



Institiúid na gComhairleoirí Treorach  
INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

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## Helping You Teenager Study

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**A Guide For Parents of  
Teenagers in  
1st Year, 2nd Year &  
3rd Year**

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**The Institute of  
Guidance Counsellors**

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## 1. Introduction

Academic success in secondary school requires several elements to be in place. Regular attendance, good punctuality, adherence to school rules, and consistent attention to homework, are the basics needed for a smooth progression in secondary school. However, experience shows, year in year out, that it is a mistake to assume that once all of the above are in place, that success is guaranteed. Something extra is needed, i.e. study.

Study is often viewed as work carried out in the run up to exams. A week or a few days before exams, students become conscious of the need to revisit topics covered weeks or months previously in order to obtain a reasonable grade in the imminent exam. However, for most students such an approach is flawed.

If we define academic success as the student trying their best, the focus shifts from the results obtained to the efforts made in obtaining that result. It could be argued that studying in the run up to exams does not constitute a student's best effort. Students who perform to the best of their ability – regardless of grade – are those who consistently study throughout the school year, not just in the run up to a class/end of term exam.

If a teacher is teaching topic 7 in class, that teacher will be focusing on the class work and homework associated with that topic. However, as real learning is incremental, topics 1 to 6 cannot be ignored or let go by the wayside. Therefore, in order for a student to maintain *their best effort*, a routine should be in place that involves studying topics 1 to 6 when the teacher is focusing on topic 7.

It is natural for students to expect parents and teachers to check that they are keeping up with current topics by checking day-to-day homework. As a result there is no necessity on the part of the student to be concerned with the past topics. If these past topics are not studied nothing goes wrong today or tomorrow and there is no apparent immediate damage to progress. However, this focus on short-term goals neglects the longitudinal study that should be done. Without addressing this, only serves to store up trouble. Therefore, for a student to be able to say they have done their best – regardless of grades obtained – that student needs to have a weekly routine of study throughout the academic year.

Moreover, whatever year the student is currently in, it is useful to project ahead to 6<sup>th</sup> year to see what habits a successful 6<sup>th</sup> year student exercises. A successful 6<sup>th</sup> year student has a weekly routine *throughout the academic year* that consists of the following: keeping up to date with current homeworks, studying 6<sup>th</sup> year material that had been previously been taught in the early part of 6<sup>th</sup> year, and studying old 5<sup>th</sup> year material. These habits do not suddenly switch themselves on when a study starts 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> year. They evolve over time i.e. a number of years, and have their origins in study habits developed earlier on the secondary school cycle. Therefore, the earlier in the Junior Cycle years that habits are formed, the greater the chance these habits will be implemented in the Senior Cycle.

## 2. Study: Learning To Learn

When students are asked how they study Maths, the general response is that they do different examples of problems over and over again. When asked why they do not just read the maths book, the response is that that does not work; the problems need to be written for the methods to be absorbed. What is actually happening is that the student is **processing** the information by carrying out a physical activity with a pen in the hand. Students agree that this is necessary for Maths. The argument here is that it is necessary for all subjects, i.e. reading only does not work - there should be some form of processing of the information for all subjects. Reading alone or re-writing or transcribing the text from a book into notes does not ensure retention. Indeed, using a highlighter or underlining key sections of text –while helping to highlight important points – does not help retention. Three main ways students can learn.

1. **Visual** (seeing) learners like to learn through written language such as reading and writing. They remember what they have written down. They use bullet points, charts, graphs, mind maps, pictures, write stories, or use flash cards.
2. **Auditory** (hearing) learners make speeches or presentations, use recordings, read out loud, create musical jingles to aid memory or tell stories.
3. **Kinesthetic** (doing) learners learn by doing, touching or making. They often move about while studying.

Nobody falls neatly into any of these categories. While one or two styles may be dominant, we tend to move between the various methods. Any method employed will vary from person to person and will also fluctuate depending on the type of material being studied within each subject and from subject to subject. However, it can be argued that all of the learning styles above are just different forms of **processing**. There are as many ways to process information as there are individuals. Below are some examples of different methods of processing, but the challenge is for each student,

- ✓ **To find the best methods that works them.**
- ✓ **Be able to change from method to method as the subject changes.**
- ✓ **Be able to change from method to method as the material with in each subject changes.**

### 3. Different Ways Of Processing

#### 3.1 Note Taking

One way of achieving quality and productive study is to make shorthand, concise, hand written notes *in parallel* with what you are reading. The student should avoid transcribing or copying from one page to another. These notes can be words or phrases and not long and full sentences. Each new point should be written on a new line. Once a or two line has been read from a text, the student should ask themselves, 'what does that tell me?' Then rephrase it in their own words. This should then be written out. Once they have written the bullet points they can reconstruct these bullet points into full sentences that they can now say out loud. Yes, out loud, they should talk to themselves. Remember, how they learned their four times table in primary school. All of this has the effect of processing the information through the "cogs" in the brain, which does not happen if you read *only*.

Here are some simple steps to follow and an example on the next page.

1. Read a sentence or two.
2. Think about what it tells you.
3. Rephrase it in your own words.
4. Write it in bullet points
5. Say it out loud.
6. Hear it.

Which step is the most important? Perhaps step 2, it forces the brain to think/process the information.

This system of reading followed by a physical activity is effective for text based subjects like History, Geography, English, and Business. For subjects with a lot of text material e.g. English and History, it is very tempting just to read – this should be avoided. Other subjects like Maths, and some of the problem solving exercises in Science, should be studied by doing examples over and over again. Also, with the Maths type subjects making templates and/or spread-sheets for definitions or formulae facilitates the practice of writing out (repeatedly), this is what is needed to solve problems. The technique of making short hand notes can also applies to languages (Irish, French, Spanish and German). Here is an example.

Topic from History Book "Slaves"

The Romans, like most ancient civilisations, used slavery. →

Slaves were brought to Rome from Africa and other parts of the Roman Empire and bought and sold in the marketplace. →

They were mostly used to do heavy manual labour; however, many slaves had been educated and these were used as teachers, clerks and scribes. A slave usually accompanied wealthy women and children as bodyguards when they went out. →

When Rome was at its height, there were some 300,000 slaves in the city. →

It was very rare for a slave to escape for any lengthy period – any Roman citizens who helped an escaped slave were severely punished. →

Some slaves eventually got their freedom (manumission) by buying it or in reward for loyal service. →

Think About it - What is it telling us?

Tells us:

That Romans used slaves →

Tells us:

Where they came from & what happened to them when they came to Rome. →

Tells us: The jobs they did →

Tells us: How many there were →

Tell us:

About escaping & what happened if they did. →

Tells us:

A new word for freedom & how they got it. →

Bullet Points

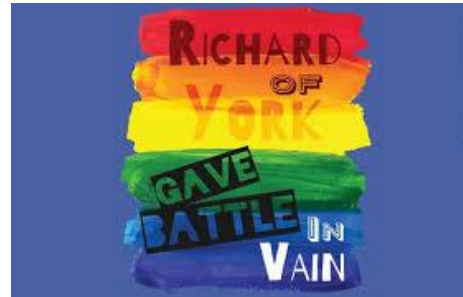
- Like most civilisations, Romans used slaves.
- Brought Africa/other parts of empire & bought/sold market place
- Manual labour/educated – teachers /bodyguards women/kids
- 300,000
- Escape rare/punishment
- Freedom = manumission/bought or reward

1. Read a sentence or two.
2. Think about what it tells us
3. Rephrase it in your own words
4. Write (not transcribe/copy)
5. Say it out loud
6. Hear it

### 3.2 Mnemonics

Mnemonics are another way to process information. These are various word games which act as memory aids.

Here is an example.



To remember the colours of the rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet) we can construct the following sentence,

“Richard **OF** York **Gave** **Battle** In **Vain**.

This is just another way to **process** information.

### 3.3 Synonyms

Synonyms are when we find alternative words that are easy to remember. For example to help the understanding and meaning of the word ‘confess’, the word ‘admit’ can be tagged along side it. A Thesaurus can help with this. This is another way to **process** information.

