

Teacher Tips for Supporting Kids' Learning



By Joanna Nesbit

Families are busy, and after the initial excitement of a new classroom, new schoolmates and Back-to-School Night, it's easy to forget to engage with your child's teacher. You might even fall out of the habit of routinely checking in with your child, especially if no news from school appears to be good news. But parents play a critical role in their child's academic success, and teachers want you to know it. Here's what they say you can do to help your child — and help them help your child.

Get to know your child's teacher

Elementary schools often schedule meet-and-greet sessions just before school begins, which is a good opportunity to meet teachers face to face. Alternatively, introduce yourself at Back-to-School Night or set up a quick individual meeting. Find out how your kids' teachers best like to communicate, and if it's via email, send them one so they have your address on file. Then check in now and again to see how things are going for your child.

Jackie Gross, a St. Louis, Missouri, teacher, parent and founder of a tutoring business, recommends you not only introduce yourself to your children's teachers but also let them know you're in their corner.

"I say up front to my children's teachers, 'I just want you to know I'm here to be your support outside the classroom, whatever you need me to do to help my child,'" says Gross. "I also say, 'Just tell me the straight story.' Not every parent wants that, and I do think good teachers tell parents what they also appreciate about your child, but it's helpful to teachers if they know you're willing to work with them to support the child."

Sometimes that means being open to hearing what isn't working at school for your kid. Gross says if you're hearing mostly negatives, of course you can ask the teacher for what's also going well. It's a useful reminder to the teacher to present your child in context with her classmates.

Be aware of your child's academic progress

Seattle fifth-grade teacher Margaret Paulk says you can judge your child's progress by what work's coming home and being completed there. "If your child has homework, don't correct it, but do make sure all the blanks are filled in," she says. "You can also judge what's going on by your child's attitude about schoolwork. If the work is too hard, kids can shut down and even say it's too easy for fear of appearing like a failure. If you're not seeing any work, have no idea how your child is doing, or if your child's attitude concerns you, contact the teacher to touch base," recommends Paulk.

If your child is feeling overwhelmed by the workload, it's important to talk about it with the teacher and possibly come up with a modified homework load. "Report cards should not come as a surprise," Paulk says.

Create a homework-friendly household

Kids benefit from predictable routines, especially when households are busy with extracurricular activities. Work with your child to create a schedule that allows him adequate time for homework completion without being rushed or up late.

"When your child does his homework should be based on his personal energy level," says Paulk. "Some kids do best right after school, others need time to play, and others do best first thing in the morning. There's no rule against homework right after breakfast."

Give him some options to choose from rather than asking him how he wants to get it done so he has realistic guidelines to work with, says Gross. Establish a distraction-free homework location, best time to get it done, and place for storing supplies within easy reach.

Monitor screens and phones

Paulk recommends no TV or video games for any family member while kids are working — it's hard enough to stay focused without the lure of electronics. Also, keep an eye on computer work because, she says, "kids love to spend time choosing fonts rather than focusing on the homework content."

She would love parents to keep screens out of kids' bedrooms. "Kids who do have electronics in their bedrooms come to school puffy-eyed and asleep for the first hour of instruction," she says. "Also, set a time for turning off cell phones." And turn off your own phones when you're spending time with your child, or at least don't engage with the phone, says Marybeth Chappell, an assistant teacher in an elementary Montessori school. "They are watching your every move. Set and enforce limits on screen time, she says.

Get organized

No matter how involved you are, you're only as helpful as your organization system. Together with your child, create a system — whether it's color-coded file folders, hanging wall folders, or an in-basket — that you can both access for important school documents, such as field trip or picture forms that need to be returned to school in a timely way.

"Also, get in the habit of giving your child the schedule for the day and have them plan when

they will get things done, because each day may be a little different," says Gross. Be specific about asking your children when they will get their homework done if they have a music lesson, and then move toward a more general inquiry if they're older, such as, "When will you get your responsibilities accomplished?"

Finally, have your child go through his backpack every day. "It's not a secret cave," says Paulk. "Backpacks contain a wealth of information — notes that go home, assignments and uneaten lunches. Look in your child's backpack on a regular basis. Who knows what surprises you'll find?"

Let your child own her choices

Once you and your child have set up some systems for success, don't rescue her if she leans toward being lax, especially if she's in fourth, fifth or sixth grade. "Allow kids to suffer the natural consequences of their choices," says Stephanie Dethlefs, former fourth-grade teacher and university educator. "Avoid things like calling to make excuses for missing homework, making an extra drive with a forgotten backpack, or fighting kids' battles for them. If parents are always cleaning up after their kids, it takes even longer for the kids to become independently responsible." Natural consequences extend to homework — do make sure your child has time to complete it, but don't correct it. Do help with a time management plan, but don't finish her project for her the night before it's due.

Gross agrees: "It might seem like you're helping your child, but the real role of a parent is not to solve your kids' problems for them but to give them the skills to solve their own problems."

Read — a lot

For elementary school kids, reading is critical. Third-grade teacher Peter Anderson says children benefit from their parents reading to them regularly and also taking them to the library. He recommends that parents and kids take turns reading to each other, then the children retell what they just read in their own words.

"Reading helps develop vocabulary and knowledge of more complex sentence structures, as well as improves fluency, expression and comprehension," says Anderson. Additionally, reading leads directly to better writing skills.

Stay connected

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by all the details of school and daily activities. Perhaps most important, try to slow down and spend a little time each day with your kids. Staying connected goes a long way toward helping kids feel supported at home and school.

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