

Creating a Home Environment for Learning

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In order for children to learn and succeed in school, the home and the school need to work together. The home provides a critical part of the foundation for learning. For parents, this means more than just attending open houses, parent-teacher conferences and school performances. It means sharing responsibility with the school for your children's learning and school success. The school will be most successful in fulfilling their responsibilities if children come to school ready and prepared to learn. What is learned and experienced in the home affects how ready and prepared they will be. Here are some ideas for creating a home environment that will support learning and school success.

Sending Your Child to School Ready to Learn

Parents have the responsibility of getting their children to school in a condition where they are most ready to learn. At the most basic level, this means getting them to school regularly and on time and keeping absences and tardiness to a minimum. Follow the “ready to learn” tips below so that your children get a fresh start every day.

Physical Readiness

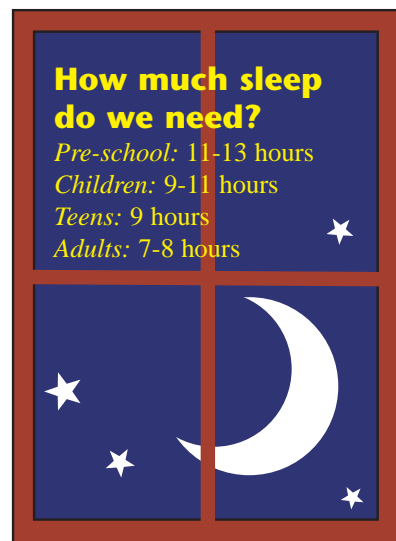
We work best physically when we have had enough rest and have energy available. The same is true for the mental work of paying attention and learning. The human brain works best when it is well rested and has plenty of energy available.

Send Your Child to School Well-Rested

- **Establish a regular bedtime and wake up time.** As a general rule, children need more sleep than adults (see table at right). If your children look tired during the day, fall asleep in class, or need a nap after school, it may be an indication that they are not getting enough sleep. If your child has problems with sleep, you may want to talk with your physician.

- **Establish and enforce a regular bedtime routine.** About 30 minutes before bedtime, have your children choose a calm activity to help them “wind down.” During this time, have them avoid television, exercise, computers and telephones. Follow a predictable sequence of activities that prepare the child for bed, such as a light snack, a bath, brushing teeth, going to the bathroom, putting on pajamas. Many parents of young children read a bedtime story or two to their children before going to bed. Older children can read to their parents or on their own. This is a good routine that can also improve children’s reading skills.

How much sleep do we need?	
Pre-school:	11-13 hours
Children:	9-11 hours
Teens:	9 hours
Adults:	7-8 hours



Send Your Child to School Well-Fed

It is hard for children to pay attention and concentrate when they are hungry. Make time in your family schedule to prepare three balanced meals each day. Having meals together can be very good for family life, when it includes pleasant conversation. Key recommendations for a healthy diet include increased intakes of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.

- **Eat at least five portions of fruits or vegetables per day.**

- **Eat whole-grain foods often; at least half the grains should be whole grains.** For children and adolescents, it is recommended that they eat whole grain foods often. Sometimes this is hard to do, but you should try to increase the amount of whole grains as they grow. When choosing grain foods, look for the words “whole” or “whole grain” before the grain’s name on the ingredient list on the food label. The whole grain should be the first ingredient listed.



- **Drink milk.** Children between the ages of 2 and 8 should consume two cups per day of fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products. Children 9 years of age and older should consume three cups per day.

Mental Readiness

A good mental state is as important for children's learning and memory as a good physical state. A good mental state means that they are relatively calm, happy, motivated and well behaved.

Send Your Child to School Calm and Happy

Children will be most calm and happy when they have a stable and warm family environment. Changes and certain life events in the family can create stress for children. Stress can lead to worry, anxiety and unhappiness. While short-term stress can be a way to motivate children to action, prolonged stress can negatively affect both their physical health and mental health. Research has shown that high levels of stress can worsen children's memory.

All sorts of different stressful events can affect families.

- **Deal with any devastating stressors.** There are some situations that are huge stressors and can devastate family life, such as violence, child abuse and substance abuse. When these conditions exist, family life will never be normal and healthy until they are dealt with directly and effectively with counseling.

- **Give time and support.** Other stressful situations involve some type of loss, such as the death of a family member, parental divorce, or a traumatic event. These will require children to adjust to the changes. Typically in these situations, there is a normal grieving process that the children will go through. During this time, behavioral problems or feelings of depression and anxiety can occur. With time and support, children usually adjust to the loss and their symptoms improve. You can support your children by listening to them, talking with them about the loss and acknowledging their feelings. Sometimes short-term counseling is helpful.

- **Strengthen your family.** There is any number of stressful events which most all families will face at different times, such as busyness, financial stress, illness, moving, family conflict, or marital conflict. Families will need to be strong in order to support the burden of stress. Families are made strong by spending fun time together and having frequent and open communication.