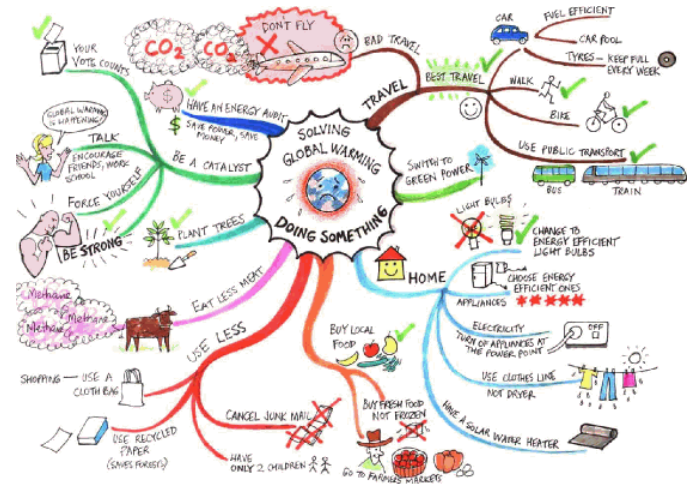
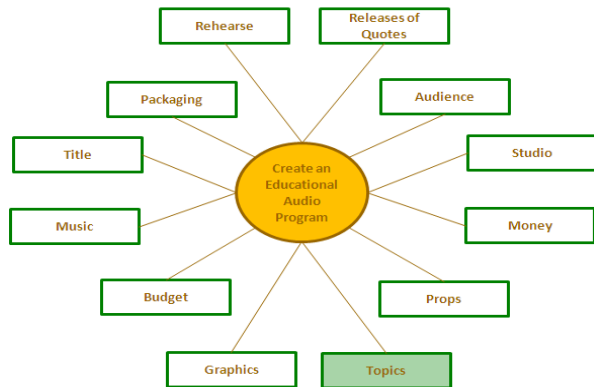
SYNONYMS LIST	
Abroad.....	Overseas
Accord.....	Agreement
Admit.....	Confess
Agree.....	Consent
Answer.....	Response
Awful.....	Terrible
Correct.....	Right
Delicate.....	Fragile
Eager.....	Keen
Enquire.....	Investigate
Evil.....	Bad
Exit.....	Leave



### 3.4 Mind Maps & Flash Cards

Other methods involve the use of **mind maps** or **flash cards**.

The following illustrate some examples more examples of **processing** information.



### 3.5 Making Recordings

Recordings can be particularly useful with vocabulary for languages. For example, if a few phrases or words are being studied,

- ✓ Press record.
- ✓ Say the first phrase/word then leave a five second gap.
- ✓ Say the second word/phrase and leave a gap.
- ✓ Say the third word/phrase and leave another gap, and so on.
- ✓ Then press replay, the word/s will be heard followed by a gap to repeat the words.
- ✓ This allows for interacting with the recording.

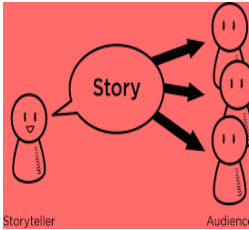


### 3.6 Becoming The Teacher

The experts have discovered that we remember, 20% of what we read, 30% of what we hear, 40% of what we see, 50% of what we say, 60% of what we do.

***But, we remember 90% of what we read, hear, say and do, and We remember 95% of what we TEACH.***

Therefore, why not do some of the following.



- ✓ Make a speech to a pretend audience.
- ✓ Tell the story to another person.
- ✓ Ask someone else to examine you.
- ✓ Teach what you have learned to someone else.



### 3.7 i-pads

Using of electronic devices instead of books has its advantages. i-pads can allow access to a greater volume of information using the internet. In addition, these devices allow for the information to be displayed in graphic or moving image format which books do not allow. However, be careful. Electronic devices only improve the way information is accessed and displayed. Because of the improved access and display we can think less learning is required. The same amount of time learning, practicing, and studying still needs to be done to acquire knowledge and skills. i-pads replacing books does not mean less work needs to be done.

### 3.8 Which One Is The Best Method?

- ✓ This question has no answer. There is not brilliant method. There is no easy method. There is only an optimum method. In other words, it may not be perfect, and it may not get brilliant results, it may not be easy, but it is the best it can be.
- ✓ One method way work for one person and a different one for another person. One method may work for certain types of material and a different method for different types of material. So, the challenge for you is to have the skill to,



1. Find the best methods that work for you.
2. Be able to change from method to method as the subject changes.
3. Be able to change from method to method as the material you are studying changes.

## 4. Time Spent Studying

### 4.1 It Varies From Individual To Individual.

The quantity of time spent by each student studying will vary considerably. The length of time spent by each student should be determined by when the quality starts to decline e.g. daydreaming etc. For some students this may be as short as 3 x 15 minute sessions (with short breaks in between). Some students may do 2 x 20 minutes. Other students may do 2 x 20 minutes plus 1 x 15 minutes. Others 3 x 20 minutes, and others 4 x 20 minutes. The combinations are as numerous as there are students. Remember, the moment the quality starts to decline the student should stop and have a short break and/or move onto a different subject. If a student has had a particularly long day perhaps they could still do e.g. 3 x 15 mins. If a student has not done much study to date then they should start off with e.g. 2 x 20 mins. and then progress from there. Shorter time slots e.g. 10/15 minutes can be very useful for languages especially when C.D.s or recordings are used.

There should also be a session at the weekend, slotted into Saturday morning or afternoon or evening and/or Sunday morning or afternoon or evening (preferably not Sunday evening). This session at the weekend should be a little more ambitious than the week night sessions. For example, more subjects, longer time slots, or more/extra time slots of the same length. It is also worth remembering that a student will know on Friday what they are likely to be doing over the weekend, as a result a slot for studying should be planned. It may be useful for any weekend homework to be done on Friday between 5 pm. and 7 pm. (what else would they be doing at that time?). This will allow the session at the weekend to be devoted entirely to study. No student can do all subjects every night. A student should pick 2 or 3 subjects each time, and all subjects should be covered at least once from Monday to Sunday.

### 4.2 Some Tips

- ✓ It might be easier to start of this routine with 2 or 3 subjects they find easier. It is always very hard, if not impossible, to start this habit using the most difficult subjects.
- ✓ After a while they can add in the subjects they find more difficult.
- ✓ Each session can be different topics from one subject or a mixture of subjects. Ideally it should be both of these, depending on what you have to cover.
- ✓ Time slots do not have to be the same. They can vary depending on the amount of material in a particular topic.
- ✓ For languages, a lot of shorter time slots might be more effective than a few larger time slots, e.g. 4 x 10 minutes of speaking a language from Monday to Thursday, might be better than 40 minutes on Thursday.

- ✓ Students are not expected to every subject every night. But every subject should be covered at least once a week.
- ✓ Whatever the length of each single session, 15 minutes, 20 minutes, 25 minutes, students should stop when they find themselves day-dreaming and not concentration. They should take a few minutes break. Some of them take breaks because they deserve them – and this is perfectly Okay. However, is there another reason to take a break?
- ✓ Taking a break allows students to recharge their batteries so that they can go back and do more work. Without taking the break continuing to work can be pointless because the work is not productive. What should they do during a break? Lie on the sofa, check social media, watch T.V. If what they are doing during a break is hard to stop doing, and makes it more difficult to return to the work, maybe something else needs to be done during a break.
- ✓ Maybe, they only need to rest their brain and not rest their body. So they should try doing something that keeps them moving. Try doing something physical that gives their brain a break. Try going for a walk. Try kicking a ball, try shooting some hoops, try hitting a slioter, try walking the dog, try whatever works for them. It might be easier to return to the work if they only give the brain a break and keep their body moving.
- ✓ After they have establish the routine of study, they might find that is better to do the work that requires greater concentration at the start of a session and leave the work that requires less concentration toward the end of a session- as they get more tired.
- ✓ If they are doing other activities on Monday, and there is only time to do their homework and no time for study, add those missed slots onto another session on a different day/s.
- ✓ If they are busy on Monday and Wednesday and cannot do study, try and make up for these missed sessions on Friday, or at the weekend.
- ✓ Students know that most of the time they can get away with not doing this type of study because nobody can really check. Therefore, it is tempting after doing our homework not to bother. If they find this happening and are trying to find a way to motivate themselves to study, try this. Maybe do the study session first, before the homework session. When the study session is finished, they now have to do your homework because it is need for the next day.

### 4.3 A Timetable

Some students like to make a timetable saying what times each day they are going to do things. It might look like this.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
5 p.m.					10 a.m.	
6 p.m.	6.00 p.m.	4 p.m.			11 a.m.	
7 p. m.	7.00 p.m.	5 p.m.				

If this type of timetable works for them, then one should be made. The times each day may have to vary if they are doing other things like sport or drama on different days.

However, such a timetable relies on students filling in what **they intend to do** and making a commitment to this. Human nature being as it is, this can be very difficult to stick to.

With this in mind, what about trying a timetable that is not filled in with what **they intend to do**, but instead, filled in with **what they have done**. It might look like this.

