

When Your Child Is Struggling in School but You Don't Know Why

When a child is struggling and the reason is unclear, more pressure rarely tells you what is wrong. Start by mapping the pattern. Which subjects are hardest? Is the problem with understanding, remembering, starting, finishing, reading directions, taking tests, or turning work in? Does the child do better with one-to-one help than independently? The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that poor school performance can reflect combinations of learning, behavioral, psychological, social, health, and stress-related factors, and recommends discussing persistent school struggles with the child's pediatrician as well as the school.¹ Check basic conditions that can affect learning before assuming the problem is effort. CDC notes that vision problems can affect learning, testing, class participation, behavior, and self-confidence; signs can include squinting, eye rubbing, or headaches after schoolwork.² Sleep matters too. CDC guidance states that adequate sleep supports focus, concentration, and academic performance, while insufficient sleep is associated with attention and behavior problems.³ Ask the teacher for specific data: which skills are weak, when the problem began, what happens after extra instruction, and whether missing work or absences are part of the pattern. At home, note sleep, attendance, stress, homework behavior, and any physical complaints. Choose one question to investigate at a time instead of assigning a label. If the struggle continues, ask the teacher and pediatrician what additional screening, evaluation, or support would help identify the barrier. The objective is to explain the pattern with evidence and then match support to the actual need.

Did You Know?

- ✓ The American Academy of Pediatrics says school struggles can reflect overlapping learning, behavioral, psychological, social, and health factors.¹
- ✓ CDC notes that untreated vision problems can affect learning, testing, class participation, behavior, and self-confidence.²
- ✓ CDC guidance says adequate sleep supports focus, concentration, and academic performance.³

Research Sources

1. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. "What to Do If Your Child is Falling Behind in School."
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Keep an Eye on Your Child's Vision."
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Sleep and Health." September 10, 2026.

School-Struggle Pattern Finder

Use this page to collect clues before deciding what the problem is. Look for patterns across school, home, and basic health needs.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

Grade/course: _____ Review date: _____

1. Name Where It Happens - About 2 Minutes

Identify the subject, task, or time of day where the struggle is clearest.

Hardest area: _____

2. Describe What Breaks Down - About 2 Minutes

Choose the observable problem: understanding, starting, finishing, remembering, or submitting.

What I see: _____

3. Check Basic Conditions - About 2 Minutes

Review sleep, attendance, stress, vision complaints, and recent changes.

Possible factor: _____

4. Ask the Teacher for Data - About 3 Minutes

Ask which skills are weak and what happens when extra help is provided.

Teacher data: _____

5. Choose the Next Question - About 1 Minute

Decide what needs to be checked next instead of guessing at a diagnosis.

Next question/action: _____

What Parents Can Say: "We know school is harder right now. We are going to figure out where the problem starts before we decide how to fix it."