

# What happens if you get a so-so teacher?

Take charge of your child's education by making the most of a less than ideal instructor.

The hour of judgment has arrived. School's back in session. You've heard a few anecdotes about your child's new teacher. You've seen some homework assignments and maybe even met her at a back-to-school night and heard her talk about her plans for the year. What do you think?

Are you impressed? Concerned? Reserving judgment? If you've got a sneaking suspicion that this particular teacher either isn't terribly great or simply isn't a terribly great fit for your child, you don't need to bemoan your child's horrible luck or storm the principal's office.

These four tips can help you make sure this year your child makes the best of a less-than-perfect educational situation.

## Message in a bottle

Don't wait for the parent-teacher conference. Although you may sometimes feel like a hovercraft zooming down on your child's teacher, trailing not-so-subtle messages like an advertisement for your child — "She's a hands-on learner!" "He loves being given responsibilities!" — don't underestimate the power of getting your child on the teacher's radar, especially if you think the teacher may not be attuned to your kid.

Offering lots of information about your child's challenges and talents not only allows your child's teacher to "see" your child's strengths and challenges. Giving the teacher the lowdown on your child (who you know better than anybody) will send a clear message to the teacher that a) you care and b) you're aware of how much the teacher is able to influence your child. Or more crudely put: You're watching her.

## Play into the teacher's strengths

Every competent teacher has strengths and weaknesses. If you feel uncertain about your child's teacher, you need to make sure your child gets the most from whatever this teacher has to offer. Say the teacher is old school: well-organized, routinized, and academic (if in a slightly boring way). You might wish the teacher designed more hands-on learning projects or even brought a sense of fun into the day. But complaining about these deficiencies to your child will only undermine his learning.

Instead, accentuate the positive in the following ways:

1. Articulate to your child why this teacher is so good at what he or she does. If your child's teacher is creative, for instance, point this out to your child. "I love how Mr. Hobson dressed up in a Mars outfit to teach you about the planet's weather and size. You'll probably never think of Mars in the same way again." Do something at home to make the most of the teacher's strengths.
2. Maybe a highly organized (but otherwise uninspiring) teacher can inspire your child to organize her own study space or carefully plan a long-term project. "Let's fix up your homework desk the same way Mrs. Ronaldo does. She puts everything in a place you can find it." Maybe the teacher, who has a propensity for funny, inspiring stories about his life (while cutting corners on the curriculum) can offer your child a model for regaling the family with tales over dinner. Or perhaps the teacher who seems obsessed with math (to the detriment of language arts and other subjects) can inspire a conversation about how math applies to so many real life situations and how this numerically laden year can support your child's dream of making a killer lemonade stand or building a go-cart.

## **Supplement the weaknesses**

Once you have a sense of what your child's teacher isn't — figure out a way to support the part of your child's education you feel your child may be missing. For instance, does your child's teacher emphasize rote learning of facts, focusing on spelling tests and math facts, while glossing over deeper critical thinking? Then introduce your child to challenging conversation: Talk about an ethical dilemma you're having at work or discuss a political story from the newspaper.

Don't just give your child more information, or feed them your opinion, but help them develop their ideas and opinions: "How do you think politicians should solve the problem of war in the Middle East?" "Do you think it's fair that the head of my company makes 50 times more than the person with the lowest paid job?" If, say your child's teacher seems lax about writing skills, consider signing up your child for an afterschool creative writing class or summer program. Skipping over basic math? Make it into a car game and quiz your child on the multiplication tables on your way to the grocery store.

## **Strategic support**

Finally, support your child's teacher, but do it in a discerning way. Sure, your child's teacher may have a wish list about how you can support her projects. But if you feel like your child's first grade teacher is better at planning elaborate celebrations where the learning gets lost, you may not want to contribute the 10 books of sparkly animal stickers for the 100-day party.

Instead, offer to visit the classroom to read with struggling students or do math games with small groups. In suggesting your wish list you may feel like you're overstepping your boundaries, but chances are you'll find that your teacher welcomes support in an area of learning that isn't their strong suit. And if not, just remember, supporting your child's learning means just that: spending what little time you have on the most important educational issues, not sacrificing yourself to whatever volunteer request flies across your transom.