MON.	TUE.	WED.	THUR.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.
(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) Mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.
(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) Mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.
(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) Mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.
(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) Mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.
(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) Mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.	(Sub.) mins.
<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>

**After** each study session the number of minutes spent at each subject can be filled in. Over time this can mount up considerably and show them how much we have achieved, rather than intended to achieved. This study log (template at the back of this booklet) can also help them keep track of the subjects they have done and the subjects they have neglected. Remember, they can pretend to others if you are doing all you can do, but they can't pretend to themselves.

## 5. Understanding Versus Knowing

Is there a difference between **understanding** and **knowing** academic material? Part of a teacher's job is to help a student understand new concepts. However, is this enough? Once a student understands something, does it actually mean they know it? Have they ever been taught something new in class and leave that class understanding the material, but the next day, or even the next week, when the teacher asks you about that material you don't know it. Does this mean you **understood** the material at the time, but now do not **know** the material? How can you check this?

Also, having accumulated a set of notes a student can feel a sense of satisfaction and a sense of achievement. However, care needs to be taken. Because of the sense of accomplishment, students want to continue this feeling of accomplishment. To do this they continue to make more and more notes, and the more notes they have the better they feel they are doing. This can take the focus away from *knowing* what is in the notes.



To avoid the trap of understanding but not knowing, and the trap of continuously making notes, students need to **test themselves**. This can be done by doing a **revision session**.

## 6. What Is Revision?

Homework is work that needs to do for the next class. Study is working on previous topics that have been taught in the past. What about revision?

Having studied for 3/4 weeks a student might find it useful to *revise* the work *studied*. Therefore, at some point, say every 3 /4 weeks, it might be useful if they stop studying new material. Instead, that week or for next few days they might spend revising the *study* notes that have been compiled over the last number of weeks. This revision may help cement the information long-term, and help it to be retrieved when they need it and ensure they don't just understand it, but know it. These revision sessions do not require new notes to be written. Retrieve the original study notes and repeat some of the **processing** techniques mentioned about, especially steps 5 & 6 (on page 5). This may not work for subjects like Maths where problems need to be redone with a pen and paper.

It might suit to do this revision every few weeks, or it might suit to do this revision at the weekends, or every 10 days maybe. Everybody will be different. Here is what one expert said<sup>1</sup>.

*The secret to remembering material long-term is not to cram and over-learn but rather to periodically review what you've studied. Just how much later depends on how long you want to remember the material. It is suggested that the optimal or best time to review material is after a period which is 10 to 30 per cent of the time for which you want to remember it. Another study that looked at retention over 6 months, found the optimal time for reviewing material was one month.*



<sup>1</sup> Doug Rohrer & Harold Pashler, *Increasing Retention Without Increasing Study Time*, Association for Psychological Science, Vol. 16, No. 4 August 2007) p 183-186.

## 7. What To Study

Sometimes students ask themselves “*what do I study?*” Each day when they sit down to do their homework, the first thing they do is to check our ‘*to do*’ list in their homework diary. This helps them keep track of what they have to do, and that they have done. Why not borrow this idea for study? Why not write a to-do list for the things they have to study for the different subjects?

A study to-do list should contain a number of past (not current) topics that need to be covered that week or over the coming weeks. The different subjects might require different types of to-do lists. For example, a History and Geography to-do list may list the names of different topics and sub-topics that need to be covered, but Maths may simply be a list of problems that need to be done. Here are two examples.



History To Do List			Maths To Do List		
Topic	Bronze Age	Modern Ireland	Topic	Algebra	Statistics
1.	Smelting	Rebellion	1.	P17 Q. 3,4,5	2016 Q. 1
2.	Farming	Independence	2.	P19 Q. 5,6,7	2017 Q. 4
3.	Homes	World War II	3.		
4.	Daily Life	Northern Ireland	4.		
5.			5.		

## 8. Filing

When making out notes students can end up with a large amount of paper. This paper can become untidy and end up all over the place in our room. This can make it more difficult to retrieve information later on. So do they need to have a filing system?



Students should all have a good filing system that allows information to be retrieved almost instantaneously, for example, they could have a separate copy/folder for each subject. This copy should be for study notes only (not homework). They have to find their own filing system that works for them.



## **9. Specific Tips For 3<sup>rd</sup> Year - Gears**

This academic years - with their state exams - can be the most stressful that teenagers have experienced to date, at least in terms of academics. Throughout the year students will encounter, highs and lows, stress, fear and anxiety. They will also feel under extreme pressure not least from themselves.

To try and help your teenager survive the academic year when State exams are involved, here are a few thoughts based on past experience of observing previous groups that have taken this journey. However, it should be noted that there is no prescription or formula and that can guarantee success.

### **9.1 Easter Holidays until the Junior Certificate Itself**

When students are asked what they feel about the year ahead, the feelings expressed are those of fear, trepidation and anxiety. At the beginning of the year, students are thinking about their Christmas exam, the mocks, and the Junior Certificate itself. They are trying to cope with all of these aspects of the year all at once. To do so can be viewed as a mistake. Each student should break up the year into manageable blocks. For example, Block 1: September to December exams. Block 2: During the Christmas holidays. Block 3: January to the Mocks. Block 4: Mock to Easter. Block 5: during the Easter holidays. Block 6: Easter to the start of the State exams. Note; if a student goes to school only, they are in 1<sup>st</sup> gear, if a student goes to school and does the homework only, they are in 2<sup>nd</sup> gear.

Consider Block 5: Easter to the State Exams. This will be the most intense time in terms of study. As these are the weeks in the lead up to the Junior Certificate itself the amount of study will, and should, reach its maximum. Each student will possibly be studying all day every day, seven days a week. In other words, your teenager may end up studying every possible moment. The period may last from the Easter Holidays until the beginning of the exams in June. One way of defining this period of the year is that students will be doing all they possibly can i.e. the equivalent of 5<sup>th</sup> gear. This may also happen a couple of weeks before the mock exams.

Some students feel they should be in 5<sup>th</sup> gear from September until May. Can any student study all day every day for seven days a week? Can any student continue this pace from September until next May? To attempt to do so may result in your teenager obtaining the required grades – in the mocks – but not in the Junior Certificate itself? In other words, these students peak at the mocks and from that point onward either burn out or become complacent and obtain less points in June. The intensity of each student's study in May – and perhaps just before the mocks – can be a useful gauge to determine the level of study that should be put in at the various times throughout the year.

## 9.2 Block 1: September until the Christmas Exams

Most schools schedule their Christmas exams sometime in December. Given this, the intensity of study after the midterm – in the run up to these Christmas exams- should be greater than the intensity before the October mid-term. If 1<sup>st</sup> gear is just attending school, and 2<sup>nd</sup> gear attending school and doing homework only, this period should be characterised by attending school, doing homework and doing extra study, i.e. 3<sup>rd</sup> gear. That is to say, a number of hours should be spent doing academic work each night Monday to Thursday. The homework should still be done late Friday afternoon or early Friday evening. Sometimes it may be necessary for students to take at least one of the weekend days off be it Saturday or Sunday. A lot of students will need this as the quality of work done on the other days is better as a result of having a day off. Some students may opt to spread the weekend workload over the two days, or those who have the stamina, may not take the day off or some students may opt to take a day off every second weekend or just as needed. On the weekend day that is allocated to study the amount of time allocated to academic work should be, approximately, twice that time spent during the weekday nights. This time should normally be study because the homework has been done on Friday afternoon/early evening. This should continue until the October midterm break. You will notice that there are still some time gaps in the students' weeks. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, to work during these gaps may be at a too intense level that cannot be sustained up to the Christmas exams. Secondly, student's need a break to recharge the batteries. Thirdly and most importantly, these gaps can then be used to increase the quantity of academic work covered. The plan for any weekend should also be influenced by study done or not done during that week. One other point worth noting is that the routine for most students may not be exactly the same each week. For example, if there is an unscheduled family event or music lesson or training session on Monday evening, there may be no time to study. The routine for the rest of the week should adapt to take account of such circumstances. After the October midterm break, these gaps should now be filled. The day off at the weekend should now be used to do an equal quantity that is done on the other weekend day. The amount on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday should, if possible, (it depends on each individual student) be increased slightly. This now qualifies as 4<sup>th</sup> gear. When the exams are over students should revert back to 3<sup>rd</sup> gear, which might include a day off at the weekend.

