Tools for Academic Success

Recently, I posted my top 10 tips for home-schooling success, whether it’s just helping with homework or being full-time home school teacher to them. Now I am elaborating on each item on the list. Parenting tip #3 is this:

Structure, routine, and muscle memory are tools

for academic success.

Studies show that habits take 6-8 weeks of consistent behavior to be formed. Bad habits, good habits, study habits…it doesn’t matter. If you want to change behavior from occasional to habitual, do it regularly for at least 6-8 weeks.

For parents of home schoolers, and for parents who just want their kids to get the most out of their homework and study time at home, help them create a structure for success and a routine for getting the job done. Structure and routine will lead them to developing muscle memory for learning and for retrieving that learning at test time.

I’ve played a lot, I mean a lot, of baseball in my time. Starting with tee ball at age 5, I progressed through coach’s pitch, Little League, Teener League, High School baseball, American Legion baseball, and then onto scholarship at Wake Forest University and ultimately Men’s Senior Baseball until I retired at age 54. Whew!!!

One time in high school, I didn’t even get a foul ball at the plate for 4 games. That was 12 at-bats! Talk about a major batting slump. And I regularly batted between .300 and .400.

Well, I went back to the drawing board. I was in the batting cage for hours each day. I hit off a tee. I hit soft toss. I studied the pitchers to know what was being thrown to me. Everything. Nothing seemed to work. Then, my coach told me, “Jon, you know what? You’re thinking too much. Get out of your head and do your thing.”

Boy that was like giving me permission. I knew I had the talent. I just needed to get unstuck. Next time up, I just cleared my head and focused on the ball. First pitch? Foul ball. Second pitch? Base hit. I got out of my slump by being prepared and not thinking too much.

For any good habit, and especially for developing good study habits, start with helping your child develop a structure to the task. Does he have a dedicated workspace or desk where he can always study? Does he have pens, markers, paper, folders, notebooks, styluses, iPad, laptop in his workspace and readily available to him? Is this space free from distractions?

Then, help him develop the routine of studying. Same relative time each school night. That is, Sunday through Thursday nights, he knows that he is attending to school matters at the same time and in the same space each night.

School systems usually have a formula for the amount of time that should be spent on homework for given grades. The range is usually from 30 minutes for primary/elementary school grades, one hour for middle school grades, and two hours for high school grades. If your child correctly completes his homework quicker than these estimates, good for him, as long as you have checked the quality of his work. Where kids are struggling for good grades, have this be both homework completion and extra study time, with your help.

With structure and routine, muscle memory kicks in, creating more efficient use of your child’s time hitting the books. With muscle memory, his working on school stuff becomes unforced and natural. These are the tools for academic (and life) success.