” and seems not to care at all about learning, he is probably motivated differently. In the same way that he learns by seeing how parts fit into the whole, he is motivated by seeing how tasks contribute to a whole. Of course, his mind is not able to comprehend the “big picture,” so he does not see the importance of the small tasks. And even when he does see a larger picture, his mind is not yet able to break it down into a series of small tasks, so he doesn’t know how to get from where he is to where he wants to be. Because he is motivated by “the big picture,” he will not want to do anything that doesn’t contribute to the big picture. That is why he always asks, “Why do I have to do this?” In one sense, he is an “efficiency expert.” Have you noticed that he always wants to find a different way, a better way, to do things? And he hates to waste time—when he does decide to apply himself, he gets the task done very quickly. Unfortunately, as a child, his big picture is focused on play. He does not see how schoolwork fits into this picture, and he considers it a waste of time. So he rarely applies himself to his schoolwork.

This Child Needs Your Help

You need to use different techniques to motivate him. Until such a time as he is able to comprehend the whole and break it down into meaningful parts, he needs you to break it down for him and present it to him in small parts. You may be able to give your other children a list of things to do and come back at the end of the morning to find them done. You will not be able to do that with this child. You will need to give him one small task at a time and establish a short-term checkpoint, “rewarding” him with encouragement and praise at the end of each task. In other words, you will need to present each small task as if it is the whole. You will need to be careful that each task you present is within his reach—small enough for his mind to see the “end” of the task and not too complicated for his academic skill level. You will need to remember that learning things that seem to him to be a disjointed list of facts is truly difficult for him, because he doesn’t see how they fit into the whole. This is not simply laziness or rebellion (although it can turn into these problems, and they need to be dealt with as separate issues). This is a true difficulty for which he needs your help, and which he can and will overcome with your help.

Guidelines for Teaching and Motivating

- Your goal is learning, not busywork. Copywork can be used as a “punishment” because it takes time and effort away from things he wants to do, but it will not be a learning tool with this child. He can copy pages upon pages without ever engaging his brain.
- Your goal is mastering a skill, not doing a certain number of problems or pages. If he can master the skill in five problems, why make him do twenty? (Remember, though, that he will need to reinforce the skill by review work on successive days. You cannot assume that learning it on one particular day means that he has mastered it forever.)
- Your goal is to make him engage his mind. If he is not learning, then he has not engaged his mind. If he does not engage his mind, he will not learn. Unless he engages his mind, you are both wasting time.
- You cannot assume that he can do fourth grade work just because he has progressed to the fourth grade. If he is struggling, there are probably things he has “covered” but not “learned.” You must find out where he is, go back to that point, and take him on from there. Don’t just start on a certain level and expect him to rise to it.
- Start by giving him only what you know he can do and gradually increase the amount he can do until he can work independently.
- Competition should be directed toward competing against himself and seeing his own progress. Otherwise, it will just intimidate and discourage him.
- His greatest motivation will be saving himself work and getting finished more quickly. This may appear to be laziness, but it can be turned into efficiency and diligence. Make him see that by applying himself diligently to something in the beginning, he saves himself work in the long run. What better life lesson could there be than this?
- Never “settle” for less than mastery. You may lower the level temporarily if you see that he is unable to master it, but after you back up to a simpler step always return to the harder step. Every time he says “this is too hard” and then actually accomplishes it, make a big deal of it. It will give him encouragement the next time he faces something that he thinks is too hard.
- Remember that because this child functions by what he sees as the big picture, he needs to have a big picture of understanding and success, not of confusion and defeat—and that is why you must take him back to whatever level he can succeed at and progress gradually to

things that are more difficult.

- Don't punish genuine academic mistakes. No matter how hard he tries, he will still make mistakes. Do punish carelessness.
- Motivation to learn more comes from being able to use what he already knows and from knowing ahead of time how he will be able to use what he is going to learn. For example, don't wait until your child knows all the alphabet sounds before teaching him the concept of reading. One popular program teaches the concept of reading a word as soon as a child learns the short vowels and only two consonants! After that, the child can't wait to learn a new sound and read more words.
- As he gets older, don't be afraid to listen to his suggestions. Set your standard of excellence and your minimum requirements. If he prefers a different method, let him try it. In other words, if you want him to make a study sheet but he wants to try highlighting in the book instead, let him try it his way—on the condition that if his work doesn't meet your standards, he goes back to your way!
- Although this child may not excel in independent learning, he will excel in something. Usually it will be something mechanical or something artistic. Encourage him in this area and try to make opportunities for him to progress and to serve the Lord and others through his abilities in this area. For example, let your student help with cooking at home or prepare goodies for shut-ins, mow lawns at your church, do woodwork projects as gifts for a children's hospital or your nursery, or play an instrument at a rest home.