The above is a general outline of one possible plan your teenager might implement from September until the Christmas. In addition, the amount of time spent studying *during* the October midterm itself should be determined by:

- The amount of work done up to that time.
- The grades/points your teenager wishes to obtain.
- The commitments they may have during the rest of the year in other areas of their life e.g. sports etc.
- The cognitive and maturity levels of the individual.
- The cognitive and maturity levels of the individual.

### **9.3 Block 2: After the Christmas exams until school resumes in January**

This period can be the most undervalued period throughout the whole year. If your teenager decides to do nothing after the exams the chances are that this will continue during the Christmas Holidays. No student can afford to take these weeks off. All students should be in 3<sup>rd</sup> gear throughout this period. There should be pre-planned days off during the Christmas Holidays. These days should be determined by family commitments and the damage done to work prospects the day after a night out. For example, it may sound over the top to suggest that a student should study on New Year's Eve. However, if a student was to study in the morning and/or the afternoon this still leaves time to do what they want to do that evening and take all of New Year's Day off.

### **9.4 Block 3: January until the Mocks**

Your teenager should be in 4<sup>th</sup> gear just after returning to school in January. This should then be increase to 5<sup>th</sup> gear a few weeks just before the Mocks. It should be noted that experience shows that next June, if a student is asked to look back at the process of preparing and sitting for the Mocks, it will be preparation i.e. the process of studying *for* the Mocks rather than the act of *taking the exams* that will prove to be of lasting benefit. The argument also holds for the Christmas exams.

### **9.5 Block 4: After the mocks until the Easter Holidays**

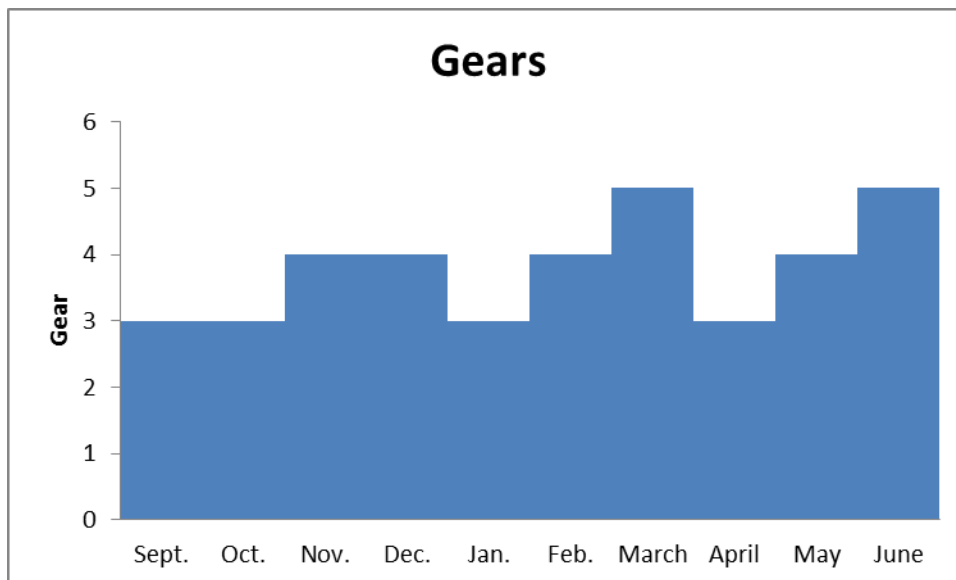
Your teenager should be in 3<sup>rd</sup> gear. This may seem too low, but they are about to enter into the most intense period of the year. It will be up to each student to decide if they should be in 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> gear during the Easter Holidays. Given that all students should be in 5<sup>th</sup> gear after the Easter Holidays it needs to be considered if 5<sup>th</sup> gear is too early in Easter for some students. To go into 5<sup>th</sup> gear at this point might result in your teenager not last the pace until June. Care should also be taken not to allow preparation for the orals not to interfere with others subjects.

## 9.6 Block 5: Easter until the start of the exams

All students should now be in 5<sup>th</sup> gear. This is a very long stretch so care needs to be taken when deciding the intensity of study over the Easter Holidays.

It is worth repeating that the above is not a mathematical formula that implies a rigid adherence by your teenager. This is impossible and unfair on students. It is for this reason that this pattern of the intensity of studying should change at various times throughout the year going up and down through 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> gear should only be treated as a rough guide. Your teenager is not a robot.

The concept of gears varies from student to student. One good guide is that a student should be mentally tired and challenged by the volume and intensity of the academic work studied. If a student claims that what he/she is studying is having no effect on his/her cognitive ability the enough study is not being undertaken. If it is not hurting it is not working!



## 10. Parent/Teenager Conversation

When your teenager is studying, it is important for them (with your help) to regularly check what is being done is of good quality. It is wasteful to be putting in the time and receive no pay off because what is being done is not productive. Bearing this in mind, here are some prompts/questions you might occasionally mention to your teenager so that, at the very least, they will mentally question themselves while they are studying.

- Are your notes short/concise?
- Have you got a pen in your hand all of the time?
- Are the notes being filed?
- Are you transcribing?
- Is your concentration slipping?
- Is there anything disturbing you?
- Can I see your notes?
- Are you making speeches?
- Are you using the recordings for languages?

Most of these questions are asking the same thing in a different way and they are not intended to be used all at once but occasionally over period of time. Furthermore, whatever techniques you use to persuade your teenager to study, be they carrot or stick, it is advisable to vary these techniques as much as possible and not to use them all at once, remember, the more you repeat this conversation the less effective it becomes. It is a long road ahead.

It is useful to note what the experts say – the students themselves – about the influence of parental involvement. Those who seem to achieve their best stated the following.

- *“The deal with my parents is that I do two hours in total each day Monday to Friday, made up of homework and study. I do ½ before dinner and ½ after dinner.”*<sup>2</sup>
- *“My Mum checks my homework and sometimes gives extra questions”.*<sup>3</sup>
- *“My Dad tests me after I have done my study”.*<sup>4</sup>
- *“I study with my Mum and do 20 minutes three times each night on different subjects”.*<sup>5</sup>
- *“I am let watch T.V. only after all my work is done”.*<sup>6</sup>
- *“I always have to do my homework immediately when I come home and always do my homework on Friday and never over the weekend”.*<sup>7</sup>
- *“I am not let use the computer [games or internet] until I have done all my homework and study”.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Student I.

<sup>3</sup> Student II.

<sup>4</sup> Student III.

<sup>5</sup> Student IV.

<sup>6</sup> Student V.

<sup>7</sup> Student VI.

<sup>8</sup> Student VII.

Those who struggle to achieve their potential stated the following:

- *"I only study when I have tests".*<sup>9</sup>
- *"I leave my homework until around 8.00 p.m. after I have relaxed and watched the T.V. and checked Facebook- I leave my weekend homework until Sunday night".*<sup>10</sup>
- *"My parents don't check my homework or push me to do any study".*<sup>11</sup>
- *"I am allowed one hour on my computer before I do my homework".*<sup>12</sup>
- *"I go to bed at 11.00 p.m. after I have watch X".*<sup>13</sup>
- *"When I go to bed, before I go to sleep I spend an hour or so on my i-pod or on the internet using my phone or texting".*<sup>14</sup>

Parents are also find it helpful to throughout the academic year.

- ✓ Create a study-friendly environment away from distractions such as T.V. computers and other siblings that may cause a distraction.
- ✓ Mobile phones should be left in another room where they are not a distraction.
- ✓ Ensure there is a space i.e. desk to study and they have all the necessary equipment.
- ✓ Provide a healthy diet.
- ✓ Encourage exercise and good sleeping patterns which are also necessary to allow good study habits to develop.

At some point your teenager will *"fall off the wagon"* in terms of study. If this happens they may continue to go through the motions of going to the room and sitting at the desk. This going *"through the motions"* can actually make the situation worse. To get out of this rut there are two suggestions. Firstly, your teenager should stop studying for a few days (while continuing to do their homework). This break should allow for a fresh mind to tackle studying from the following Monday. Secondly, another option might be to study 2-3 of the subjects that they he find easiest to study. Do this for one week and then get back into the habit and then tackle the rest of the subjects the following week. It should be noted that a few students have will go through the motions of going to their room and sitting at their desks. This is done to keep their parents off their backs even though they know they are not doing quality study.

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<sup>9</sup> Student VIII.

<sup>10</sup> Student IX.

<sup>11</sup> Student X.

<sup>12</sup> Student XI.

<sup>13</sup> Student XII.

<sup>14</sup> Student XIII.

## 11. Exam Results

When you receive your teenager's Winter exam results it is worth considering the following points. To determine if a result is good or poor it should be remembered that for some students a D is a good result while for other students a B might be viewed as a poor result. This is a very individual judgement that depends on the student and the subject.

