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FOR FAMILIES

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Helping children set goals

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- ❖ **INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES** is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Written by Judy McDaniel, communications consultant.

Helping your children set goals and then work to achieve those goals will open doors for ongoing communication between you and your children and can be a positive experience for your whole family. Learning to set goals is a skill that will benefit your children as they progress in school and as they enter adulthood.

Goal setting can be learned by even the youngest of children who can be taught to set simple daily or weekly goals. Older children, as they develop the ability to visualize farther into the future, can begin to set more detailed goals for home as well as for school.

If you also set goals for yourself as you help your children develop goals, you can prevent your children from viewing their goals as simply additional chores or directives from you. Together you can monitor progress, celebrate successes and evaluate causes for not reaching certain goals.

Achievable and effective goals for your children are ones that:

- ❖ Are realistic;
- ❖ Force them to grow as they strive to achieve desired results;
- ❖ They want to achieve;
- ❖ They believe they can achieve; and
- ❖ Are within their skills and abilities to achieve.

When setting goals with your children, be specific. Set a deadline for achieving each goal, and decide on a timeline for intermediate steps.

For young children, goals should be kept simple and easy to achieve. Once they understand goal setting and have experienced the positive results of reaching their goals, they will be eager to set more difficult goals. Possible goals for a young child might be to make his or her bed every day without being told to do so; to take care of the family pet, or to read a book a week.

Discuss with your children the steps they will need to take to accomplish their goals and those things that might prevent them from doing so. Be realistic in discussions.

With older children you can develop more elaborate goal statements that include step-by-step lists of the actions to be taken to achieve the goals and the benefits of reaching the goals. Also include target dates for achieving goals and discuss solutions for possible roadblocks.

If your child proposes an all-encompassing goal such as "I will graduate from college, get a good job and earn a lot of money," talk with him or her about how to break the general goal down into steps that are manageable and can be achieved in a shorter period of time. Many smaller goals can be derived from the larger dream of the future.

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Sometimes your child's desired goal will have to do with a future profession. ("I am going to be a veterinarian.") Again use this interest as an opportunity to review the steps, study habits and behaviors that will help your child achieve this goal. Then set up a series of short-term and long-term goals and strategies.

The task of setting goals affords a good opportunity to share thoughts and feelings with your children. Tell them about goals you had when you were younger and about your goals now. Describe how you overcame obstacles, how you felt as you achieved goals and/or how your goals changed. Also talk with your children about the time when you did not reach certain goals.

When your children set goals, write them down and make them special. Have younger children draw pictures of themselves working to reach their goals. Display the goals somewhere in the house where they can be readily seen. The refrigerator door often provides the perfect spot. Mark the family calendar to note the deadlines for achieving goals. Discuss the goals at regular intervals and ask your children how they are doing. Help them avoid big failures by showing them how to deal with small obstacles as they arise, and compliment them on their progress no matter how small.

If for some reason goals aren't met, discuss this with your children. Don't let them feel like failures just because goals weren't met by the original deadlines. Were the goals too difficult? Was the time line realistic? Why did they set the goals in the first place? What unanticipated circumstances affected achieving the goals? Are the goals still something your children want to pursue? Do new goals, with different intermediate steps, need to be set?

Over time the practice of goal setting will become a natural part of your time with your children. It will lead to communication about the most important parts of their lives and their futures. It will give you insight into their thoughts and dreams. And it will give you opportunities to share your thoughts and dreams.