

# Helping Children Learn<sup>®</sup>

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



January 2024

## Reinforce learning and academic skills in six simple ways at home

Incorporating learning into your child's time at home is one of the most important ways you can support success in school. Here are six easy ways:

### 1. Expose your child to new things.

Every meaningful experience your child has—from observing a construction site to visiting a museum—has an impact on learning. On your next outing together, discuss how some of the things you are seeing relate to what your child is learning in school.

### 2. Have conversations about what your child is doing in classes. Show enthusiasm and interest. Find out what your child thinks about school.

### 3. Ask your child to teach you. Have your child show you how to solve that math problem on today's worksheet, or tell you about a historic event the class is learning about.

### 4. Talk together about all sorts of topics. Really listen to what your child says, and ask follow-up questions to keep the conversation going.

### 5. Encourage deeper thinking. Discuss similarities and differences between things. Ask your child to give reasons for opinions.

### 6. Put your child's abilities into action. Let your elementary schooler use knowledge and skills to help you around the house. Ask for your child's advice when you are making a decision or solving a problem.



## Addition facts can be child's play

Memorizing addition facts frees up brainpower so your child can focus on solving multi-step problems and word problems efficiently. To strengthen your elementary schooler's addition fluency in fun ways:

- **Play board games** with two dice. At first, your child may need to count every dot on each die. With practice, your child will immediately recognize the number of dots on one die (say, 3), then count the dots on the second die (say, 5) on from 3 ("4, 5, 6, 7, 8") to find the total number of spaces to move. Soon, your child will simply recall that  $3 + 5 = 8$ .
- **Build with blocks** to practice making 10. Help your child learn number combinations that equal 10 by building two-color block towers (1 blue block + 9 red blocks = 10, 2 blue + 8 red = 10, etc.). Later, your child can use this knowledge to learn "neighboring facts." (" $5 + 5 = 10$ . So  $5 + 4$  must equal 9, since 4 is one less than 5 and 9 is 1 less than 10.")

## Breakfast is a smart start

Studies show that eating breakfast improves students' focus, alertness, comprehension and memory. Whether your child eats it at home or at school, breakfast provides essential fuel for learning. If time is an issue, offer grab-and-go options like an apple and a piece of cheese.



## Why handwriting matters

Writing by hand helps children learn reading skills faster than typing on a keyboard. Seeing and feeling the letter shapes reinforces letter knowledge. To boost handwriting skills:



- **Make sure your child's feet** rest on the floor. Place a box under them if necessary. This anchor makes writing easier.
- **Help your child** find the right amount of pressure. Pushing too hard tires out hand muscles. Experiment with different tools, like gel pens that glide smoothly.
- **Offer chances to write.** Together, write letters to relatives. Dictate your grocery list for your child to write down.

Sources: R. Wiley and B. Rapp, "Handwriting beats typing and watching videos for learning to read," Johns Hopkins University; L. Brukner, "Tips to help students with their handwriting," Edutopia.

## Encourage organization

Elementary schoolers are just developing the organizational skills they need to think ahead. Help your child learn to:

- **Use a calendar** to track assignments, test dates and activities.
- **Break big projects down** into parts to complete over several days.
- **Tidy up after study time** so supplies will be easy to find when next needed.



## My child's clowning is a serious issue. What can I do?

**Q:** My first grader is a real class clown. The teacher says this behavior is disruptive. At home, my child also uses laughs to get out of doing things. But how am I supposed to impose discipline when I am laughing myself?

**A:** Children often make jokes and behave like clowns to gain status with peers—and it works. Or they are rebelling against adults or rules, but in such a way that adults react to the humor instead of the misbehavior.



To put an end to your child's antics, change your response:

- **Don't use labels** like "the class clown" or talk about how funny your child is to others—it will only reinforce the silliness.
- **Ignore your child's efforts at humor** when they are inappropriate. Leave the room if you can't avoid laughing. Clowns need an audience in order to continue their performance.
- **Establish rules and consequences in advance**, and apply them consistently. If your child is clowning to avoid a responsibility, enforce the consequence for shirking. If your child is trying to manipulate you into a *yes* when your answer is *no*, stick to your *no*.
- **Talk with your child** about better ways to make friends. Smiling and showing interest in others is a great way to start.



## Are you teaching your child new words?

Communication skills improve when your child can use just the right word to express an idea. Are you helping your child build a large vocabulary that supports academic success? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you discuss** unfamiliar words and their meanings when you and your child read together?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you introduce** new words for familiar ideas? "Let's use big blocks at the bottom so the tower will be *sturdy* and won't fall down."
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you choose** word games often when playing games as a family?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you help** your child make and add to a personal dictionary of new words?

- \_\_\_ **5. Do you post** a new word each day that family members try to use in conversation?

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are adding to your child's word power. For each no, try that idea.*

"A child needs a forest of words to wander through, a sea of words to splash in."  
—Frank Bruni

## Keep on reading aloud

No matter how old students are or how well they can read to themselves, family read-aloud times are effective and fun ways to build reading skills. For the best results:

- **Choose a regular time.** Reading aloud with your child daily demonstrates that reading is too important to miss.
- **Read books you like.** Your enjoyment can increase your child's enjoyment.
- **Emphasize the first line** to grab your child's attention.
- **Use distinct voices** and expressions for each character to bring them alive.
- **Stop reading** for the day at a point where your child is eager to hear what happens next.

## Offer reasons to persevere

Learning isn't always easy, which is why it's so important for students to develop persistence. To encourage your child to persist:

- **Offer reminders** of times persistence has helped your child master a skill.
- **Offer encouragement.** Say things like, "You are making progress. Keep at it, you'll get it."
- **Discuss the rewards.** It feels great to be able to go into a test with confidence, knowing you've studied hard. Even better, it feels great to learn and get smarter!

## Unlock cooperation secrets

Give your student two keys to working well with others in the classroom:



- 1. Controlling others** is impossible, but your child *can* control personal actions and reactions.
- 2. Responsibilities** are like promises. They are things that must be done, especially when others are counting on your child.

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