Practical Ways to Talk to Students about Grades

It’s natural for young people to worry about disappointing the adults who care about them, but the weight of the shame shouldn’t prevent the important open, tactical grade conversations that could change their academic picture for the better. Here are some ideas for ways to tackle the difficult talk—with a little high school policy mixed in:

1. Say, “Let’s start with the facts.”
Calmly first ask her to gather facts i.e., is she actually getting all F’s? Or D’s? (yes, there’s a difference). What about the impact on sports or extra-curricular opportunities? Let your student do the legwork so you can all make informed decisions about next steps.

2. “Say, “What do you think led to this outcome?”
The blame game will only alienate your student. See if he can come up with his own answers about what happened to his academic performance. Try to keep your tone in check since your student will read your judgmental non-verbal cues and shut down quickly.

3. Discourage your student from saying, “I’m such a failure.”
Just like you aren’t allowed to play the blame game, neither is your student. Tell her that tearing herself down isn’t going to change the result, and will only make her feel worse about herself. She will feel supported by you not letting her beat herself up.

4. Feel free to ask specific questions, such as, “Was the class load too overwhelming?”
Think about what is required for the “business” of high school and stick to questions that focus on the process: “Did you struggle with lecture format in your classes?” (Learning style issue?); “Did you take the right combination of classes?” (Too many tough classes in one semester). Any “less than favorable” behaviors or habits are going to spill out in the midst of that conversation anyway.

5. Ask, “What resources did you seek to help you?”
Your student may stare at you blankly on this one. Too many students admit that they go it alone in high school when there are a host of support systems in place to help them. Does your student know where to find the tutoring center, counseling office, other relevant programs and services? If not, share what you know, and make a plan to go there. Tomorrow. Together, if possible.

6. Say, “Let’s take a look at your grades and see where you are.”
If your student received all or many F’s, then he will likely have to retake classes. Discuss what options your student might have to recover full or partial credits the next semester (or at night
school, or over the summer). Discuss what your student learned about the ramifications and make sure he is fully aware of the impact and ways to restore credits.

7. Say, “You can average these up in another marking period.”
If the grades are not F’s, but not B’s or A’s either, then you may want to remember that in some programs, D’s—while not a celebration—do enable a student to pull her credit out of the class. They can be averaged up, of course, with high grades in other classes (and the class could be retaken later). Certainly, how many “poor” grades a transcript can bear depends on your student’s overall goals.

8. Ask, “Have you checked with your teacher to ensure that these grades are correct?”
Plenty of teachers have accidentally transposed a number or lost a student’s paper. This is why a student must self-check grades... always! Sometimes, the teacher may have missed a student’s assignment that was turned in electronically, but the student doesn’t realize it. Students should always check questionable grades with teachers before they walk away from the term. Even if the term is over, it is never too late, and errors can be changed with a form.

9. Ask, “Are you willing to go talk to your teachers—the ones you just had and the ones you will have next semester?”
If you empower your student to talk to anyone, their teachers should be the #1 stop. Debriefing what went wrong with last semester’s teachers will help your student identify specific strategies that he can use to improve from someone who witnessed her performance. For next term, creating a perpetual feedback loop with a teacher almost always creates better grades for students. I’m not saying all 4.0’s, but improved grades over what would have been otherwise.

10. Ask, “In addition to the support that I know you’ll want to put into place at school, what are some specific ways I can support you?”
Since you approached this whole conversation in a practical and strengths based way, your student will trust that he might be able to let you in on his newly created “academic success team.” Find out how your student would like you to support him.

11. Say, “These grades don’t define you. What defines you are the next steps you take. And I believe in your next steps.”
This is just another way of saying, “I care about you”. Remember that you can also connect with your student by talking about a time that you struggled with your grades, or if you know someone who faced the same issues and overcame them. Talking to students about failing or “bad” grades is one of the absolute hardest parts of our jobs—even without the emotional investment of a familial relationship.

Adapted from “Say This, NOT That to Your Professor: 36 Talking Tips for College Success” by Ellen Bremen