

Elementary School Parents[®] *make the difference!*

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A mid-year tune-up helps your child recommit to learning

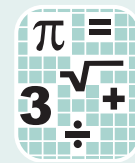
It's the beginning of a new calendar year—and nearly the halfway point in the school year. Take this opportunity to consider your child's habits and make needed adjustments.

Ask how your child thinks the school year is going. If you set learning goals together at the start of the year, review them now. Is your child making progress? How can your child make the rest of the school year even better?

Then, help your child make some resolutions. Here are four to consider:

- 1. Recommit to routines.** Has your elementary schooler's bedtime begun to slip? Are mornings more rushed? Is your child's regular study time now not quite so regular? Sleep and study routines make life easier—and help students perform better in school.
- 2. Spend more time reading.** There is no skill that will help your child more in school. And reading ability, like other skills, gets better with practice. Encourage daily reading and let your child read about anything, from sports to favorite movie characters.
- 3. Take more responsibility for learning.** Remind your child that to be successful in school, students need to complete assignments on time, participate in classroom discussions and ask for help when they need it.
- 4. Have an optimistic mindset.** Positive thinking makes it easier to tackle challenges. To foster positivity, help your child manage stress, visualize a successful outcome and learn from mistakes.

Use toothpicks to reinforce math concepts



A box of toothpicks is all you need to teach your elementary schooler some key math skills—

such as reasoning, number sense and even basic geometry. Toothpick math is also a fun way to make time go faster while waiting at an appointment.

Try these educational ways to put a box of toothpicks to use:

- **Last one wins.** Lay out 12 toothpicks. Taking turns, players may remove one or two toothpicks. The player who takes the last toothpick wins. (Leaving three toothpicks on the table guarantees a win on your next turn.)
- **Can you copy this?** Using five toothpicks, create a design. Let your child look at it for only three seconds. Then, cover it up and see if your child can recreate it from memory.
- **Tricky triangles.** How many triangles can your child create with seven toothpicks?

For even more toothpick math fun, go online with your child, search *toothpick puzzles* and print out more to try.

Help your child make decisions with this five-step process



Making responsible decisions will be easier when your child takes them step-by-step.

Encourage your student to rely on this five-step process:

- 1. Define the situation.** Children can't make wise decisions if they aren't clear about the issues at hand. Ask your child "What's the main thing you are concerned about?"
- 2. Explore options.** What are some ways your child could handle the situation? Have your child make a mental list, then narrow it down to the three most sensible choices. This list-making step is essential because it illustrates that there are usually several options for solving a problem.
- 3. Consider the disadvantages.** Have your child think about the

cons of each idea. If a certain option has a particularly negative consequence, this is a good time to rule out that option.

- 4. Consider the advantages.** Now ask your child to think about the pros of the three top choices. Does one option have major advantages over others? If so, that may be the winner.
- 5. Decide on a solution.** After weighing the pros and cons of each possible option, your child can make a decision with confidence.

"It is in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped."

—Tony Robbins

Resilience is essential for your child's academic success



It's wonderful for students to be talented and smart, but educators know it's just as important for them to be resilient.

At one time or another, everyone faces a challenging task or a disappointing setback. The key is to remind your child to keep trying. Pushing forward—even when things are tough—is a key to success in school and in life.

To help your child bounce back and keep trying:

- **Break big goals** into small parts. If your child wants to raise a grade, for example, offer support by developing a plan together.
- **Offer encouragement.** When your child is working on something challenging, say things like:
 - » *I know you can do this.*
 - » *I bet you'll figure it out.*
 - » *You're making great progress.*
 - » *You'll get the hang of it.*
 - » *If it doesn't work that way, try another way.*
- **Focus on the process.** It feels great to go into a test with confidence, knowing you've studied hard. Even better, it feels great to learn! Talk about your child's accomplishments and what makes each so worthwhile.

Are you building your child's 'word power'?



Knowing just the right word to use can give an elementary schooler real power. A strong vocabulary improves your

child's thinking and communication skills. And there is a clear connection between a strong vocabulary and academic success.

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to see if you are expanding your child's word knowledge:

- 1. Do you talk about words?** When reading books together, discuss the meanings of unfamiliar words.
- 2. Do you use new words** for familiar ideas? "Let's tidy your room by *categorizing* your toys."
- 3. Do you play word games** as a family, such as Scrabble?
- 4. Do you pick a Word of the Day** that family members try to use at least three times during that day?
- 5. Do you encourage** your child to use a notebook to write down new words and their meanings?

How well are you doing?

More *yes* answers mean you are helping your child learn and use words. For *no* answers, try those ideas from the quiz.

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Reduce recreational screen time by tracking it and setting limits



Researchers have looked at the difference in children's brain activity when reading a book versus consuming

screen-based media. The researchers found that brain activity increased while children were reading and decreased while they were viewing screen-based media. Their findings highlight the importance of limiting recreational screen time for healthy brain development.

The first step is to help your child become aware of how much time is spent staring at a screen for fun. Have your child track the time spent watch-

ing TV, playing computer games, and scrolling through online content. You and your child may be surprised how quickly those minutes add up.

Does your child spend fewer than two hours a day in front of a screen on non-school activities? Your student is on the right track. More? It's time to set limits.

Studies show that when families set *any* media rules, children's screen time drops by an average of more than three hours a day.

