

DR. BERTIE'S PARENTING NEWSLETTER

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Each month I invite parents to submit a question or topic that they want to see featured in my free newsletter, and I will pick one of these to address. To ask a question, suggest a topic, or subscribe, write to askdrbertie@gmail.com. For other services, write to drbertiewai@gmail.com.

WHAT MIGHT BE BEHIND HOMEWORK STRUGGLES AND THE LACK OF INITIATIVE

What I hear a lot from parents is the headaches around finishing school work and preparing for tests. These are wide-shared problems that many families face. What many parents might have overlooked is the fact that these problems might be complicated by a hidden fight: the fight between parents and children for a sense of agency (or control), and how not having a sense of control can negatively impact these children's lives in both the short and long run.

Common problems parents have raised:

1. **Poor time-management**
2. **Low motivation**
3. **Opposition (e.g. talking back)**

1 & 2 arise a lot in the battle-ground of school work. Parents find that their children are not self-motivated when it comes to reviewing for tests/exams, and that they lack initiative and self-discipline when it

comes to finishing their homework.

The problem can be two-fold.

1) When children are highly supervised to the point where their to-do list is itemized and time-table determined by adults on a minute-by-minute basis, children become "**micro-managed.**" *If a child grows up in a highly controlled environment where they are simply expected to take orders from adults and execute them without ever having a need to plan, decide, time-manage and to take initiative, we can't really blame them if they grow up without these very important life skills.* It will be unfair to hold our children accountable when they have never been taught a skill and asked to practice that skill.

2) *Another issue that micro-managing a child might inadvertently create is a growing resistance in the child. (Think about how you feel if your boss micro-manages you.)* All human beings desire for a sense of agency, a feeling of having some control over

our own lives. That translate into the desire to have some say in the when, how, and what, etc. When that sense of agency is taken away from a child, the child's frustration can lead to some defiance behavior, such as talking back, saying no, arguing for the sake of arguing, or other kind of oppositional behavior. Resistance and opposition is just a child's way of saying "I want to have some say."

One way to get around the resistance is to work collaboratively with a child about how s/he wants to handle homework time. Sit down with your child to talk about what the after-school schedule should look like: what should be done first, when to take a break, what the child can do during breaks, rewards for finishing on time and doing a good job, etc. That way, children feel their voice is heard and preferences considered. That will motivates cooperation and compliance.