

Ingredients for Academic Success

What makes the difference between an academically successful child and one who struggles with schoolwork? Anna Dalglish, Instructor at the Kumon Maths and English Study Centre in Guildford North, believes a child's potential to learn is unlimited, particularly if these key components for successful learning are in place:

Individualised progress

Every student is unique with an individual learning style and ability level. One maths student may be highly confident and have a go at unfamiliar sums, even at the risk of getting them wrong. Another, whilst possibly academically stronger, may be held back by fear of failure. An effective learning programme, as well as tackling the many different types of unhelpful study habits, should be flexible enough to address the individual needs and characteristics of each student.

Little and often

An effective learning method should recognise the optimum time for which students can concentrate. Small but consistent effort is a very effective learning approach, particularly with young children, and can add up to a relatively painless way to study. Over time, this approach develops students' self-discipline, their determination and willingness to persist, and the ability to focus for longer periods of time.

Independent learning

Students retain knowledge and skills more effectively when they work something out for themselves. Solving problems exercises the brain in a way that simply being told the answer does not. Whilst spoon-feeding for exams can work in the short term (at least at lower school levels), it does not challenge students to think for themselves or prepare them for life

after school. If a student is genuinely stuck, guidance is more helpful than spoon-feeding. A student who has “learnt how to learn” and solve problems for himself will ultimately be stronger both in the subject studied and in other subjects. He or she will develop a positive “can-do” approach to all subjects and will experience the personal pride and self-esteem that come from ownership of his or her learning.

Feedback and praise

Motivation and encouraging a positive attitude to study is important. This is where parents’ support, interest and involvement in their children’s learning is particularly beneficial. Parents can act as their child’s “coach” by giving genuine praise, providing guidance (whilst still allowing the student to work things out for himself), encouraging an attitude of self-belief, and setting high standards.

Confidence and consolidation

Students learn best when they experience a sense of achievement. Any parent who struggled with a subject at school will know the demotivating effect of thinking you are “no good” at a subject. An effective long-term learning method should begin with work at a comfortable level for the student, allowing him to succeed and gain confidence. This approach also ensures the student builds on solid foundations – particularly important in maths, where failure to understand a topic fully can repeatedly undermine future progress.

Aim high

Being satisfied with “good enough” grades prevents students from developing their full potential. A student who experiences the enjoyment of getting full marks is less likely to settle for “good enough” grades but will strive to achieve the best possible mark and to make further progress. Whilst some parents may shrink from “hothousing” or being perceived as pushy, students themselves gain great satisfaction from mastering a subject. Think of the delight on your child’s face when he or she first learnt to walk. If your child had been

content with learning to crawl, he would not have made further progress! The same enjoyment and self-esteem can be gained from aiming and achieving at the highest levels. If the parent is genuinely acting as their child's coach, there is no need for "pushiness".

Learn from mistakes

The higher the student aims, the more mistakes he or she may make. Rather than being deterred, the trick is to see the mistakes as a learning opportunity. Requiring the student to correct his or her own mistakes, rather than pointing out where he has gone wrong, builds up the skill of self-learning.

Practice makes perfect

If you run a marathon, you do not have one practice run and then turn up on the day. Doing something once or twice does not develop in-depth knowledge or skills. It takes months of driving a car for the skills to become automatic. Studying is no different, and repeated practice of topics allows knowledge to be thoroughly assimilated. As with the benefits of students working things out for themselves, repeated practice "exercises the brain".

The art of helping your child to unlock his or her potential is not an easy one and, as with most things that are worthwhile, it takes practice to perfect. However, the rewards for both you and your children are undoubtedly worth the effort.

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