

# How Can I Help My Children Do Better In School?

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*Twenty-five clip-out suggestions teachers can give parents who ask the perennial question.*

How can I help my children do better in school? Teachers and school administrators have heard this question from parents since schooling began. Up to now, some standard answers have been: "Keep in touch with what's going on in your child's school life"; "Meet the teacher"; "Join the P.T.A."; "Do volunteer work at school."

All of these are good suggestions, and thank goodness for parents who are involved in school activities. But parents can do *much more* to help their children do better in school-particularly with basic reading and pre-reading skills.

Following are ways you can suggest for parents to help their children and, in the process, become partners in learning with the school. Though employing these techniques takes no educational training, it does take time. It's worth it. Some of the suggestions may seem obvious, but there's no reason to assume that most parents follow them all. If presented as answers to parents' specific questions or as general, non-condescending reminders, they can serve you well. Consider sending all parents a checklist similar to this one and include a letter to introduce it.

## Twenty-Five Ways To Help Children In School

- 1)** Keep your children healthy. Should the school nurse or doctor inform you that your child has a health problem, discuss it. He or she can help get the assistance you need. Seeing, hearing and feeling well are essential to learning.
- 2)** Talk with your children. Talk naturally. Don't use baby talk no matter how young the child. The more words a child can understand and say, the easier it will be for him or her to learn to read and to understand.
- 3)** Listen to your children. Encourage them to talk about their everyday activities. Make sure you give them the chance to initiate conversation during meals and on other suitable occasions. Your children will learn to express themselves if they know you will give them your attention.
- 4)** Praise your children. Praise and recognition reinforce learning. Reading, for example, is enjoyable, but it's also hard work for children. They need your support and encouragement. Praise them when they succeed and help them when they are having problems.
- 5)** Be patient with your children. Even though you work with them and help them with their homework, they may make the same mistakes many times. Don't despair! Some experts say that new learning sometimes requires more than 15 repetitions before it is absorbed. It's most important that you do not become angry or impatient, since learning cannot take place in a tense atmosphere. If you find yourself "losing your cool," just stop and do something else for a while.
- 6)** Avoid comparing your children. Each child is unique. Some children learn faster than others. If your children seem to be moving at a slow rate, don't blame them or worry them about it. It's too early to make comparisons anyway, for your children may have an as yet untapped reserve of attributes and talents. Let them know you love them for what they are and that you will continue to love them no matter how they do in school.
- 7)** Set the stage for good homework habits. Try to provide a quiet, well-lighted place for study, and make sure there is room for books, dictionaries, papers, pens, pencils and other homework tools.
- 8)** Schedule home study on a regular basis. To succeed in school, many children need a regular study time each night free of interruptions and distractions. If your children are not given a homework assignment, this scheduled time can be used for review, reading for pleasure or some type of family or learning activity. It's a good idea to provide each of your children with a notebook so that he or she and you will always know exactly what the assignments are. This notebook will also serve as a written record of all assignments and will help to organize, review and study of previous material.
- 9)** Set a bedtime and stick to it. Learning is hard work and requires full use of all faculties. Your children will be in the proper frame of mind and otherwise ready for learning only if they report to school each morning well-rested.

**10)** See that your children's school attendance is excellent. When children miss school, they may miss the presentation of new information or the mastery of a difficult concept. Once they fall behind their group, it's especially hard to catch up. Some children can never quite adjust after frequent or extended absences from school.

**11)** Know exactly how your children are doing in school. If you find out that they are having academic or other problems, don't wait to be contacted by the school. Take the initiative by making an appointment to talk it over with the teacher. If you can't get to school, send a note asking the teacher to contact you by telephone. Find out how you can help. Perhaps you can provide information about your children and family that will help school people respond with greater understanding to your child's situation.

**12)** Make family mealtimes meaningful. Mealtime can provide the ideal setting for talking together, sharing events of the day and discussing individual problems and aspirations. In a relaxed, family atmosphere, youngsters have a chance to test their debating skills in friendly arguments and to talk out their differences of opinion. Such discussions will help develop your children's self-confidence and encourage them to speak up in the classroom. Don't allow TV to interfere with this perfect opportunity for family communication.