It might be useful to look at the report from the end of the previous academic year and set some realistic goals for the Winter exams. This might be trying to increase each grade by one, at least, i.e. D's to C's, C's to B's, and B's to A's, as well as turning fails into passes. When you see the Winter report all the good results should be acknowledge and praised. However, if there are some poor results, or if your teenager did not do as much as they could have, the you might say to them "*don't look back at what you haven't done, instead look ahead to what can still be done...*". In other words, it is preferable to focus on incremental improvements, from Summer in the previous year to Winter this year, and from Winter to the Mocks, and finally to the Junior Certificate itself.

Some students say that they finish an exam early. This is normally only valid for a student when they have got everything right, i.e. 100%! When discussing this, students often say that they have 'answered everything'. Yet they never seem to get that 100%. When it is pointed out to them that they should not have finished early because they did not get everything right, they argue back with the same line that they 'answered everything'. The following might be a more useful approach. *'Yes, I suppose you were entitled to finish early because you answered everything. You finished early because you wrote everything down that you could. You emptied your head of all the information you have. However, there must have been information missing because you did not get 100%. Maybe, even though you emptied your head of all the information you had, just maybe, it might be that you did not have enough information in your head in the first place when going into the exam. How could we address this?'*

## 12. Grinds

One other point that may become an issue for some students is grinds. Before you pay for (full class) grinds (on Friday night, Saturday morning, Christmas or Easter) it is worth considering the following point. For a student to grasp a particular topic/subject two steps are necessary. Step 1, the information needs to be delivered by a teacher. Step 2, the student must now apply themselves to studying/working on the information. Both steps are necessary. No matter how confident they feel after leaving a (class) grind, or how well the information was delivered by the teacher, or how many notes they may have, step one alone is not sufficient. If a student takes a grind it replaces step 1 only. **It does not substitute for step 2.** Too many students use grinds as an alternative to step 2 and delude themselves into thinking that after a grind their own study is not necessary. The student thinks that understanding and knowing are the same thing. This is not the case. Grinds only work effectively when they are followed up with study by the student. Grinds are an addition to - **not an alternative to study.** Also, if the number of grinds taken over a full week (e.g. a week at Christmas and/or Easter in 6<sup>th</sup> year) is more than two, it is impossible for the student to follow this up with step 2. Also, Step 2 needs to be done as soon as possible after step 1. Remember *understanding* and *knowing* are not the same thing. The above also applies to on-line grinds.



## 13. The Emotions That Block Study

All of us, adults and teenagers, strive to do our best at tasks we engage in or are given to do. Doing well, or doing our best, makes us feel good about ourselves, and gives us a sense of purpose and of well-being within ourselves. Experience shows that the vast majority of teenagers will admit privately to themselves that they would love to do well academically (even if they say the contrary to others). They would love to be in a situation where they have the habit of regular study and to be able to say they have done their best.<sup>15</sup> It is important to help teenagers to learn how to study and how to organise themselves. However, if after providing this help, they are still not attempting to do their best, it is more important to address what may be blocking them from engaging to their potential? For most students the biggest barriers to learning *to their potential* are rarely technical, but are emotional.<sup>16</sup>

### 13.1 The Signs & Symptoms of Avoid Studying

Most teenagers, and indeed adults, use various strategies to avoid working. Some of these strategies are practical, and all are driven by some emotion. Here are some avoidance or scapegoating strategies<sup>17</sup> that teenagers use to avoid tasks.

1. 'Non-performance', where the individual may avoid eye contact with a teacher or parent when discussing academic issues.
2. 'Shame effort', where the individual asks a teacher or other adult questions to which the teenager already knows the answer. This serves to hide what they may not know and make themselves feel better.
3. 'Procrastination' and delaying any effort to attempt a task so that they can later blame time management in order to direct attention away from the real issues.
  - Do you pick up your phone to avoid the work?
  - Do you switch on your i-pad or computer to avoid the work?
  - Do you switch on your T.V?
  - Are there other things you do to avoid the work?
  - Do you blame, your phone, i-pad, T.V.?
  - Is it really the fault of these devices?
  - Who turned them on?
4. Using 'unreachable goals' so that they can use the excuse that no adolescent could possibly achieve what they had aspired to.

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<sup>15</sup> This is not the same as enjoying or liking study.

<sup>16</sup> Josh Kaufman, *The First 20 Hours – How To Learn Anything Fast*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2013) p 144.

<sup>17</sup> John Colman and Leo Hendrey, *The Nature of Adolescence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Routledge, 1990) p 47.

5. The 'academic wooden leg' whereby the adolescent admits to minor failings such as the exam was too long, topics were asked that were not supposed to be examined, or they freeze/panicking in an exam in order to avoid acknowledging a greater weakness. For those that say they freeze in exams, this is normally caused by (i) the student not knowing the material in the first place due to poor or no study habits, or (ii) an emotional fear of the consequences of doing poorly. Remember, people don't fear failure, they fear the consequence of failure, namely, what others will think of them and what they will think of themselves.
6. Some teenagers adopt negative aspirations<sup>18</sup> which rubbish the benefits of studying and comfort themselves by associating with others who have the same beliefs. They may also create a direction in class talking to others or through mis-behaviour.
7. Teenagers can also adopt a 'negative identity'<sup>19</sup> and do the opposite to what is expected in order to distract attention from the real issue. A row about not studying, or about the activity they do instead of it, is a useful distraction from actual study.
8. Some students compare their results with the results obtained by their peers who may be achieving lower scores as a way of finding comfort and/or distracting from their own performance.
9. Others blame the teacher, while some use hatred of a subject as a reason not to get stuck in and perform, or some claim that the exam was too hard or too long.<sup>20</sup>
10. Some students resort to (i) only studying what they already know, or (ii) revising the homework that was just finished, or (iii) revising material recently done in class instead of doing genuine study. These activities act as a comfort blanket as they are relatively easy because the material is fresh in the mind. While sometimes these activities are academically useful, if they are being used as a tactic to delay studying older material or more difficult material or material that is not understood or known, it can be detrimental in the long term. They can also drag out the time taken to do homework to its maximum so that there is no time left to study.
11. Some students develop the habit of relying on an adult to help them do their work. This can become over reliance if they cannot, over time, do without that help. This can be one factor that prevents a student taking ownership of their own study routine.
12. Some students say "*if only I had a new desk, I would study*". They never do when they get that desk. Some say "*the computer or T.V. distracts them*". No it doesn't. They switch on the computer or T.V. It doesn't switch itself on. This is to seek an external distraction that helps avoid getting stuck into the work.

<sup>18</sup> E. Hurlock, *Adolescent Development*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972) p 184.

<sup>19</sup> J. Dacey and M. Kenny, *Adolescent Development*, (Brown & Benchmark, Publishers, 1994) p 185.

<sup>20</sup> E. Hurlock, *Adolescent Development*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972) p 197.

13. Some students constantly resort to the line “*I don’t know how to study*”. This is particularly common for students who may have actually studied and who (i) find that method is difficult i.e.it is not simple and easy, (ii) or they do not get a perfect result or the result they wanted. In these cases it needs to be pointed out that there is no study method that is easy and there is no study method that can produce perfect results. Sometimes students just need to accept that studying will always be difficult and these students need to learn to be happy with their effort and the results they obtain. It’s all about the *optimum methods* (even though this may be difficult) and the *optimum results*.

### **13.2 Avoiding The Pain**

What about the teenager who does not have low self-esteem but still does not study to their potential? Or teenagers who have a high or average level of academic ability and do not engage? Indeed, there are students who find academics difficult or have some diagnosed learning *disability*, but their level of difficulty does not fully account for their underperformance in terms of effort put into study. In these cases there may be another type of emotional blockage.

When learning something new, people can become aware of their limitations and are frustrated by the gap between what they want to accomplish and what they are capable of. When a student’s work requires improving skills or learning new material, the biggest barriers to their learning (to their potential) are rarely technical, but are emotional.<sup>21</sup> When learning something new, teenagers can experience a form of mental pain and discomfort. The more difficult the new task, the greater the level of pain. So in order to terminate these negative feelings teenagers stop engaging and stop trying. This helps them stay in their comfort zone. Teenagers need to understand that what they are feeling is perfectly normal and that the uncomfortable feelings are a normal part of the learning experience. It also needs to be realised that this mental discomfort will not last forever and will get easier as progression is made through the task. Teenagers need to learn to persevere and push through the pain barrier. They need to recognise that the mental discomfort will eventually dissipate as the task nears an end. They need to be willing to suffer through something uncomfortable if they are to obtain what is on the other side and have a vision of what life will be like when the task is complete.<sup>22</sup>

In these situations it should also be noted that if the learning is described to the learner as ‘easy’ in order to convince them to start when it is actually difficult, this will eventually backfire. Furthermore, it is worth observing if the help provided by parents or other adults (as discussed above) is preventing the teenager from having the experience of working through the pain barrier. They need to feel and experience the pain if they are to learn to work through it.

