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5 Ways to Help Kids Who Procrastinate

By Michael Kramer, Ph.D



Not now. Later. Tomorrow. That's when many teenagers say they plan to complete their household chores or tackle their homework.

To a certain extent, this is normal—many of us have a tendency to delay, to put off until tomorrow what we don't want to do today.

There is a difference, however, between the occasional delayer and someone who has an established, disabling pattern of procrastination fueled by an underlying issue. For parents, dealing with either can be a frustrating challenge. Discerning between the two can be even more difficult.

"Anxiety and fear are better managed by attempting to succeed at the task at hand rather than avoiding it."

Defining Procrastination

Procrastination comes in a few different forms:

- Not starting a task until the last minute.
- Failing to complete an assigned task in a predetermined timeframe.
- Putting off a task in order to complete a more preferable, lower priority task.



For children, procrastination usually results in a negative consequence such as poor or failing grades, the inability to participate in extracurricular activities, or family consequences like loss of driving rights, screen time, or increased parental supervision.

If your child is encountering these negative consequences on a regular basis, then they likely suffer from procrastination. But, there are steps you can take to help break the behavior. In order to effectively parent a child who procrastinates, it's first important to understand *why* your child puts off tasks.

Understanding the Behavior

There's a common misconception that kids procrastinate because they are lazy or have low motivation. While low motivation can be a contributing factor, there are many others, including:

- **Lack of Relevance:** Your child may not see the task as relevant to his or her current or future goals.
- **Boredom:** Some tasks just aren't compelling. For instance, most kids don't find cleaning their room to be a fun or engaging activity.
- **Lack of Self-Discipline:** Knowing you need to do something isn't the same as being able to get started. Kids are faced with an increasing number of distractions, which can make it hard to prioritize and stick to plans.
- **Poor Time Management:** Many kids underestimate how long it takes to do something, and do it well. They put off getting started, assuming there's enough time to complete the task.
- **Anxiety and/or Fear of Failure:** Some children are unable to start tasks because they are afraid that their performance won't meet personal expectations, or the expectations of significant others. Taken to the extreme, this anxiety becomes perfectionism—the paralyzing belief that anything less than perfect is unacceptable.

To understand your child's procrastinating behavior, you need to talk openly and hear his or her perspective. Typically, kids are willing to share if they feel like you're being supportive—they need to believe that you genuinely want to understand their fear so you can help them, not issue a series of consequences that may exacerbate feelings of disappointment. 

As you listen, try to identify which of the underlying causes may be at play. Just as a physician can't effectively treat a headache without knowing the underlying cause—dehydration, allergies, concussion, or tumor—you can't effectively help your child stop procrastinating unless you understand what's prompting the behavior. For instance, offering or withholding a reward for completing a task won't help a child who is delaying because they don't see why the task is relevant.

So what can a parent do? When your child's anxiety prevents her from tackling necessary tasks, you need to intervene. These five steps can help:

1. **Ask Your Child Questions:** Get to know how your child views their self, the expectations placed on them, and the reality of the situation. Ask questions like, "What standards do you set for yourself?" "What do you think we expect of you?" "What will really happen if you don't accomplish the task based on the standards you've set for yourself?"

Understanding how your child is currently interpreting the situation will help you develop appropriate parental responses.

2. **Clarify Your Expectations:** Kids tend to overestimate parental expectations, so make sure you are clear and realistic in what you expect from your child. For example, many parents may focus on the *effort* put forth on a school project or test, not the grade—but a child may think you expect them to earn straight-As in every subject.

This may be realistic for kids who are consistently high-achievers, but for children who struggle with just turning in their homework, such expectations may be too much. In this case, lean toward setting specific, achievable expectations such as structured time to do homework, study, or do chores.

Also remember to be clear and direct when stating your expectations. Doing so will help ensure that you and your child are on the same page—if your child still procrastinates after you have this conversation, restate your expectations and reinforce that they are accountable for their own actions and the corresponding consequences.

3. **Teach Problem Solving Skills:** Consider this scenario: *If I don't excel on this paper, my grade point average will go down, which means I won't be able to play football this year, which means I'll have no friends, school will be unbearable and I'll be a total loser.*

Is that scenario reasonable or likely? No. But kids who fear failure often spiral into a series of unrealistic, irrational, worst-case consequences. It's called catastrophic thinking. In addition to contributing to anxiety and procrastination, this kind of thinking can lead to outbursts of bad behavior. A child may act out because they don't know how to solve the problem appropriately.

You can help coach your child by teaching effective problem-solving techniques. Try breaking tasks up into more manageable chunks or setting smaller, more attainable goals. By helping your child understand how to develop a plan for tackling a problem, they may feel less overwhelmed by the amount of work involved with the task.

4. **Point Out Positive Qualities:** Ask your child to identify the attributes they think lead to happiness and success in life—integrity, creativity, people skills, passion, for instance. Getting your child to focus on personality traits they already possess, or will likely develop, will boost their self-esteem and shine light on unrealistically high standards.
5. **Use Your Experience to Relate:** Self-disclose some of your own fears and describe how you've managed them. By acknowledging your imperfections and struggles, you may prevent your child from feeling defective—like s/he is the only one who can't effectively manage tasks.

Attempting Success

Because anxiety can be paralyzing, you may have to help your child get started. Consider giving her a defined start time. For instance, "*After dinner at 6:00, let's get started.*" You can also try setting some rules around the process, like working for a certain amount of time without interruption, or completing a specific body of work before taking a break. This type of structure can help children (and adults!) manage anxiety and generate a sense of momentum and confidence.

Ultimately, your goal is to help your child learn to set reasonable expectations. **Anxiety and fear are better managed by attempting to succeed at the task at hand rather than avoiding it.** Said another way, fear doesn't simply dissipate with the passage of time—it is only reduced through continuous effort, which leads to success. With parental support, a plan to tackle problems and a willingness to try, your child will be armed with tools to manage tasks effectively. 

About Michael Kramer, Ph.D



Dr. Michael Kramer is a Clinical Psychologist and Nationally Certified School Psychologist who has worked with children, adolescents, and their families for over thirty years. Over the course of his career, he has worked in residential treatment centers, inpatient psychiatric units, community mental health centers, and public and private schools. In his private practice, he specializes in providing treatment to youth with anxiety, depression, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder. He also works as a Sports Psychologist, providing service to high school, collegiate, and professional athletes. Dr. Kramer is the father of two grown children.

