

15+ Ways to Boost School Success

By Diane Debrovner

Whether your child is starting preschool or third grade, these little strategies can make a huge difference.

Be a Strong Support

1. Insist on a good night's sleep. If your child has been staying up later during the summer, start enforcing an earlier bedtime two weeks before school starts. Kids need their rest in order to concentrate and follow the rules at school.
2. Check the backpack. Track down all the notes and permission slips that come home from the teacher, rather than relying on your child to give them to you. It can be embarrassing for your little one if he is the only student who didn't bring in a special snack or wear a certain outfit planned for the day.
3. Always go to open-school night. If you have older kids, don't assume it's not important this time around because you already know what first grade is like, Dr. Ramey says. You may miss out on key information, including how the teacher likes to be contacted. Your child (and the teacher) may also feel hurt that you skipped it.
4. Know the daily routine. Ask for a weekly schedule of gym, science, music, and art classes. You'll be able to help your child prepare for the day and ask more specific questions about what happened at school.
5. Talk to other parents. Because it's sometimes hard to know whether your child's perception of what's happening in the classroom is accurate, it's helpful to have a few parents whom you can always call to touch base.
6. Volunteer whenever you can. "Even though I work full-time, I go on field trips, help with class parties, and read to the class twice a month," Shinberger says. "Fortunately, I am blessed with a great boss."
7. Show you care. No matter how busy you are, let your child know that you're interested in what he's learning.

Encourage Learning

8. Go on family adventures. Before school starts and on weekends, visit museums, libraries, and other interesting places and encourage exploration. Occasionally, while you're there, you might say, "Let's pretend I'm the teacher and you're the student," Dr. Ramey suggests. Later, you might ask, "What was something really interesting that you learned?"

9. Play board games. Not only are they fun, but they help your child get used to following specific rules. Before you start, read the rules out loud and ask your child to repeat them. If you're not sure whether something is allowed, go back and double-check. "My 7-year-old daughter, Connor, has always loved playing hangman, and it's a great way for her to practice reading and spelling," says Darcie Shinberger, of Macomb, Illinois. If you keep a pad of paper in your purse, you can play anywhere.

10. Read together. Kids benefit enormously when their parents continue to read with them at home every day. They also like it when their parents read the same book they're reading in school, Dr. Ramey says. You might say, "Let me know when there's a good book you're reading, because I'd like to read it too."

Encourage Social Skills

11. Teach your child to ask for what he needs. It's essential for students to be able to tell the teacher, "I don't understand," says Parents adviser Sharon L. Ramey, Ph.D., director of the Georgetown University Center on Health and Education, in Washington, D.C. One way to teach this lesson: Slip in some more-sophisticated words when you're reading a book to your child, and say, "When we read tonight, I'm going to use some new words and I want you to stop and ask me if you want to know about a word." Let your child know that teachers like to have children ask them questions about new words too.

12. Focus on manners and social skills. Expect your child to say "please," "thank you," and "excuse me." If he's a first-time student, help him practice sharing, taking turns, and standing in line. You might role-play and say, "What if you and another student both want to play with the same blocks. What could you do?"

13. Rehearse at home. "My son, Jack, has a tough time speaking to a group, so we sometimes practice show-and-tell at home. I pretend I'm his teacher, and his twin sister pretends she's another kid in the class, and he goes to the front of the room and does his presentation," says Leslie Lido, of Merrick, New York.

Set up a Learning Environment

14. Get organized. Find a specific place to put scissors, paper, crayons, and other supplies your child uses, and help her get in the habit of putting them back where they belong the way she'll have to do in her classroom. The same goes for shoes and jackets; when you can't find them in the morning, the day quickly gets off to a bad start.

15. Give them room to work. Even kindergartners need a regular spot to do their homework where they can sit up straight, spread out their papers, and not be distracted. If your child doesn't have a desk in her room, sitting at the kitchen table is much better than slouching on the couch.

Teacher Tips: Helping Academic Success

Look over the work your child brings home, and ask him to explain what he did. This will help reinforce the concepts he learned.

- Penny Zaniewski, Lit'l Scholar Academy, Las Vegas, Nevada

Help your child find age-appropriate books about the topic that he's most interested in, whether it's sports, dinosaurs, or dogs.

- Greg Lawler, Scholls Heights School, Beaverton, Oregon

Celebrate your child's successes, but don't overdo it -- or else your child will want to do well just to earn praise, rather than for the personal feeling of accomplishment. Try to start compliments with, "You should be so proud of yourself because ..." or "You must be so happy that you could ..."

- Marge Harvan, Weaver Child Development Center and Christian Primary School, Canton, Ohio

Additional contributions to this article from the editors of Parents magazine.

Originally published in the August 2004 issue of Parents magazine and the August 2003 issue of Parents magazine. © Copyright 2009 Meredith Corporation. All Rights Reserved