

# Helping Children Learn<sup>®</sup>

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School

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October 2016

## Plan ahead for a productive parent-teacher conference

Attending a parent-teacher conference is one of the best ways parents can partner with teachers to help children learn. These one-on-one meetings let you learn about your child's strengths, find out how to help him improve where needed, and hear what is coming up in the year ahead.

To get the most from your conference, take these five steps:

- 1. Talk to your child.** Ask what his easiest and most difficult subjects are—and why. What would he like you to ask the teacher?
- 2. Make a list** of things the teacher needs to know about your child. You know your child better than anyone else. Sharing this information will make it easier for the teacher to meet his needs.
- 3. Write down your questions.** You might want to ask things such as: Is my child in different groups for different subjects? Does my child participate in class discussions and activities? Is my child working up to his ability? How well does my child get along with others?
- 4. Arrive on time.** Teachers usually have several conferences scheduled in a single day. Make the most of the time the teacher has available.
- 5. Create an action plan.** Ask the teacher what you can do at home to reinforce what your child is learning at school. Try to get at least one or two specific suggestions.



## Make time for the basics

School children need enough time for homework, for sleep, for family and for relaxing. Review your child's extracurricular activity schedule. Consider adjusting it if:

- **He can't do homework** until late at night. Activities should never interfere with schoolwork.
- **He shows signs of stress**, or isn't enjoying an activity.

## With persistence, hard tasks get easier

If your child complains about schoolwork that is "too hard," remind her that everything is hard until it gets easy.

School is filled with lots of challenges. To motivate your child to keep trying until she conquers them:

- **Break tasks** down into smaller pieces.
- **Help her see the link** between her effort and success.
- **Tell her you know** she can do it.
- **Remind her of things** that used to be difficult that she now does easily—like tying her shoes.



Source: C. Heath and D. Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Broadway Business.



## Set up a system to stay up-to-date

Your child's backpack is more than a carryall. It's a school-home communication device. You'll know more about what's going on at school if you:

- **Have your child keep a folder** in her backpack that's just for homework and take-home papers. Each day after school, look through the take-home folder together. What assignments does your child have today? What papers do you need to read, sign and return?
- **File papers right away.** Some papers, such as study guides and fliers about upcoming events, must be saved. Keep a folder for them. Post items you refer to daily on the refrigerator.
- **Keep a calendar.** Record test days, activities and assignments. Each day, review the calendar together. Keep it updated.
- **Check online.** The school website may have assignments or forms that need to be filled out. Print them out and send them back in the backpack.

## Think about decisions

To make reasoned decisions, kids need to think about consequences. That takes patience, practice and self-discipline. With your child:



- **Review past decisions.** When has your child made good choices?
- **Discuss new decisions.** Talk about situations your child may face. What are his choices and their likely outcomes?
- **Praise responsible decisions.** Provide a supportive environment that rewards well-made choices.



## How can I get all my kids ready on time in the morning?

**Q:** Getting three children out the door for school is hard! Either one child won't get up, or another forgets a book and has to go back for it. Or somebody's homework has vanished. My kids often miss the bus and I end up driving them to school. How can I fix this?

**A:** Mornings are a challenge in many households. But as long as your children know you'll drive them to school if they are late, they don't have much incentive to change.

To begin to turn things around:

- **Call a family meeting.** Announce that Mom's Taxi has a new policy. From now on, rides to school come with a cost. You can choose the price—part of their allowance, or perhaps an extra chore. It doesn't have to be a high price, but it should be something your kids want to avoid.
- **Get organized at night.** Help your kids lay out clothes, fill book bags and pack lunches. Set alarm clocks to go off a few minutes earlier.
- **Give everyone a five-minute warning** before it's time to leave. Then calmly walk out the door and head for the bus stop.
- **Enforce consequences consistently** once you set them. Odds are, you'll only have to collect your "taxi fare" once or twice before your children get better organized.



### Parent Quiz

## Are you giving effective instructions?

Classrooms—and families—function smoothly when children know how to follow directions. Are you teaching your child this vital skill? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

1. **Do you make sure** you have your child's full attention before giving directions? Call her by name and look her in the eye.
2. **Do you give** specific instructions? If a job involves several steps, list them. "First, pick up your clothes. Next, put them in the hamper."
3. **Do you ask** your child to repeat what you said before she begins a task?
4. **Have you posted** a checklist of things your child should do every day?
5. **Do you praise** her when she follows directions?

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are helping your child learn to follow instructions. For each no, try that idea.*

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*  
—Maya Angelou

## Do an after-the-test review

Tests give your child a chance to show what he knows. But they can also give him a chance to learn more. Reviewing past tests can help him improve his scores in the future. After a test, have your child:

- **Go over the results.** He should correct any wrong answers.
- **Determine the types** of errors he made. Did he rush and make careless mistakes? Was he unprepared?
- **Make adjustments.** Brainstorm with your child about ways to reduce errors, such as checking his work and studying for several days before a test.

Source: W.R. Luckie and W. Smethurst, *Study Power*, Brookline Books.

## Coach a team player

All through school, your child will be expected to work with others. She'll be more successful if she knows how to be a team player. To help her practice:



- **Have family members take turns** making some choices, such as which video to watch or which game to play.
- **Teach fair ways** to decide who goes first, such as "Rock, Paper, Scissors" and flipping a coin.

## Use discipline that works

To improve your child's behavior with discipline, experts suggest that you:

- **Use natural or logical consequences.** For example, a *natural* consequence of forgetting homework is getting a zero. A *logical* consequence of losing an item is having to replace it.
- **Plan ahead.** Talk with your child about discipline. Agree on basic rules and consequences. Enforce rules consistently.

Source: "Natural and Logical Consequences for Behavior," WebMD, niswc.com/consequences.

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Published in English and Spanish, September through May.

Publisher: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Alison McLean.

Staff Editors: Rebecca Miyares & Erika Beasley.

Production Manager: Pat Carter.

Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.

Layout & Illustrations: Maher & Mignella, Cherry Hill, NJ.

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P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

1-800-756-5525 • www.parent-institute.com • ISSN 1527-1013