

## Creating the Right Bridge From School to Home

By: Benjie Stern, PhD

Parents are often faced with a dilemma when a child immediately arrives home from school. Each parent asks themselves “Should my current parenting role be that of a loving parent as I pour my child with love and support as soon as he arrive home from school, or should I take upon the immediate role of the tough homework police?” Like in most parenting interactions, the best way to figure out how to relate to our children is to make an effort to understand their emotional world. When a child comes home from school, she is emotionally overwhelmed. The child had gone through hours of class, restricted to her seat, required to pay attention without being distracted or daydreaming, battered and bullied, and faced with many social challenges; especially in the schoolyard, bus, and lunchroom. This stress can be very positive for the child’s growth, as the challenges push the child to develop to be more resilient. However, this child is in desperate need for support, as the positive stress is in danger of developing into negative stress, ‘distress’.

Each of us experience positive stress and ‘distress’ on a daily basis. According to the Yerkes-Dodson law of stress, an optimal level of stress is needed to improve performance in whatever task one does. Increasing stress up to that level can prompt a person to perform better. It is the positive stress that drives us to thrive. The pressure to support a family, drive to be successful, and desire to do something meaningful, propels us to work hard and achieve our goals. But beyond that optimal level, raising stress levels further could cause the quality of the performance to deteriorate. That is when, what is termed 'eustress', or good stress, becomes distress. When we are distressed we begin to feel emotionally overwhelmed, overworked and overburdened as we have trouble meeting deadlines, concentrating and making decisions. Our productivity and performance decrease as our stress levels increase. We also may become easily irritated and overwhelmed, and have relationship problems with colleagues. Everyone has a different breaking point. However, children are especially sensitive to stress and their breaking point can arise much quicker. When a child has reached his/her breaking point, he/she can begin to act out behaviorally, become oppositional, and too emotionally overwhelmed to concentrate in class, achieve in school, complete homework and study for tests. Dr. Becker explains that a key ingredient in decreasing distress is support. The strength that a child needs in order to be resilient to the challenges that they face in their everyday development is the feeling of trust and support given by the child’s parents.

Now it is clear that the child needs support after a long hard day, what can a parent do to provide this support? What the child needs is a warm, genuine greeting from her mother. A greeting saturated with delight and endearment is vital for the emotional support of the child, and essential for the child’s continued enjoyment and tolerance for school. The support the parent gives the child adds fuel to the resiliency of the child, as it decreases the distress and adds more room for positive stress; intensifying her energy to take on more challenges (i.e. homework). Rabbi Solomon emphasizes that if a parent shows an outpouring of love when a child comes home from school, the child will associate the entire experience of school with love. So much so, that when she wakes up in the morning the next day, she will have forgotten the hardships she endured, and will remember only the joy of coming home.

What are some healthy ways a mother (or father) can greet their child when they first come home? The first important advice is that the parent should not be the teacher's agent or an extension of the school, by extending the feeling of persecution from the school into the home. Rather than putting your child through a cross-examination the second they step foot into the house and before he/she has a chance to breathe asking "What did the teacher say, what did what you learned today, and especially "what's for homework?", a parent can make statements that convey an understanding of the trials and tribulations at school: "You look as though you had a hard day"; "I bet you could not wait for school to end"; "You seem glad to be home". Then some helpful questions can include "what are some of the things you enjoyed during the day", "what were some difficult parts of the day", and "what can I do for you". In most situations making statements is preferable to asking questions.

If a parent is on the phone at the time when the child gets home, it is vital that the parent takes a break from the phone call for a few minutes to give their full attention to the child. A child has to feel that her parent is interested in her and the child is more important than the other things going on in the parent's life. A child feels safe and protected if she knows that she is the focus of her parent's world. If after greeting the child with respect the parent does not have time to listen right then to the child, set up a time for it later on- but the parent must give the child at least a little bit of "uninterrupted full attention" time. If the parent is not home when the child comes home, it would be helpful for the parent to either write a note, email, text, or call the child, leaving a message of affection.

It is not the amount of time we give our children each night that matters; rather it is the attitude and spirit with which it is given. The moment the child is in our company, the child needs to feel that in our eyes, at that moment, she is the most important person in the world, and indeed she should be. If a child feels understood and secure in our love, they will not have to worry that they are not perfect. Unconditional love despite their imperfections is the type of love they need to get them through a day full of struggles. They will always feel secure through all the tribulations of the day, knowing that they have a safe haven, a house of refuge, which they can always run to at the end of the day. This will give our children the resiliency to take on the challenges of life head on, and be able to increase the margin of positive stress to reach their highest potentials.