

How Parents Can Help Their Kids Be Successful in School

"I just don't have the energy at the end of the work day to crack the books with my kid. Isn't that what we pay teachers to do?"

"Every child can't be an achiever, right?"

"My kid just isn't interested in doing homework. I've just given up. How do I help him turn things around in school this year?"



These are natural questions for parents to ask.

The good news is that children are born learners. They are curious about the world around them.

Here are some tips that parents can use to help their children be successful in school.

1. Get a plan and stick to it.

Set a specific "quiet time" every day for homework or general reading. Involve your child in setting the rules for this. Ask your child to come up with 3 rules — for example:

- Collect all needed materials before starting.
- No talking or fooling around during quiet time.
- Complete all work before stopping.

Write the rules on paper and post them in your house. Children are more likely to follow rules that they helped create.

Some elementary school students have 20-30 minutes a day set aside for this purpose. Junior and senior high school students may need at least 30-45 minutes for daily study time. Some schools expect students to spend at least 15 minutes per subject each day on homework. Check with the teachers to see how much homework to expect for your child.

Homework, even if routine, should not be viewed as optional, any more than is an assignment or project at your place of work.

2. Be a cheerleader.

Some children do poorly in school because they see themselves as unworthy. For a child to feel good about learning, he must first feel good about himself. Encourage your child by praising him for his efforts. Express interest in his school work.



3. Make no excuses.

Avoid giving your child a reason for making excuses. Even if you think your child will feel better if you do so, never

say this sort of thing: “Some people just don’t have a head for math.” Your child may think that you think she isn’t able to handle a task. Success in a future job will require your child do the best she can. You will not help your child by encouraging her to make excuses whenever it is convenient.

4. Light a fire.

Be enthusiastic! It can be contagious. Don’t give the message that homework is a boring chore. Children who do well enjoy learning. If your child does not seem motivated to do well in school, try to find ways to make the learning fun.

5. Make learning “real”.

The best learning is hands-on. Show how school work skills are needed and used in day-to-day life. For example, a child who helps make a meal learns fractions, telling time, reading and multi-step problem solving. Show your child what is under the hood when you work on the car. Ask for “help” when you balance the checkbook or write “thank you” notes and letters. Have your child jot down notes, reminders and shopping lists.

6. Fight the frustration.

Listen carefully when your child talks about having difficulty with his homework. Encourage him to break down problems into small steps.

7. Set the right mood.

Make your home a place where it is easy for your child to learn. Keep books, magazines, catalogs and writing materials at easy reach. Make sure that your child has a place to study. This could be in the child’s room, in the kitchen, or in another place where the lighting is good, and it’s quiet. Be near enough to answer questions that your child has.

If your child does homework somewhere else (such as at his after school program or at a day care provider’s home), be sure to discuss with them where and how the homework gets done. Ask them to provide a quiet, well-lit space for homework. Once your child is home, go over his homework to make sure it is complete. Answer any questions he has about his work.

The example you set will make more of an impression than your words. The more interested you are in his homework, the more your child sees you learning, the more excited he will be about learning. Make sure your child sees you reading. Limit the amount and kind of TV you watch.



Limit your child’s TV viewing to no more than 10 hours per week. Suggest programs that have useful tie-ins to schoolwork, such as shows about history, computers or animal life. Discuss these shows with your child. Help him see the connection to his school work.

8. Don’t pinch hit.

Your child must learn to “face the music” for poor or incomplete work. While you should be actively involved with being sure your child does her homework, don’t carry the whole load. Don’t do the long division, write the essay or do the science project for your child. If you are getting overly involved in homework because of a concern that it is too difficult for your child, call or visit the child’s teacher and share your concern.

9. Encourage independent growth.

Eventually a child must take charge of her own learning. This means that it is important for you to “let go” when your child pursues hobbies and starts reading for her own enjoyment.

One way to encourage independent growth is to maintain the daily “quiet time” even during vacations and weekends. Introducing your child to hobbies, even something as simple as reading the baseball scores in the sports section of your newspaper, is a good way to make non-homework learning fun.

10. Use the school.

Get to know your child’s teachers and what they expect. Compare your goals for your child to those of the teachers. Make sure that your child knows of your interest in his school. This will send the message that what he is doing is important.

- Tell teachers of special events, such as a recent family death, divorce or move, that may influence how your child does in school.
- Get answers to all of your questions about homework requirements, attendance policies, dress and conduct rules, discipline policies, and curriculum guidelines.

Talk with your child and find out what his concerns are. If you learn that your child feels ignored or “picked on” in the classroom, talk with the appropriate school official. If you can’t find the time to visit in person, call the teachers or attach notes to homework your child is taking back to school.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

If the steps described here don’t help your child, see if he suffers from a physical or behavior problem or learning disability. Talk with a medical doctor or other qualified professional for expert advice.

Signs that your child may need assistance:

- Your child has a hard time focusing on one thing—both at home and at school.
- Your child is doing well in many areas, but has one area that is very difficult. For example, she always gets B’s in reading and writing, but is doing poorly in math.
- Your child is repeatedly “in trouble” – for disrupting class, not completing in-class work, or fighting at school.
- Your child reports that no one at school “likes her,” and seems to have no real friends.
- You know your child could do better, but he “just doesn’t apply himself” or “is just lazy.”
- Your child complains that she cannot see the board clearly.
- Your child has great difficulty writing. For example, he can tell you what he wants to write, but can’t seem to get it on paper.
- Your child’s handwriting is very poor, and does not improve.
- Homework time has become a battle at home.
- You have a feeling that “something” is getting in the way of your child’s doing his best.

Your child's learning: A daily checklist

Clip this handy list and place it on your refrigerator or another spot where you will be sure to see it every day.

1. Is a learning "quiet time" scheduled for my child today?
2. How can I praise the effort and/or thinking of my child today?
3. Have I clearly talked about what I expect? Have I avoided making excuses for low effort by my child?
4. Can I praise a good effort?
5. What will I read or write today to set a good example?
6. How will I get relaxed before homework time so that I do not become impatient?
7. Have I made it clear that my child (not me) is responsible for homework?
8. Can I involve my child in a household activity today that will show the practical importance of learning?
9. Have I encouraged my child to pursue a hobby, reading the newspaper or another independent activity?
10. Did I remember to "sign off" on homework and attach a note if there is a problem?



Have a good month!

Pat Tanner Nelson, Ed.D.
Extension Family & Human Development Specialist
ptnelson@udel.edu
<http://bit.ly/DEjitp>

Rev0712

This newsletter has been adapted from the pamphlet Making the Grade: How Parents Can Help Their Kids Do Better In School. It is one of a series designed by The American Association of Parents and Children (AAPC) to help families improve the educational achievement of their children and to better manage their family finances. Dr. Elizabeth Park, graduate of the Department of Individual and Family Studies, University of Delaware, also contributed to this issue.

Suggested citation: Nelson, P.T. (Ed) (2012). How Parents Can Help Their Kids Be Successful in School. Families Matter! A Series for Parents of School-Age Youth. Newark, DE: Cooperative Extension, University of Delaware.