Source: T. Horowitz-Kraus and J.S. Hutton, "Brain connectivity in children is increased by the time they spend reading books and decreased by the length of exposure to screen-based media," *Acta Paediatrica*.

Learn about the mental health benefits of independent play



Does your child love to build things with blocks? Swing from the monkey bars? There's more to playtime than just

having fun—in fact, research shows that independent play can improve children's mental health.

Not only does free play bring kids joy, it also helps them solve problems and even overcome fears. In addition, play is an effective stress reliever—after all, it's hard to feel stressed when you're blowing bubbles or pretending to be a superhero!

To encourage independent play, provide your child with:

- **Time.** Allow plenty of free time each day. While structured activities like sports and music lessons have many benefits, a busy schedule can interfere with playtime.
- **Materials.** Give your child a variety of things to play with, including

building toys, art supplies and props for pretend play. "Toys" don't have to cost a lot—your child can turn cardboard boxes into castles or locomotives, and your old clothing is ideal for playing dress-up. Items from nature, like acorns, rocks and twigs, make great playthings, too.

- **Encouragement.** Support your child in taking positive "risks," like climbing a low playground rock wall, balancing on a fallen log, learning to do a cartwheel, etc. These experiences boost confidence and promote a "can-do" attitude that can lead to greater mental well-being.
- **Independence.** Let your child be in charge during playtime. Choosing what to play with and how to play with it maximizes the mental health benefits of independent play.

Source: "'All work, no independent play' cause of children's declining mental health," Florida Atlantic University.

Q: My elementary schooler does not like to write. When there is a writing assignment, my child just stares at the blank piece of paper. Is there anything I can do to help?

Questions & Answers

A: Elementary schoolers are often reluctant writers. Many simply freeze with fear at the thought of writing. They worry that what they write won't be any good, or that they'll be made fun of.

To overcome writer's block:

- **Empathize with your child.** Say that professional writers have difficulty writing sometimes, too—and that's OK.
- **Recommend practice.** Have your child write about anything that comes to mind, no matter how silly. Or, suggest writing about a personal interest.
- **Talk through topic ideas** with your child. Encourage brainstorming, and ask your child to make a list of ideas.
- **Suggest your child write down** ideas just as they come. Later, your child can edit for flow, grammar and spelling.
- **Encourage your child to use** a computer to write if possible. This makes revisions easier.
- **Be gentle when reviewing** your child's writing. Note what you like first and don't over-criticize. Focus on what your student is trying to say, not just the mechanics of writing.
- **Avoid fixing mistakes.** This will send the message that you don't think your child is capable of fixing them independently.
- **Be patient.** Allow your child to express frustration. It takes time and practice to become a skilled writer.

It Matters: Emotional Intelligence

Show your child how to develop social awareness



When children have the ability to understand and empathize with others, they are able to form solid

connections with classmates, teachers and friends. Social awareness allows people to feel compassion for others—even when their background, beliefs and culture may be different.

It's important for children to recognize and accept the strengths of people who are different from them. To guide your child:

- **Discuss** your family's background. Unless you are a Native American, someone in your family came here from another country. Remind your child that at some point, everyone has struggled to find their place.
- **Talk** about the importance of not forming opinions about people based on their color, religion or culture. Let your child know it's never OK to insult or treat someone badly because of their appearance or background. Don't allow family members to use harmful or offensive language when referring to others.
- **Remind** your child that a person's heritage does not show how smart they are, how good they will be at sports, or even what kind of food they like.
- **Welcome** many different kinds of people into your family's life. Encourage your child to do the same. Talk about how much your family can learn from others.

Boost relationship skills by teaching how to resolve conflicts

Whether it's a dispute with a classmate, a misunderstanding with a teacher or an argument with a sibling—all children experience conflict in their everyday lives.

To resolve conflicts productively, encourage your child to:

- **Avoid name-calling.** Demonstrate how to use "I messages" to explain feelings instead of "you messages" that blame the other person.
- **Hear the other person** out and try to understand their point of view.
- **Calm down and think** before acting. Many times, a situation gets out of hand because people allow their emotions to control their actions.
- **Consider a compromise.** Your child is more likely to resolve a conflict successfully by looking for a solution where everyone gives a little and gets a little, too.



- **Ask for help** when needed. Sometimes it takes a mediator to resolve a conflict. A parent or teacher may be able to help.
- **Stand up** for the rights of others who may have been wronged in the conflict.
- **Be willing to apologize** when at fault.

Four strategies help you talk with your child about feelings



Elementary schoolers who understand their feelings—and know how to talk about them—are less likely to act out and more likely to express themselves effectively. To get a conversation going about feelings:

1. **Make a list of different feelings:** *happy, sad, angry, disappointed, frustrated, scared, mad*, etc. Have your child draw a picture of each emotion.
2. **Ask how your child is feeling** every day. Then, talk about the things that make your child feel

that way. Listen carefully and be understanding. Don't ever say that your child shouldn't feel a certain way.

3. **Point out your child's feelings.** Say, "You look happy to be outside," or "You seem frustrated that you haven't figured out the answer to that science question yet."
4. **Talk about healthy ways** to manage strong feelings. When angry, your child can take a deep breath and count to ten. When sad, your child can hug a stuffed toy. When discouraged, your child can try a different strategy.