Interview with Black Hills Parent magazine.

RE: Procrastination

I am going to share with you what I have found in working with people who are "struggling" with procrastination, and then I will give the best answers that I can to your questions.  I generally work with adults, but often in my work with adults, it is in a consultative approach to how to improve parenting and their children's productivity.

Most people who are struggling with procrastination are viewing the issue as just that: an issue.  It is being seen as something that gets in their way of enjoying life or stops them from following through on tasks.  In all reality, for those people who *have* the issue of procrastination, it is actually a motivator.  Often those people who know what procrastination is like are people who 1) have very high tolerances for stress 2) work better under pressure 3) need engaging activities to hold their interest 4) are multi-taskers 5) are motivated more by what they *don't* want than what they *do* want (i.e. at a biological level people are motivated *away* from pain and *towards* pleasure, so these people have an "away" style of motivation.  So, people are simply not motivated to complete a task until it has to get done *now,*"or else."  Sometimes, what ends up happening is that people who procrastinate do their best work just in the nick of time or at the very last minute.  It is no doubt that if you ask someone who functions this way, they will tell you that even if they *had*attempted to complete this task previously, they simply did not have the *drive* to get it done.  Many people who procrastinate have experimented with planning, time-management, breaking the task into smaller parts, or tried other solutions, and it hasn't worked.  Often, these are the same people who exhibit features of inattentiveness (ADHD).  They are also likely to be detail-oriented rather than "big-picture" oriented and prefer gratification *now* rather than fulfillment later.

For someone who truly wants to *change*their habits of procrastination, this is asking them to give up more than just procrastination, it is asking them to change their way of life.  For this to work for people, the positive benefits have to outweigh the losses involved (of living in the now, having instant gratification, having more excitement in their lives and living by the seat of their pants).  The positive benefits have to be more attractive than their current experience.  Often, people are not aware of these "payoffs" that they get from procrastination.  Once people become aware of what keeps them procrastinating, they are better able to weigh the benefits of change and make a decision truer to their own nature.

What are the benefits of anticipating  and being proactive towards task completion?  For most, they will include:

* Improved management of time and life balance
* An improved overall sense of peace and calmness
* Improved confidence and empowerment over one's own life
* More autonomy in deciding what to do with one's time (instead of being dictated by deadlines)
* Being able to take both "big picture" and "day-to-day" perspectives for improved decision-making and overall awareness.

What tends to evoke procrastination?

After sharing with you my observations on procrastination, we can see that a lack of interest in the task at hand can be a common precursor to procrastination.  Personality styles can be factors as well as common payoffs such as a heightened sense of anticipation, improved focus while working under stress, and more motivation when it comes down to the "now or never" moments.

Fear of failure?

Fear of failure is one of those factors mentioned frequently in current articles about procrastination.  To me, fear of failure exists *alongside* of procrastination in a way that also stops people from following through but is not necessarily a source of procrastination.

Too much on one's plate?

When a person has too much on one's plate, it is not so much procrastination that gets in the way but is a matter of prioritizing.  Someone who is working on 5 projects at once, that gives them equal attention, can only get 20% done on one project at a time in comparison to someone who is only working on 1 project and gets 100% done on that one project in the same amount of time. So, there is often a phenomenon that happens when people who have "too much on their plates" feel like they are not getting anything done, when in reality, they are.

When is it a problem?

Like any given topic, it is an issue when it interferes with a person's functioning in one or more areas of their lives: social, personal, or professional.  It is a problem when the person experiences it as taking away from the quality of their life.

How do you help children who habitually put things off until the last minute?

You start *as young as you can*!  You help children have positive experiences in making choices over how they use their time that becomes available to them following completion of a task.  You help them see the value in prioritizing, scheduling, and having the experience of the benefits listed above in comparison to the "living like your hair's on fire" experience.  Most of all, you model what you expect from them.

Do lists help?

Does exercise help?  :) (Yes!  When you do it!)  Lists help when they are created consistently and posted in a place where they will be used.  Many people make lists and find them a week later in pants pockets.  Lists can help but can also be overwhelming and create a sense of dread or incompetence when to-do lists don't get completed.  It is helpful for people to be able to prioritize and congratulate themselves on what they*did* accomplish and look forward to what they can get done the next day.  People often focus on what they *didn't* get done and are left living in that reality, which in all actuality only hinders their efforts further.

What do you do when a to do list doesn't work?

Break it down!  :)  If a to do list doesn't work, it may be for the reasons mentioned above.  Sometimes to do lists don't get done because the tasks are too big.  For example, a student who has "complete final project for science class" has a big project that might remain on their to do list for weeks or months.  Instead, breaking this down into smaller steps can help give them more manageable steps to complete and find a place to start.  (Answer to your first question:  Procrastination often occurs because people don't know where to start.)

I recently worked with two people who had "Make a will" on their to do lists for years!  (They were both in their 80's.  This is procrastination!)  The problem is that the task was daunting (aside from emotional).  It didn't feel like something they could complete as they both didn't know where to start or what questions to ask.  When we brainstormed what it would take to get this accomplished, they came up with about 10 action steps.  1) Get a referral for an attorney.  2) Call. 3) Talk with family.  4) ....

A to do list needs to include attainable *action steps.*People often make the mistake that "prioritizing" is an action.  It is still just words on paper.  Action steps actions that can be taken to produce tangible results.  So when a to do list doesn't work, assess and create action steps.

Does goal setting factor in at all?

Of course goal setting factors in.  People who are goal-oriented are more likely to be action driven and proactive.  People who are not (who are motivated more by the things they *don't* want) are more likely to be procrastinators.  Consider how you wake up in the morning.  Do you wake up without an alarm?  Do you get up at the first sound of your alarm going off or to your child wanting fed?  Or do you hit snooze until the very last minute.  The people who keep hitting snooze are the same people who will procrastinate until the "or else" kicks in.  Again, it takes a person being willing to seek a lifestyle change and give up the rewards of procrastination to become goal driven.  A person who hits snooze gets to stay in bed longer than you do (a person who gets up right away).  This is another example of procrastinators having more instant gratification.

Would a reward system work?

Again, if the benefits outweigh the losses for the individual.

Here are my additional offerings:

There are activities that all of us do that sometimes seem like "too much on our plates" that continue to need to be done.  These include anything from sleeping, to doing the dishes, to washing laundry, to making dinner.  Sometimes these are referred to as "flow activities".  Procrastinators use these activities as excuses to put something off.  And as it turns out, it's true that we all need to eat to live.  The laundry needs done, and so on.  When we notice ourselves in these activities, we can ask "Is this the most important thing to be giving my time to right now?"

Other helpful questions include:

"What is the next most important thing I can do?"

"What is the first step in moving towards my goal?  The next?"

"How will I hold myself accountable?"

"What will it be like to have free time instead of crunching before a deadline?"

"What will I get to do with this free time?"

"How will I celebrate my successes?"

"What resources do I have to help me be proactive in managing my time?"