They're baaaack.  
No, not Halloween ghosts or 
Thanksgiving gobblefests, but some-
thing that strikes real fear into fami-
lies during late fall: report cards.  

Children and their parents both 
dread report cards. Kids are not only 
anxious about their grades, but their 
parents' reaction as well. Parents worry 
about the child's ability to succeed in 
school and get a good job in the future, 
but also about what other adults - teach-
ers and neighbors - think of them as 
competent parents.  

Whether your child gets satisfactory 
or unsatisfactory grades, keep the focus 
on learning. Having an automatic 
response to grades can put the emphasis 
on results, evaluation and competition, 
sometimes at the expense of learning. 
Begin by asking your child what she 
learned during the last marking period. 
What did she like best? What was easy? 
What was difficult? What does she 
think she will learn in the future? In 
what ways does she think she can 
improve? 

When grades meet or exceed expec-
tations, everyone breathes a sigh of 
relief. When grades are unsatisfactory 
or failing, parents can jump to conclu-
sions and have strong, negative reactions 
that are unhelpful. What can parents do 
to avoid or reduce report card over-
reaction? 

Stay calm.  
When parents are disappointed by 
children's school performance, they may 
become frustrated, even angry. Children, 
too, may have strong feelings of shame 
and defensiveness. If report cards 
arouse these strong feelings in your fam-
ily, it's important to set aside a cooling 
off period. Allow time after the arrival 
of the report card for everyone to get a 
grip on strong emotions. School strug-
gles require a problem-solving approach 
that depends on everyone remaining 
calm and rational.  

Understand what 
the grades mean. 

It's important for a parent to under-
stand the teacher's grading system in 
order to determine her child's strengths 
and shortcomings and the most effec-
tive course of action. Most teachers 
take into account attendance, participa-
tion, school assignments, homework 
and test results when setting a grade. In 
some cases, grades may reflect conduct. 
On the whole, however, grades usually 
evaluate the child's ability to master sub-
jects based on a number of criteria.  

If the child's effort and perform-
ance is satisfactory during class, but he 
consistently fails tests, he may be experi-
encing test anxiety or have difficulty 
interpreting tests. While all school chil-
dren need to conform to testing stan-
dards, there may be alternative ways to 
evaluate your child's performance. 

Likewise, if your child's participa-
tion in class is inadequate, she may need 
encouragement and opportunity to be 
more involved. If his homework is 
unsatisfactory, he may need guidance in 
establishing effective after school rou-
tines or help in acquiring study skills.
blaming, criticizing and excessive advice-giving. School performance is ultimately the child's responsibility and any problems are primarily his to solve. So what does a parent do? Ask the right questions and be a good listener.

Let your child explain his school performance. How does he feel about his grades? In what areas is he doing well? Where does he need to improve? Ask him how he can and will do better. Ask him how you can help him do better.

When parents remain non-critical and practice respectful listening, children may reveal feelings and ideas that point toward potential solutions. For example, a child may talk about how other children tease her so she's afraid to speak up in class. Another child may disclose that he doesn't have enough time to complete his tests. In either case, some solutions are suggested. The shy child can practice speaking up while another child can learn time management or test-taking skills.

**Talk with your child's teacher.**

When children fail or get poor grades, it's imperative that parents arrange parent-teacher conference. These conferences should be cooperative, not confrontational. Blaming the child, the teacher or the school system for your child's performance misses the main point, which is to help your child learn and succeed.

Your child's teacher can help you understand what the grades mean and what your child needs to do to improve. She may be able to offer some insight about your child's learning style, level of motivation or peer relationships that impact on achievement. Parents can contribute information about the home environment and family situation that may be influencing learning. Parents and teachers can often work together to develop a mutually satisfying strategy for helping a student.

**Make an action plan.**

Discuss the teacher's ideas with the child. Remember, your child has already shared some of her own ideas for improvement. Using everyone's ideas, develop an action plan.

1. **Set realistic goals.** It's realistic to expect students to maintain or improve acceptable grades and to improve poor grades by one letter during the next marking period. It's unrealistic to expect a student to suddenly get all A's.
2. **Establish a timetable.** It's not unreasonable to expect students to show some improvement week by week or test by test. On the other hand, it is unreasonable to expect a complete about face in a short period of time. A realistic timetable helps the student evaluate whether or not he's on track.
3. **Develop study skills and habits.** Help your child get organized and learn how to manage her time. Be consistent in enforcing after school routines.
4. **Provide incentives and consequences if necessary.** Rewards do not help children develop intrinsic motivation or pride in their work. But some children may need some incentives to acquire skills and helpful habits. Other children may need to lose privileges to reinforce the importance of schoolwork. In any case, avoid punishing children about their school performance. This tends only to de-motivate them.
5. **Stick to it.** Give your child time to develop new attitudes and skills. Don't be easily discouraged. Solving problems and learning new skills takes time.

**Get help if needed.**

Some students require tutoring or other assistance. You may have to arrange for diagnostic testing or specialized services for your child. You may need support and cooperation from other family members as you and your child adapt to new routines and rules. Finally, you may need support as you deal with your own feelings in the situation. Practice good coping skills and seek out the empathetic ear of a good friend.

**If your child gets good grades.**

Even when children get good grades, parents can over-react. Too much praise or unnecessary rewards send the message that children are only important when they get good grades. Children may even think, "They only love me because I get good grades."

It's more important to focus on how the child feels about his achievements. In order for children to develop pride in their work, they must be able to reflect on and evaluate their own efforts. A thoughtful parent helps children arrive at their own conclusions about their success. When children say, "I'm proud of my grades. I like school. I want to do even better next time," parents do not have say anything. A smile and a hug can say it all.

**Source:** Tim Jahn, Human Development Specialist, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

HD 97