Specific Suggestions for Specific Situations

- Break assignments down into small parts. For example, if he has trouble copying a paragraph, you may have to say, "Copy this sentence, and I will be back in five minutes to check it." Then do the same with the next sentence, and the next, until the paragraph is copied. Then praise him profusely for having copied the whole paragraph and remind him that by copying it one sentence at a time he was able to accomplish what seemed like an impossible goal. In time you can assign a whole paragraph and give him twenty minutes, etc. Study assignments will involve reading, picking out important facts, studying them, reviewing or self-checking to make sure they have been learned, and then taking the test. The last paragraph of this document gives a more detailed explanation of how to break down this process.
- Use a reduction in quantity as a motivation for increased quality. If he has a page of problems or sentences to do, give him the whole page but tell him to start by doing every other problem, or every third problem. Give him a reasonable time limit, and tell him that if he finishes within that time and gets them all correct, he won't have to do the rest of the problems. If he misses problems, have him do the rest—but make sure he understands this is not punishment. It is just to help him learn the concept. (You can be discriminating, here—if he is doing long division and obviously has grasped the concept but misses one problem because of a simple addition error, you may want to go over the addition fact he missed but not make him do the whole page of long division problems. If you notice a trend of addition errors, though, you should have him do the rest of the problems and then follow the instructions given below for dealing with carelessness.)
- If sloppy penmanship is a problem, cut down on the amount to be copied as a reward for careful penmanship. You may start by requiring only one word or one sentence if you like—but don't let him stop until he turns in the minimum assignment in acceptable penmanship! You may end up with a showdown the first time, but don't give in! Gradually increase the amount of work, building up your student's confidence and skill, so that he can write a composition or an essay question on a test using good penmanship.

- Avoid busywork. Busywork can be defined as assigning more work than is necessary to learn a skill. Some students actually like busywork. Not yours, though—he hates busywork! In some situations, such as a classroom, where a certain amount of time has to be spent and students don't all finish at the same time, there is almost no way to avoid busywork. But you have a choice. You will have greater success and a better attitude if you whittle away the busywork—and for once your student will see you as “the good guy”! Examples of things that *can* be busywork in certain situations are answering in complete sentences, answering questions on separate sheets so that the problem or question has to be rewritten, writing out study sheets rather than highlighting important concepts in the book, using copywork or outlining as a learning tool, writing out compositions or answering questions by hand when the computer could be used, assigning projects such as book reports for the sake of doing a certain number of them rather than for the sake of learning how to do them. The determination as to what is busywork and what is necessary for learning is very individual and will require some thought and evaluation on your part. It is very much related to age and educational level, as well as to your student's progress in independent study habits. For example, your child needs to know how to answer a question using a complete sentence. If your child cannot do that, then by all means make him do it on everything he writes until he can. But if you are sure that whenever he is asked to do so he is able to answer a question using a complete sentence, you may help him to focus on and finish history or science homework better by allowing him to use short answers instead of complete sentences. Just be sure you don't let the skill of answering in complete sentences be lost—make him do it on tests, or on random days, enough to reinforce the skill and to satisfy you that he has not forgotten it. If your child cannot do a good book report, then make him do as many as it takes until he hands in a good one! But if he proves he can do a good book report, let him hand in two or three good ones and then just let him read. Reward him for the amount of reading he does rather than trying to force him to read by requiring book reports.
- Careless errors should be dealt with differently than honest academic errors. If he continually misspells simple words in his daily work—words that you are certain he knows how to spell—this is because he doesn't care and therefore is not careful. Your job is to make him care. This is where copywork comes in, and this is definitely “punishment” rather than a learning tool! Make him aware that you plan to keep a sheet of paper beside you when you correct his daily work. Each time he misspells a word, record it on the sheet of paper. At a time that would normally be his independent playtime, require him to write each word on the list correctly two times (or five, or ten—start small and increase the “punishment” if he does not respond). How do you know whether he knows the word or not? If you call him in and ask him to spell it, and he spells it correctly, then you know it was just carelessness. If he cannot spell it, then it is probably a spelling rule that needs to be taught. In time you will determine where his capability level is. Just start with a few words that are obviously careless mistakes and gradually add more until you are covering all the words he carelessly misspells. If carelessness in math computation is the problem, you could use the same idea. If he added $6+7$ incorrectly, make him write $6+7=13$ a few times.
- Try the “elimination” method for spelling tests. On day one, give him five minutes to look over the list and then give him a “test.” Cross off all the words he spells correctly. The next day, study only the words he missed. Go over his mistakes and explain the spelling rules that will help him to spell the word correctly. Then give him a test on this list. Cross off all the words he spells correctly. The third day, use only the words he missed on the second day. Go over the list, give the test, and cross off the correct words. Do this until he gets all the words correct. He will like this method because he will not have to waste time copying words or studying words he already knows. You will like this method because he will have a much better attitude and because it will help you identify and focus on areas where teaching is truly needed. For example, my child consistently ended up with “ous” words, like “numerous,” at the end of the week. He would always write “os” or “us” but never “ous.” It became very clear that this was a spelling pattern that he needed to learn, not just one that he missed because he was careless. Before long, he was noticing the “ous” words on the list at the beginning of the week and paying special attention to them because he was tired of seeing them at the end of the week--and before long he was getting “ous” words correct the first time!