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<sup>21</sup> Josh Kaufman, *The First 20 Hours – How To Learn Anything Fast*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2013) p 144.

<sup>22</sup> Josh Kaufman, *The First 20 Hours – How To Learn Anything*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2013).

### 13.3 Learning To Take Ownership

From an early age parents teach their children to tidy up their toys when they have finished playing. As they grow, children are taught to tidy their room and to help set the table for a meal. Parents do this so that when their child is an adult they can live as independent individuals, able to cook, clean, and look after themselves and survive in the world. Does this learning need to continue when children turn into teenagers? Should teenagers, over time, learn to cook for themselves, wash and iron their clothes, and make their way from A to B on their own, e.g. by bike or bus, rather than be given a lift everywhere. Learning these skills teaches teenagers to take ownership of their lives and to do things for themselves. This *taking responsibility* for themselves can have an enormous impact of teenager's attention to study. Without being taught to take responsibility in other areas of their lives, students will find it very difficult to take ownership of their academic lives. Sometimes such difficulties can be evident when a teenager gets into the habit of not doing the academic work they should do when they have no valid excuse not to do this assigned work. This can be compounded when they are continuously given a 'note' from a parent to avoid the consequences. They may even risk coming across to others as being *lazy*. Indeed, if this continues beyond the teenager years and is still evident when employment begins, they are unlikely to progress their career as well as they would like.

From the adolescent's perspective such coping mechanisms make sense and indeed work in that they hide the truth, avoid exposing any weakness, and prevent further failure and thereby avoid feelings of incompetence. It can be argued that these strategies are rooted in some emotion that brings about these avoidance strategies, or these strategies are being used to avoid a specific negative emotion.

## 14. Being Comfortable With Themselves

### 14.1 Confidence & Self-Esteem

In academia there are several definitions of self-esteem. One definition states that self-esteem can be defined as the extent to which one prizes, values, approves, or likes oneself.<sup>23</sup> In common parlance the term 'esteem' refers to something positive or admirable and therefore implies that self-esteem is purely a positive construct. This definition could lead to the interpretation that an individual's feeling of self-esteem is only derived from the things that make an individual feel good about themselves<sup>24</sup>. Another definition states that self-esteem is the negative or positive attitude that individuals have of themselves. It could be concluded from this definition that self-esteem is binary, in that it is either positive or negative. However, there are more helpful definitions defining self-esteem as the positive or negative orientation towards oneself, as an overall evaluation of one's worth<sup>25</sup> and another definition states; self-esteem, also called global self-esteem, refers to the positive or negative way people feel about themselves as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

These definitions make use of the terms "overall", "global", and "as a whole". The inclusion of these terms implies that it is the *summation* of an individual's positive and negative attributes that produce the overall feelings of self-worth. These definitions take into account that all individuals encounter shortcomings in their abilities to deal with life's experiences and it is these shortcomings that, if they outweigh an individual's positive attributes, can result in an overall feeling of low self-esteem.

The popular notion among adults working with teenagers is that to enable adolescents feel good about themselves, it is solely a matter of telling them how good they are. However, it can be argued that it is necessary for teenagers to acknowledge and accept that they have short-comings and vulnerabilities and cannot excel at every aspect of their lives. These shortcomings need to be accepted and improved upon, where possible - and importantly - these shortcomings should not be the dominate aspects of a teenager's life that determine their overall self-worth.

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<sup>23</sup> Blascovitch, J., & Tomaka, J. (1991). *Measures of Self-Esteem*. In J. P. Robinson, P.R. Shaver, & L.S. Wrightsman (Eds.) *Measures of Personality and Social Psychological Attitudes* (Vol 1).

<sup>24</sup> Stets, J. & Burke, P. (2014). Self-Esteem and Identities, *Sociological Perspectives*, 57, 409-433,

<sup>25</sup> Tsaousis, I. (2006). *The Relationship of Self-Esteem to Bullying Perpetration and Peer Victimization Among School Children and Adolescents: A meta-analytic review*. *Aggression and Bullying Behaviour*, 31, 186-199.

<sup>26</sup> Morin, A., Maïano, C., March, H. Nagengast, B. & Janosz, M. (2013). *School Life and Adolescents' Self-Esteem Trajectory*, *Child Development*, 84, 1967-1988.

## 14.2 Being Comfortably With Self

The definitions of self-image would suggest that teenagers who have high levels of 'self-esteem' have high levels of 'confidence'. Let's examine the meaning we place on the word 'confidence'. Using the phrase 'build their self-esteem' automatically instructs us to tell them how great they are, how brilliantly they can do things, how well they have performed. In short, keep constantly telling them how great they are will boost their confidence. However, there is one very important aspect that is missing from this approach. They are not brilliant at everything – nor will they be. They are not perfect and have flaws. Consider the following scenario.

Two people are called for an interview for the same job. Neither has any experience and both are straight out of college. One interviewer decides to ask a question someone with no experience could not possibly answer. This was done - not to catch them out - but rather to see how they react in a situation where they don't know the answer. One interviewee resorts to pretending to know what to do and spoofs and does so very confidently. The other interviewee, pauses, and then says, "*I don't have enough experience to answer that question; I would have to ask my co-workers and boss for guidance and help*". Now who is the more confident interviewee? The second interviewee is not afraid to admit - to themselves and to others - that they do not know something and they have the ability to ask for help from others. Is this interviewee a more confident person who is not afraid to expose a flaw? This scenario adds an extra meaning to the word 'confident'. Is the word 'confident' an adequate word to describe what we want to strive towards? Would it be more accurate to use the phrase 'comfortable with self'? In other words, being comfortable enough in ourselves to expose our flaws and not let that exposure and the response of others to have a negative impact on what we actually think of ourselves. Therefore, using the phrase 'comfortable with self' can be more instructive to us than the word/s 'confident' or 'high self-esteem'. How can we help teenagers become comfortable in themselves?

## 14.3 Doing What Is Instinctive

Firstly, do what is instinctive. Praise their achievement and qualities. These may be academic achievements, sporting, or musical. Or they may be personal qualities such as kindness, being empathic towards others, or having a caring nature. This is particularly important when a teenager is not academic and may be struggling in school. In addition to finding non-academic attributes, their effort, not results, should be praised.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, if teenagers are good academically, it can be unhealthy to define them solely as such. It is always preferable to praise the efforts rather than the results. Remember also, it is natural to express pride in them when they achieve something. However, avoid them feeling that they will only elicit pride if they do well and achieve. Tell them you are proud of them when they are sprawled on the sofa watching T.V. and eating pizza!

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<sup>27</sup> Carol Travis & Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made- But Not By Me Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts* (London: Pinter & Martin Ltd. 2008) p 233-234.

#### 14.4 Doing What Is Not Instinctive

Secondly, let's do what is not instinctive, discuss with them what they cannot do or find difficult to do. Discuss in a way that they do not feel they are being defined by what they cannot do. Discuss in a way that makes it clear that it is the trying that matters not the result. Discuss in a way that it is normal for everyone to be good at some activities and not so at others. Look for situations where they are not doing well and praise their persistence and effort. Discuss occasionally - not constantly –anything to do with academics. Check that it is not your constant focus. Discuss in an accepting way, i.e. that the flaws and failings are accepted. Discuss in a way they know that their flaws do not result in them being viewed in a negative way. Discuss and explore the feelings brought on by these difficult activities. Discuss in a way that does not make it a big deal and discuss with a bit of humour! Avoid discussing in a way that it is something that needs to be “fixed”, because a lot of the time it can't be. Again, this is particularly important when it comes to academics. Remind them that a low result will never be criticised if the effort was maximised.<sup>28</sup> Remember which interviewee had greater self-esteem/confidence, or more accurately, which interviewee is more comfortable with themselves.

In compiling this booklet, a group of ten mixed-gender 5<sup>th</sup> year students was surveyed. Two of the group, Michael and John, did not drink. Michael was not “*slagged*”, while John was. When asked why this was the case, they all responded by saying that “*Michael doesn't care what people think of him and is confident enough to still be involved in what is going on, while John is slagged because he just sits there and says nothing*”<sup>29</sup>.

