

# What Parents Say Matters

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When I overheard a troubling conversation at a recent dinner about a child's academic performance, it reminded me about the importance of the words we use when speaking with our kids. Perhaps this discussion is even more timely as we near the end of the first semester in school, and grade reports will be released soon.

On our survey, the *Stanford Survey of Adolescent School Experiences*, we ask students several questions related to perception of their parents' behavior. We examine whether students perceive that their parents are guided by a "mastery orientation" or a "performance orientation." Parents with a mastery orientation for their children emphasize deep learning, improvement, and understanding of class material, and they don't view their child in competition with peers. In contrast, parents who value a performance orientation, focus on their student's achievement as mainly measured by grades and test scores — the need to score better than others in order to succeed.

The results of our survey indicate that when students believe that they can meet their parents' expectations, there is a statistically significant correlation with the following student outcomes:

- Academic worry is ↓
- Cheating is ↓
- Physical stress is ↓
- Engagement in learning is ↑
- Hours of sleep is ↑
- Perception of teacher support is ↑

These are all indicators of a healthier, more balanced adolescent experience.

So, how can we parent so that our children perceive that they have the ability to meet our expectations? One way is to *be careful of what we say and how we say it*. Often, parents forget that all of our quick questions and short statements about school and learning eventually leave a distinct impression on our kids. The next time the topic of discussion turns to grades, tests, college admissions, or extracurriculars, think about the following scenarios and what our children may hear:

<p><b>What We Say:</b> When looking at a child’s report card, we ask, “How did you end up with a B in that class? You were doing so well. What happened on the final?”</p>	<p><b>What They May Hear:</b> An “A” is the only acceptable grade.</p>
<p><b>What We Say:</b> When your child is upset by a grade on a recent test: “I know you are disappointed, but let’s keep things in perspective and figure out if you understand what you got wrong.”</p>	<p><b>What They May Hear:</b> We are not <i>only</i> concerned with grades. We care about learning and improvement.</p>
<p><b>What We Say:</b> After your child strikes out in a close baseball game, “Hey, don’t worry about it; that was a tough situation for any player.”</p>	<p><b>What They May Hear:</b> We do not expect you to be perfect.</p>
<p><b>What We Say:</b> “Did you hear the news that 3 kids from the high school were accepted to Ivy League schools?”</p>	<p><b>What They May Hear:</b> Acceptance at <i>only particular</i> schools is newsworthy, and we want you to go to a newsworthy school.</p>

To be fair, these lines above are taken out of context. We don’t hear what was said before or after, and we don’t know if the tone was one of care or concern. And yet, kids sometimes hear only partial messages despite our best efforts.

Try to remember to ask how your child is feeling about the grade, test, game, or college admissions experience. Honor his/her emotions and opinions and to try to keep the big picture in mind when having these conversations. Our kids look to us for perspective and to give meaning to experiences. We need to choose our words wisely because our children are listening.

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