- Speed drills are good—but remember that your child may be intimidated and discouraged if he feels he cannot succeed, and he may just freeze. If this is the case, you must build his confidence by teaching him that success is doing your very best. So don't start by saying, "you have three minutes to finish," as if not finishing in three minutes means he has failed. Instead, give him the page and tell him to do it as quickly as he can but to take as much time as he needs to make sure that his answers are all correct. Always emphasize accuracy more than speed. Start with fewer problems or questions if need be, and work up to larger quantities. For a young child, keep it to something he can finish in two or three minutes. For an older student, keep it to ten or fifteen minutes. Time him on what he does, and record his time. The next day, give him the same amount of work and time him again, recording his time and comparing it to the first one. The goal is to see progress. Be content with small gains, especially at first, and don't be discouraged with a set-back or two as long as you see a trend of progress. If you don't see a trend of progress, then you may need to adjust the difficulty level. Make much of his progress—this is where rewards DO work! In addition, as his confidence builds and his successes add up, his enjoyment of his work will increase and his attitude will improve. When he is ready, you can proceed to setting a time limit and letting him race the clock. Working under pressure is a skill that does need to be developed in order for him to do well on skills tests and college entrance exams.
- Building-block skills (arithmetic tables, consonant sounds, letter blends and difficult spelling patterns, etc.) must often be learned by rote memory, which may be very hard for this student. Start with only a few facts. Write them on note cards and drill them, making a game of it. For instance, start with five sounds or five addition facts. Tell him that if he gets the answer without hesitation he gets the card; but if he has to stop and think before answering, you get the card. At the end, count his cards and record how many he got to keep. Emphasize how many he kept, not how many he missed. The next day, remind him how many he kept on the previous day and encourage him to try to keep one more. When he has kept all the cards, add one or two more cards to the stack. After all the facts to be learned have been added to the stack and he has kept all the cards, then make it a timed drill following the guidelines for speed drills given above. The goal, of course, is to drill him until the facts become second nature. Drills should be done daily, maybe even twice a day, but only for very short periods at a time.
- Composition assignments can be very intimidating. Remember that this child cannot break down a big project into steps. He needs you to give him a simple, logical pattern to follow with a definite starting point or he will not be able to focus and start. The best thing to do is to give him the list of question words: who, what, when, where, how, how many, and why. Have him write down these words along the left margin of a page, leaving several lines after each one. Then have him answer each question word by writing one or two sentences about his topic (help him to understand that not all of these questions will apply to every topic). When he is finished answering the questions, show him how to take the sentences he wrote and make a paragraph with them. With some students, you may have to start out doing this orally together, even writing down his answers yourself. As your student's educational level and skill level progress, you can lead him into more complex "outline" plans, such as a chronological listing or the listing of a series of steps. If your student's struggle with writing keeps him from being able to focus on the skill of composition writing, you might want to allow your student to use a computer. It will take his focus off the drudgery of writing and allow him to focus on the art of composition—and he might even enjoy it! Remember, though, that there will be times he will need to hand-write long selections. So once he has mastered the writing process, go back to requiring hand-written compositions on occasion.
- It is essential that this student have a definite means of determining whether he has mastered the material or not. In the beginning, that will have to be you! You will have to orally quiz the material to be tested. At first, you will probably be actually teaching it at the same time. If he doesn't know an answer, tell him what it is and have him repeat it. Then ask another question. Then go back to the one he missed to see if he has learned it. Keep going back and asking it again until you are sure he has learned it. (Don't "teach the tests" but do use the tests as a guide to make sure you ask him all the things that are covered on the tests. Have the