#### 14.5 Defining The Teenager Solely By Their Academic Ability

Consider student X. Early on in their education it is discovered that they have very high academic ability. Their proud parents, understandably, tell aunts, uncles, and grandparents who are equally proud. However, from then on, student X is constantly defined by those around them as a high achiever. The focus is constantly on the next result. Student X may now feel an overwhelming weight of expectation that they must *always* perform well. Over the years, student X learns to define him/herself solely by the position they occupy on the academic spectrum. The weight of expectation can result in unhealthy levels of anxiety that can actually have a negative impact on their performance.

Consider student Y. Early on in their education it is also discovered that they have very high academic ability. Their proud parents, understandably, inform their teenager of this. They understandably outline how well they can do academically, and that, given their abilities, can pursue any career pathway in life. Student Y is delighted and sees the world as their oyster. However, student Y misinterprets what they are told. They assume that they can take any academic course they want because they have the natural brains to do so. They mistakenly think that having the brains *alone* is all that is necessary for success. They fail to

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<sup>28</sup> www.nymag.com “How Not To Talk To Your Kids” New York Magazine.

<sup>29</sup> A Quote from a 5<sup>th</sup> Year Teenager.

grasp that the fact that it is not enough to just have the natural ability, and do not realise that without hard work and study, their achievements will be below their abilities and expectations. In these situations care also needs to be taken if there are other siblings in the house. It might be unhealthy for one sibling to constantly hear how ‘brainy’ the other sibling might be.

There is one cautionary note that needs to be taken into account when dealing with students who have a very high academic ability. In very rare cases it can sometimes have an unintended negative consequence. An E.S.R.I. study found that among teenagers, being studious is seen as acceptable as long as it is not seen as showing off.<sup>30</sup> This gives the impression that other teenagers do not like their peers ‘showing off’. However, is there more to it than just ‘showing off’? How does the ‘showing off’ make the other teenager/s feel? Does it make them feel inferior? Does it make them feel inadequate? Therefore, teenagers with a very high academic ability should –while never ever hiding who they are – be conscious as to how they come across to their peers and never show any intolerance to anyone who has less academic ability.

Consider student Z. This student finds academic work difficult. This may be because that is just the way they are or it may be that they have a learning *disability*. Quite understandably, students W’s parents are anxious to want the best for their teenager and improve the situation. Every time an exam result is received, there is constant focus on how this result can be fixed. This can continue over of a number of years. Over time, student W learns to define themselves solely by the position they occupy on the academic spectrum. This burden of needing to fix things can lead to teenagers viewing themselves *only* in terms of their academic performance. Experience shows that these teenagers at the lower end of the academic spectrum can still reach their maximum academic potential if their other aptitudes are constantly praised, encouraged, and reinforced. All of us are good at some things and poor at others. Unfortunately, the secondary school system may not tap into some students positive attributes. Teenagers need to be reminded that there is nothing wrong with them, it is the secondary school system that is wrong. Focusing on what teenagers *can do* – even if it is not academic or is a non-school based activity - rather than what they *cannot do* has the result of bolstering their view of themselves as an individual. It allows them to have a positive view of life and their activities, and allows them to be optimistic and hopeful about their future. These positive feelings allow them to cope with the disappointment of exam results because they now see this as only one part of who they are and that while they may not be brilliant at academics, they are brilliant at other things! This focus can also have the effect of allowing them to accept what they cannot do, because they now feel there are other things they can do.

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<sup>30</sup> Smyth, E., et al., *Pathways Through The Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students*, (Dublin: E.S.R.I.), 2006.



Consider again student W. This student finds academic work difficult either because they have a learning difficulty or it is simply because that is just the way they are. Student W tries to develop strategies to hide their lack of academic difficulty. For example, they may avoid talking about school or avoid doing homework. They may even want the parent not to tell others of their difficulties. These strategies are not about academics, but rather designed to protect their feelings of self-worth. These avoidance strategies are fulfilling an emotional need. However, in the long run these avoidance strategies are destructive both academically and in terms of self-esteem because as adults, they continue to avoid anything that makes them feel bad about themselves both personally and professionally. Parents should avoid being tempted to collude with these strategies. Instead, parents should focus, not on the academic issues, but rather the self-esteem issues. Parents should remind the teenager that they are not defined by the academic ability and that it is Okay not to be good at school work as long as they try their best. Parents should talk to them about how well they perform at other things and that they have other attributes and talents and encourage them towards believing that they can still be successful. It can also be useful to address their fear about what other people might think of them. If they are preoccupied about what others might think of them, this thinking is actually based in what they think of themselves. Again, this is a self-esteem issue and all the more reason to boost their own view of themselves. If they come across somebody who might think less of them because of their academic abilities, remind them this says more about the other person than it does about them. Remember, there are plenty of teenagers who have difficulties with academics and don't feel the need to hide it. Why? Because they have strong feelings of self-worth and recognise that effort is more important than results and that they are valued for who they are and what they can do, rather what they cannot.

In summary, a teenager's sense of value and self-worth should be based on who they are as an individual and should not solely be defined by the position they occupy on the academic spectrum. Focusing on the former can give them the inner strength to cope with their academic outcomes and therefore, strive to improve themselves as best they can, regardless of the grade achieved.

## 14.6 The Square Peg In A Round Hole

*“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life believing that it is stupid”*

There is another type of teenager who, when asked how they feel about secondary education, says they feel like a square peg in a round hole. Despite everybody’s best and extensive efforts these students cannot or will not engage academically. Is there something wrong with them? No! What is on offer in secondary school does not suit everybody and that at this stage in their career development they are not suited to an academic environment? This may be because they are not mature enough or simple not ready or may never be. For some this may never change. For others this changes at a later stage. Perhaps it may change in transition year, or in 5<sup>th</sup> year or as late as 6<sup>th</sup> year. For some this change may happen sometime after they finish school or at a later stage in adulthood.

Most parents aspire for their teenager to obtain a degree. For some this is the best option. A second best option may be doing a course in further education that equips them with the additional skills not obtained through the Leaving Certificate and increases their employment opportunities. A third best option might be to do straight into a trade or employment. However, if a person is made happy and content with going into a trade or directly into employment, it might be that this is not the third best option, but actually the best option. If they are happy and content shouldn’t we be?

## 14.7 Other Issues

All families have their ups and downs. There may be periods of difficulties with relationships between husband and wife, between parent and child, or between siblings. Indeed, there may also be the trauma of redundancy, illness, or bereavement that may impact on the atmosphere in the home. Some students who experience such family difficulties can continue on and cope without these difficulties impacting on their school lives. However, other students can, and do, encounter situations whereby difficulties in the home have such an emotional impact that they hinder their emotional and academic progress within the school. In such situations it is recommended that the provision of information to the Year Head is vital if the school is to help. Such a request will always be treated in the strictest confidence and the information only used to adapt the school responses to cater for the circumstances the teenager is in. Without such information schools may inadvertently treat the teenager’s possible *acting out* or *acting inwards* as purely a disciplinary matter and, without knowing, add to their difficulties. Experience shows year in year out, that when parents withhold vital information – mainly through an unfounded sense of embarrassment – they prolong their teenager’s difficulties and prevent the school from acting in the student’s best interests.

## 14.8 Praising The Effort V Praising The Result

An American psychologist, Carol Dweck, of Columbia University carried out two studies into the effect of praise on students in a dozen New York schools. In one study<sup>31</sup> students were randomly divided into two groups. One group was praised for their *intelligence* (“*you are really smart*”), and the other group was praised for their *effort* (“*you must have worked really hard*”). Each group was exposed to the same academic tests.

Some, in both groups, scored poorly in some of the tests. Those that were praised for their *effort* assumed that they hadn’t focused enough and subsequently with later tests got more involved and were more willing to try different methods to solve problems. Those that were praised for their *intelligence* and had subsequently scored poorly became stressed and opted out in future tests. In addition, on further testing, those that were praised for their *effort* improved their scores by about 30%, and those that were praised for their *intelligence* scored worse by about 20%. Subsequently, the groups were given a choice for further tests. They were informed that some tests were harder and some tests were easier. In the group that were praised for their *efforts*, 90% consciously chose harder tests and the majority of those who were praised for their *intelligence* consciously chose easier tests. The conclusion from this study was that those that were praised for their *efforts* “came to see themselves as in control of their success” and that “the brain was a muscle” and “that the harder you work the bigger it gets and the smarter you become”. In addition, “emphasising effort gave [students] a variable that they can control”. Those that were praised for their *intelligence* learned intelligence was more important and “discounted the importance of effort” and felt that “intelligence determined your success”. The above observations were the same regardless of gender or socioeconomic class.

