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Book Review

THRIVING AT SCHOOL: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO HELP YOUR CHILD ENJOY THE CRUCIAL SCHOOL YEARS, 2ND EDITION

J. Irvine and J. Stewart

Finch Publishing, Sydney, 2008.

Thriving at School: A practical guide to help your child enjoy the crucial school years, by Dr John Irvine and John Stewart, joins a range of books that assist parents (see Connor & Linke 2007) with the transition of their children to school. However, this book is unique in that it goes beyond the first year of school and provides strategies for parents to help their children thrive throughout their primary school years.

This book is written in simple, clear language and the informality of the 'teacher says' and 'true tale' vignettes add humour and reality to the topics. The initial focus in Part 1 is on school readiness and choosing the right school which, although not an option for many, provides some insight into what might be reasonably expected from every primary

school. The 'readiness for school' checklist is helpful and aligns with other sources of information available (Dockett & Perry 2006). Part 2 explores the new '3 Rs' of respect, responsibility and relationships, essential to developing confident, resilient, creative and flexible learners, before the authors move to specific strategies for the development of the more traditional 3 Rs of reading, 'riting' and 'rithmetic'.

Particularly useful is Part 4, *Thriving in the playground*, which provides insight into bullying (including cyber bullying) and ways of dealing with it. The emphasis in this book on developing social skills and emotional intelligence is warranted given the complexity of modern day living and the known links between emotional intelligence and academic success (Downey, Mountstephen, Lloyd, Hansen

& Stough 2007). The appendices provide additional information about learning with special needs (with some strategies and suggestions for further help) and the wiring of the brain for thinking.

This book is reassuring in its approach. At times it draws specifically on research to provide evidence for the advice provided and these references are listed by page at the end of the book. The Top Tips, Checklists and To Dos/Not to Dos offer parents immediate straightforward, practical ways of responding and being proactive when assisting their children. Underpinning Irvine and Stewart's book is the idea that children thrive at school when parental involvement in their learning is high and when positive home/school relationships are created. *Thriving at school* provides parents with the tools to do both.

However, the book does have some limitations. Some of the information seems somewhat Queensland-centric – not all states and schools have the same school canteen and school reporting requirements. Whilst the authors discuss a range of intelligences, they do not provide parents with strategies to assist in the development of these beyond linguistic, mathematical and emotional intelligences. This is a pity because it reinforces a somewhat traditional view of learning. Strategies and advice for the development of musical, sporting, and other interests and intelligences would have enriched this book. Parents wanting specific advice and strategies for assisting their child with a disability will need to look beyond this text.

Most of the suggested strategies for numeracy skills are currently used in classrooms and this consistency is helpful. Numeracy skill development should indeed be authentic, fun and engaging and the strategies supplied fit these criteria. However, the authors' strong support for employing a tutor for a struggling child should be treated with caution for a number of reasons, apart from the expense. Tutors need to be skilled in developing authentic learning experiences, and must be able to work closely with the child's teachers and their methods – this is not always possible. The implication that tutors are for remedial purposes only (rather than enrichment as well) is reinforced in this text. It is also worth noting that the rainbow number pattern strategy is somewhat confusing and the example of the decomposition method for subtracting numbers is incorrect.

The authors have listed some good web sites and programs that might assist in numeracy and literacy development. These are likely to be most successful if parents sit with their children whilst using them. Sitting alone with a computer program, no matter how wonderful, requires a large degree of self-regulation.

Part 3, *Thriving in the classroom*, focuses on the development of literacy skills. The authors provide a short introduction to the concepts of whole-word and phonic

approaches to reading as well as strategies to assist with reading such as the '3P' or 'pause, prompt and praise' strategy. Some fun reading activities and games are also included. However, one major limitation of these strategies is the lack of phonological awareness strategies (such as learning rhymes). These teach speech sounds related to letters and words, necessary before the application of 'word attack' type approaches. The book's advice for improving spelling would have benefited from an introduction to the ways children learn to spell, that is, visually, phonetically and through understanding the origins of words. With this understanding, parents might be better able to diagnose particular spelling problems and choose relevant strategies for solving them. A description of the developmental stages of the primary school child linked to relevant learning strategies would also assist parents as some strategies are more useful at certain stages than others. The book advises parents to refrain from telling a child the correct spelling and suggests getting him/her to first consult a dictionary. This may not be appropriate if the child does not have at least the first three letters of the word correct.

Thriving at School is an invaluable resource because it provides insight into the broader aspects of primary school life and the needs of learners today. Its straightforward, practical advice will provide parents with the confidence to support their children's learning. It is likely to be most useful for parents who have high aspirations for their children's educational success and are willing to actively support their learning. Its main tenet, that children will be more successful as a result of parent involvement, is well backed by its strategies for engaging children in learning. For the professional, this book might be most useful to initiate discussion with those parents who are themselves educationally disadvantaged, or have had negative experiences at school and are reluctant to approach their child's teacher.

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REVIEWED BY
Cathleen Farrelly
Faculty of Education
La Trobe University