test and the book open in front of you. As you review material on the test, include some questions of your own from the book as well. Make sure your student cannot see your materials so he will not know which questions are on the test and which are from the book.) When the student has progressed to the level of making his own study sheets, have him fold a sheet of notebook paper in half so that the fold runs vertically down the center of the page. On the left side of the page, he should write the keyword. On the right side, he should write the definition or description. (You may wish to have him skip several lines between keywords if the definition or description will be lengthy.) Then make a cover sheet out of stiff paper, preferably colored. Mark and cut out a block on the top left side that is one line deep and half a page wide, so that when the cover sheet is laid down only the keyword on the first line shows. The student may check himself by looking at the word that appears and trying to say what is written on the other side of the page (which will be hidden by the cover sheet). Then he may move the cover sheet down to expose the next word, which will also expose the answer to the first word so he can check himself. This is an easy way to make a study sheet that actually allows the student to test himself to see if he has learned the material. If the facts are written all on one page with no way to see the questions or keywords apart from the answers, the student will think he knows the facts because he recognizes them, but he will have no way to check himself and be sure.

- Your child's retention will be best when it is based on logical context rather than rote memory. Don't throw out memorization of facts; but when he struggles with them, help him by putting them in a logical context. For instance, if your child has trouble learning addition and subtraction facts, use tangible objects so he can visualize the concept. If he has trouble with multiplication tables, put them in context by showing him, for example, that when he learns the eight's multiplication table, he is just counting by eight's. (If you doubt how effective this is, think about how easily your student learned the two's and the five's—because he already knew how to count by two's and five's.) Just write out the eight's facts side by side, so that the answers are all in a row across the page (8, 16, 24, etc.), then have your student memorize the answer row. After that, he will probably not have trouble with the eight's multiplication table because he “understands” it.
- Use hands-on activities to provide focus, motivation, reinforcement, and review. Hands-on may mean paper mache and finger painting, but it can be a lot of other things, too. Project notebooks, posters, picture collages, computer typing, time lines, or even highlighting or underlining in the book can be hands-on activities. Anything that puts a fact in a context or causes the student to focus on details will help him learn. These tools should be used carefully, though—or they can become busywork!
- In a homeschool setting, your child will not often be taught by the lecture method—but your child does need to learn to focus and learn under the lecture method. One good way to teach this is to give him a tablet and a pen during church. Have him write down the Scripture text and pick out two or three important things that the preacher says. Don't let him doodle! He may take a long time to write one sentence, and you may think he is missing a lot of the message during that time, but if he is not writing something down, he will more than likely tune out the whole message and hear nothing at all. This is a “hands-on” tool that can teach your child to focus and listen. Reward him according to the number of things he writes down. This is also a good way to discuss things with him, because you can go over his list together.

So How Long Do I Have to Do This . . .

Are you going to have to do these things for your child for the rest of his life . . . and yours? No! Your job is not to babysit him, but to teach him—not only academics but life skills. Your goal in homeschooling is much more than helping him progress academically. It is to teach him to be an adult who functions independently. Therefore, you will want to continually make progress, not only in academics, but in the way tasks are assigned and accomplished. At first, you will probably have to do everything for him and with him. When he is successful at that level, then you should assign to him one of the tasks that you previously had done yourself. For instance, at first you will have to read a story or text assignment with him. After a while, you may begin reading the assignment with him but leave him a small section to finish on his own—give him a

time limit and come back to him at the end of the time limit. If he has reached the point of consistently being finished when you come back, then change it so that he comes to you when he has finished. The next step would be, of course, that he could read the whole selection by himself—but you will still have to go over it with him after he has read it to help him pick out the important points to remember. The next step would be to give him a list of important words or study questions which he will identify or answer after he finishes his reading, which will make him focus on the important points—but you will still have to orally quiz him on this list to make sure he has learned it, not just that he has written it down. The next step would be to have him make his own list, fill in the answers, and then bring it to you to go over together. Someday—believe it or not—he will be able to read, make the list, study the list, and take the test . . . all without you! How long will that take? It may take only a few months, or it may take years. Your child may progress very quickly toward independence, or your child may progress slowly and need your help for a long time. It may happen in 6th grade, or it may not happen until 11th or 12th grade. Every child is different. You will never know until it happens. But when it does happen, you will know that it was worth the effort!

Biographical Information

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Joy (Mayes) Dean was born into a preacher's home and was saved as a small child. During her college years, Joy was given the opportunity to serve as a short-term teen missionary in Africa for 10 months. A desire to serve the Lord and a burden for missions that grew in her heart as a result of this experience were the common goals on which her relationship with her husband, Steve, was established. Steve and Joy had the privilege of serving for one term as missionaries in South Korea. After returning to the states, Joy homeschooled their five children for 15 years. It was during this experience as a homeschool mom that the need for state history course materials became evident. The lessons Joy wrote for her own children became the basis for the family business, A Helping Hand (www.statehistory.net), which is now a full-time ministry for Steve and Joy.