**13)** Make television your servant, not your master. Children learn a lot from television--both good and bad. Help them choose appropriate programs to watch. Then watch with them and, afterwards, discuss what you've seen. This approach to television can help your children develop new interests that you can encourage them to read about.

**14)** Take your children places. Visits to nature and science centers, art museums, train and subway stations, airports, farms, factories, shipyards, supermarkets, pet shops, and so on will help broaden their experiences. Such diverse activities are vital in readying young children for reading.

**15)** Read with your children. It's a rare child who is not delighted to be read to by a parent or older friend, but it's important to read with your children, not only to them. Not long ago, I saw a young teacher trying to read a book to a small group of five-year olds. The children kept interrupting with questions and comments, frequently turning back a page or two and saying such things as "Let me see the lion again" and "See the mouse with the hat?" Finally, the teacher said in an angry tone, "Do you want me to read this story or not? If so, hush?" That teacher's scolding kept her student's quiet, but from that point on the youngsters were spectators of the reading process not participants in it. The experience lost its excitement and the story wasn't personal anymore. It was just ink on paper. As irritating as interruptions can sometimes become, it's important to remember that children's comments during a story signal that they are making connections between new material and something they already know--the essence of the learning process. So read with your children and welcome interruptions. They tell you that you are doing your job well.

**16)** Help your children read. If your children are beginning readers, tell them the words they can't yet read so that they can move along and maintain interest. Later, you can assist them in figuring out the harder words for themselves.

**17)** Have your children read to you. Encourage them to read a story to themselves before they read it to you. This practice will help give them confidence and a greater understanding of what they have read. It will also make the story more interesting to them.

**18)** Listen as your children tell you about what they have read. Reading is not reading unless it's accompanied by understanding. Therefore, when your child shows understanding by wanting to tell you about what he or she has read, it's extremely important to show you are interested.

**19)** Provide a wide variety of reading materials in your home. Children learn by example rather than by precept. If you have books, magazines and newspapers readily available and in use, your children will see that reading is a source of pleasure and information. It's infinitely more effective for your children to see you reading often than it is for you to tell them to read.

**20)** Give your children books as birthday or holiday gifts. Children who have books they can call their very own are motivated toward reading. The arrival of books mailed directly to your children--with their names on the labels or cartons--provides a strong inducement for reading.

**21)** Tempt your children with paperbacks. For a number of young readers, there is something formidable about hardcover books; for them, paperbacks are much more attractive. Also because paperbacks are less costly, you can provide many more and a greater variety.

**22)** Intrigue your children with their own magazine subscriptions. Few youngsters--even those not keen on the idea of reading anything at all--can resist the appeal of the arrival in the mail of their own magazine. Reluctant readers suddenly find themselves poring over instructions for easy do-it-yourself projects, riddles, puzzles and stories. Before they know it, they're "hooked" on reading--anxiously awaiting the next issue of their magazine.

**23)** Get your children interested in daily newspapers. The writing communicates a sense of vitality and immediacy that piques children's interest. Clip articles that will appeal to them. Also point out that newspapers advertisements provide a service for the consumer--whatever his or her age. Encourage the children to read ads in the newspaper and especially in "their" magazines for products that interest them.

**24)** Join and use the free public library. Take your children to the library. Help them get their own cards and select and take out their own books. Ask the librarian to suggest good books to suit your children's ages and interests.

**25)** Encourage a wide variety of reading experiences. The fact that children read is sometimes more important than what they read. For example:

*Kitchen Reading:* Labels on food cans and boxes can make interesting reading. The contests and free gifts advertised on labels are strong reading motivators. Reading these labels can also lead to writing contest entry letters or filling out forms for free merchandise.

*Medicine Cabinet Reading:* Labels on jars, bottles and boxes found in the bathroom (excluding dangerous medicines and poisons, of course) can be just as interesting as those found in the kitchen and may also include contests and special inducements.

*Rock Record Reading:* If your children are between the ages of 10 and 14, they probably have a collection of rock records. Listening time can also be reading time. Album jackets are filled with information about the kids' favorite rock stars, and sometimes the words to the songs are included. Many record shops sell song books that have the lyrics to all the new rock records. Encourage your children to read along as they play the records.