

Help Your Child Succeed in School

Janelle Durham, Parent Educator, Bellevue College. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

"According to research, the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to:

1. create a home environment that encourages learning,
2. communicate high, yet reasonable, expectations for their children's achievement and future careers,
3. become involved in their children's education at school and in the community." *

Create a Home Environment that Encourages Learning

Teach a love for reading. Reading is key to all academic learning. Read to your child often; choose fun books that give you joy when you read them. Take frequent trips to the library. Go to story times. Read a lot yourself so your child sees the lifelong benefits. Tell them your favorite stories. When they ask questions, don't just answer off the top of your head – be sure to sometimes model how to look it up!

Play games and do puzzles together. These teach that challenging yourself to think hard is fun. Kids learn strategy, problem-solving, memory skills, random luck, handling frustration, and more. Many logic, word and math puzzles are also good preparation for future test-taking skills.

Make things together. Making things from kits or following recipes will teach your child how to follow directions precisely and in the right order. But also have times for free play with legos, kitchen experimentation, and making "inventions" from cardboard and tape. This teaches flexible thinking, innovation, and that things may not go right the first time, and we have to keep trying till it works right.

Discipline – teach rules & manners. To succeed in school, kids need to understand that there are rules, and that when they follow the rules, we get to enjoy being together, and when they break the rules, they get negative consequences. They need to know how to pay attention, listen and take turns. Give your child chores so they learn how to be responsible and how to break a job into manageable steps.

Manage screen time. Limit total time to less than 2 hours, ensure that content is age appropriate, and make sure media use doesn't block kids from getting exercise, interactive play time, and adequate sleep.

Promote social-emotional skills. Getting along with peers and teachers helps the child feel a part of the school community, and thus more engaged. Kids need to be able to resolve conflicts, ignore disruptive behavior from classmates, handle their frustrations effectively and reach out for help when needed.

Create an organized family life. Following family routines at home – like hanging your coat up, tidying your toys, and taking dishes to the kitchen – help a child learn similar rules at school. Be sure your child has the self care skills to be independent at school, such as being able to toilet independently, put on their own coat, and organize their possessions. Kids will do best at school if they sleep 10 – 11 hours at night. Healthy breakfasts get the day off to a good start.

Create a space for homework. Create a quiet and comfy space for working in. When your child is doing homework, support them by helping them get organized, making sure they have the necessary materials, asking about assignments, helping interpret instructions, and praising your child's efforts.

Communicate high, yet reasonable, expectations

Talk about the value of education. The more you value education and learning, the more they will. Talk about how your education has helped you succeed. If your lack of education has blocked you from your goals, share that, and tell them what you're doing now to overcome that. Talk about the important work you see being done around you and about how good it is that people are educated to do that work.

Model a work ethic. If your child sees that you work hard, do your best, challenge yourself to continue to learn more and do better, and are responsible and reliable, it motivates them to be/do the same.

Take school attendance seriously. Making sure they get to school on time, and attend every day, shows them how important school is. If you take them out of school for vacations, that de-values education.

Challenge them, but don't overwhelm them. Whether you're choosing puzzles, toys, board games, or extra academic challenges, be aware that there is a "sweet spot" for learning. You want things to be easy enough that they are capable of doing them *with work*, but not so easy that they don't even have to think. Challenging enough that your child has to stretch, but not so challenging that they always fail. They'll gain the self-confidence that comes with knowing that if you work hard, you will be successful.

Praise and feedback. Don't give empty praise for the stuff that's easy, but DO give lots of praise where they had to work hard. Praise effort, don't imply that it's just god-given talent that helped them do well. Specific praise is better, and it's OK to give suggestions on how to improve (without criticizing them).

Play games – don't "let them win". Many parents find that if they beat their child at a game, their child has a meltdown. So, they either don't play games, or they let their child win all the time. Instead, choose developmentally appropriate games where your child has a chance at beating you if they pay attention and think hard. They'll still be disappointed when they lose, but triumphant when they win!

Develop connections at your child's school: School/Family partnerships

Research shows that when parents are involved, students have higher grades, higher test scores, better attendance, better homework completion, higher graduation rates, and fewer behavioral issues.

Meet the teacher and stay visible to them: Drop off or pick up your child at the classroom when you can, go to school events (concerts, plays, fairs), respond to teacher emails when asked to. If you're asked to send in something specific for a class project, be sure to do so. This lets the teacher know that you care.

Attend parent-teacher conferences / back to school nights: Come prepared with questions like: What are my child's strengths? Where are they struggling and how can I help? Does my child have any special needs and what programs are available to support them? What can we do at home to support learning? Ask for additional meetings if needed, but don't over-burden the busy teacher with too many requests.

Support the teacher and the school: There's nothing more powerful than volunteering in your child's classroom! It builds your connection with the teacher, their feeling supported by you makes them more supportive of your child, you get the chance to see your child's classroom in action, and your child sees how much you value their school experience. If you can't volunteer on a regular basis, at least try to get in there a few times during the year. You can also support the school through participating in the PTA, donating to special requests, being supportive of all the staff members, and so on.

Speak positively about the school: Don't bad-mouth the teacher or criticize the school in front of your child. If you have concerns, address them, but in the meantime, display a positive attitude to your child.

Know about your child's day: If you have a sense of their schedule, the routines, who their friends are, favorite subjects and so on, it helps you ask them specific questions about their day. Instead of the generic "how was school", if you say "you had a math test today, how did that go?" or "you have music tomorrow – I know you love that" helps show your child that they, and their life, are important to you.

Strike a Balance – Avoid All Work and No Play

Some parents fill their child's outside-of-school time with more academics: tutoring, math club, and more. Remember that childhood is about more than just learning academic skills: children need time to run outside to build large motor skills, unstructured play time with other kids to learn social skills, and bored free time to learn to be creative. We know from neuroscience that kids learn better when they feel safe and happy, and they need down time to let their brain cement all the connections they've been developing. So, give them time to relax, to play, and to enjoy childhood!