Another study<sup>32</sup> by the same psychologist carried out over a twenty year period reinforced the idea of focusing on the effort rather than the result. This study concluded that while it is certainly important for children to learn to succeed; it is just as important for them to learn not to fear failure. [Children] worry that making mistakes reflects on their inherent abilities. Over a period of twenty years Carol Dweck observed who students who were praised for their efforts in mastering new challenges. Others were praised for their intelligences and ability, with the kind of thing many parents say when their children do well; ‘*You’re a natural maths whiz, Jonny*’. Yet these messages to children had profoundly different consequences. Children who are praised for their efforts, even when they don’t ‘*get it*’ at first, eventually performed better and liked what they are learning more than children praised for their natural abilities. They are also more likely to regard mistakes and criticisms as useful information that will help them improve. In contrast, children praised for their natural ability learn to care more about how competent they look to others than about

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<sup>31</sup> www.nymag.com “How Not To Talk To Your Kids” New York Magazine.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Travis & Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made- But Not By Me Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts* (London: Pinter & Martin Ltd. 2008) p 233-234.

what they are actually learning. They became defensive about not doing well or about making mistakes, and this sets them up for a self-defeating cycle. If they don't do well, then they resolve the ensuing dissonance ("*I'm smart and yet I screwed up*"), by losing interest in what they are learning or studying ("*I could do it if I wanted to, but I don't want to*"). When these kids grew up, they will be the kind of adults who are afraid of making mistakes or taking responsibility for them, because that would be evidence that they are not naturally smart after all.

## 15. If They Get Stuck

### 15.1 Target The Emotions

Parents are quite rightly concerned that their teenager performs to the best of their ability. As a result parents try to help teenagers on a practical level. This can be a very useful and worthwhile strategy. However, if the strategic help given by parents or other adults continues over a considerable period of time, it can be detrimental in the long term. The practical help being provided may become a necessary constant in the student's life. Such continuous help can prevent the teenager from taking ownership of their own work. Indeed, if the student becomes dependent on such help it is more than likely that there is one or more of the aforementioned emotional issues at the root of the problem. What can be done in such situations?

It might be appropriate for the adults to ask themselves are the unintentionally colluding in practical activities that only serve to prolong finding a long-term solution. Should the help provided by parents focus on teaching teenagers to help themselves? Is the help provided an external solution when it is an internal solution that is needed?

It might be useful to shift the language from *telling* students to study, and instead, switch to asking the student what is *blocking* them from doing what they know they should be doing, and for the majority of students, what they want to be able to do. (This is not the same as liking or enjoying study).

- It might be time to have a conversation around the emotions a student feels *during* study?
- It might be appropriate to talk about the emotional outcome *after* receiving exam results?
- Should the focus shift away from tactics designed to get them to study to bolstering their self-image?
- Is it necessary to remind them that they are not defined as a person by their place on the academic spectrum?

- Might it be necessary to remind teenagers that for some students an A or B is a good result while for others a D might be a brilliant result?
- Finally, it is important to remember that the earlier in the education cycle such an approach is taken the greater the chances of it succeeding.

### **15.2 Remind Them Of Their Other – More Important Assets**

Finally, certain academic standards may be necessary to gain entry to a particular course or career path. However, in the vast majority of working environments it is not academic qualifications that allow an individual to progress within a particular career path. Are the following non-academic characteristics just as important?

- ✓ Determination to succeed, enthusiasm, and confidence
- ✓ Integrity, loyalty, and honesty
- ✓ Initiative, creativity, and inventiveness
- ✓ Ability to persuade, help, and motivate others
- ✓ Empathy, team spirit, and leadership
- ✓ Refusal to accept defeat and having a sense of humour
- ✓ Having good intrapersonal and interpersonal skills
- ✓ Being independent, having impulse control and having stress tolerance
- ✓ Being optimistic, realistic, flexible and adaptable
- ✓ Not letting what they can't do interfere with what they can do

### 15.3 Remind Them That It Will Be Worth It

You might have seen a baby or toddler attempting to take their first steps. They try and fall, and then try again. They eventually succeed in walking on their own. When this happens, and because they have no words, they scream and shout. Are they saying, *'look at me, look at what I can do'*? Are they expressing an inner satisfaction that they have learned something new? Imagine the seven year old rushing home from school to tell their parents what they had learned about planets in school that day. That seven year old is excited, proud, and chuffed with themselves because of what they had learned. Imagining the 16 year old whose mother let them learn to drive a car in an empty car park. They are excited and thrilled because they have learned something new.

These examples prove that the human condition is naturally predisposed to want to, and feel good about, learning something new. In other words, we all like enjoy learning. We all have had the experience of learning something new. We have all experienced the sense of accomplishment we get from leaning. We all have had the rewarding experience of the feelings of satisfaction, delight, fulfilment, and a sense of gratification we get from challenging and stretching our minds by learning. Put simply, learning gives us a buzz.

However, it has to be acknowledged that these positive feelings may not happen to the same extent when we have to learn something we find difficult, or something that is not interesting to us. This can be common in the secondary school system.

It needs to be remembered that sometimes we have to put up with something difficult if we want to get to where we want to be. We sometimes have to persevere and tolerate the pain to get what we want in the future.

Sometimes it can be worth it, because it is a gateway to a place where we will be learning what we want to learn, and we will be learning what is of interest to us. Sometimes it will be worth it because it will get us to a place where we will get that buzz we got when we took our first steps.



## 16. Conclusion

- There are some students at the high end of the academic spectrum who reach their potential, while others who have the same academic potential, don't.
- There are some students who are average on the academic spectrum who perform above average while others – with the same potential – perform below average.
- There are others students who find academics difficult but perform above average while a similar student performs below average.
- Also, there are some teenagers with a learning *disability* who perform poorly, while others with a *similar* learning difficulty perform well above what their academic abilities would suggest.

How does this this come about? Can we conclude that 'brains' are not the main determining factor in how teenagers perform? If so, what are the personality traits that are seen in successful adolescents? Are these characterises as follows?

- Teenagers who are self-aware enough to realise that they are subconsciously using scapegoating strategies (as listed above) to avoid studying? Are they self-aware enough that - when they realise they are deluding themselves with these strategies – they stop doing so and start working?
- Do successful teenagers have a healthy view of themselves and feel comfortable in themselves nurtured by those that matter to them? Do these successful teenagers define themselves as multi-faceted i.e. not solely on the basis of their academic performance? Do these teenagers accept themselves for who they are, i.e. good at some things and not so good at others things?
- Have successful students learned to push through the pain barrier when things get difficult? Have they learned to have the stamina to push themselves to finish a job and not give up when the going gets tough? Have these teenagers accepted that studying is not easy, and that they have to find their own optimum way to study? Have they accepted that there is no method of study that (i) makes studying easy or (ii) produces perfect results?
- Have teenagers who perform to their optimum ability learned, through previous experiences outside school life, to take ownership of their own study? Have they realise that *they alone* have the power to determine the outcome, and they have the potential to determine their own results and the capability to dictate their own future?

Finally, the guidelines outlined in this booklet are exactly that, just guidelines. It needs to be remembered that each individual is unique and will spend different amounts of time studying and that the number of methods of studying (processing) are as numerous as there are individuals. There is no fixed definite schedule and there is no single easy way to study.

Think back to when they were toddlers and they were learning the letters of the alphabet and how to recognise words. The mastering of these skills did not happen as a result of one action, event, or a single conversation. It was a *process* that was spread over a considerable amount of time. Similarly, the concept of studying at secondary school cannot be acquired by one action, event, or single conversation. It needs to be seen as a continuous process that both parent and student need to engage with and in, and revisit, assess, and adjust constantly over *all* the years spent in secondary school.



# Study Log

MON.	TUE.	WED.	THUR.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.
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SUBJECT	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Total
English	mins.	mins.	mins.	mins.	mins.
Maths	mins.	mins.	mins.	mins.	mins.
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	mins.	mins.	mins.	mins.	mins.
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>hrs mins.</b>	<b>hrs mins.</b>	<b>hrs mins.</b>	<b>hrs mins.</b>	<b>hrs mins.</b>

**To Do List**

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## Acknowledgments & Bibliography

- Student I.
  - Student II.
  - Student III.
  - Student IV.
  - Student V.
  - Student VI.
  - Student VII.
  - Student VIII.
  - Student IX.
  - Student X.
  - Student XI.
  - Student XII.
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# Notes