Send Your Child to School Motivated

Students make decisions about how much effort to put into their learning based on how much they value learning and school. Their value of learning and school is strongly influenced by what you as a parent expect from them. Research has shown that the expectations parents and teachers have about students' behavior can influence behavior, positively or negatively. In other words, when parents expect students to do well, they tend to do well. When parents expect students to fail, they tend to fail. Regardless of your children's mental ability and skills, you can hold and appropriately communicate high expectations and beliefs about them. Below are some ideas for communicating your values and expectations.

- **Show interest.** One simple but important way to communicate that school and learning are important is to show interest in how your children are doing at school. Every school day, ask them about their school day, homework, tests and classroom participation.

• **Communicate your expectations.** Expectations get communicated through what you consistently say to your child over time. The student will come to believe what you believe about their school, learning and work. You want to communicate the following: *“I expect you to do the work. I expect you to do as well as you can. I know you can do it if you try and use good study skills. I expect you to stick with it, even if it gets difficult.”*

Encouragement and praise, such as the following, are clear ways of expressing your expectations:

“I know that assignment is tough, hang in there. I know you can do it!”

“When it is time to study, work hard!”

“Great job, I like how you worked really hard on that paper!”

There are many more subtle ways to communicate your expectations. For example, you can ask your child, “How many days before the test are you going to study?” This question sends the message that you expect them to study several nights before the test.

• **Model learning.** Most children and adolescents adopt the values of their parents. Show your children that you value learning by doing educational activities in their presence. Let them see you reading. Have reading materials readily available in the house. Talk with them about current events. Take them with you to the library.

Send Your Child to School Well-Behaved.

In order for your children to contribute to a positive learning environment at school, they will need to be taught how to be responsible and work independently. They must come to school with qualities of character that are valued by their family, school and community. These qualities include honesty, respect, caring about others, following teacher directions and school rules, taking responsibility for their actions and making good moral choices. These important qualities must be taught to children through careful guidance and by example. Below are some ideas for helping your child develop these qualities.

• **Teach your child to mind your direct requests.** Children need to learn to mind authority figures. A child who has trouble minding at home may also have trouble minding at school. The average child minds parent commands about 60 percent to 80 percent of the time. A good goal for minding is at least 70 percent. Recommendations on how to teach children to mind better are readily available through written material, videos and counseling.

• **Establish rules.** Every home needs a reasonable set of rules. You should make these rules plain to your children and frequently review them. Once the rules are set, it is important to frequently catch your children following the rules and praise them. If a rule is broken, you can use mild, age-appropriate discipline.

• **Have your child help with chores.** A great way to teach responsibility is to develop a reasonable, regular schedule of chores for your children to do around the house. Younger children can help set the table, take out the trash, or put away their toys and clothes. Older children can help prepare meals and clean up afterwards. Using a visible chart or checklist is a good way to keep track of chores.

• **Teach your child to be respectful of others.** There are many examples of respectful behavior. Respect is taught primarily through example. To teach respect, you must show respect to your child. At the most basic level, this means showing interest in others, listening, talking in a pleasant tone of voice, spending time with your children and sending clear messages of love.

Examples of Respectful Behavior

- Talking in a nice tone of voice
- Apologizing when wrong
- Saying please, thank you and excuse me
- Allowing others privacy
- Stopping the behavior immediately if someone says “Please stop”

Sending Your Child to School Prepared

In addition to sending your child to school physically and mentally ready to learn, you need to send them to school prepared to learn. Learning and school are the primary “work” of children. Children need to learn that as they grow older the amount of play time decreases and the amount of work time increases. They need to learn that when it is time to work they need to work hard, and when it is time to play they can play hard. Working hard will require discipline and the use of good work habits. For school, this means participating in class, keeping organized, completing homework on their own and on time, and studying for tests at home. Below are some ideas for teaching your children good work habits.

Set up a Regular Study Time

Convey to your children that they will have regular study times at home. Even when they have no assigned homework, they can be studying for tests, practicing work in weak areas and reading. Although the amount of study time will differ across children and schools, a good rule of thumb is 10 minutes per grade of home study time most nights. For a seventh grader, this would mean about 70 minutes of home study time about four nights per week.



Teach Your Child the Skills to Succeed

In order to learn, get good grades and succeed in school, children will need to use good work skills. There are sets of work skills that have been proven to help with learning, including organizational and study skills. Although most people did not learn to use these formal skills until later, they can be successfully taught to children. About the fourth grade is a good time to start. You will need to get a hold of some good information about the work skills and get familiar with them before you teach them to your children. You should expect to spend most of the school year working nightly with your children, showing them what skills to use and how to use them.

Monitor Your Child's Use of the Skills

Once the skills are taught to the child, you will need to closely monitor their use of the skills. At first, your children may not want to use the skills because they think of them as more work. You will need to require that they use them. Expect some resistance to them using the skills initially. For example, often students need to reread a chapter before a test. The students may state that they have already read the material at school; however, because some of the material may not yet be stored in their long-term memory, they will need to read it again. Keep monitoring their use of the skills until you begin to see that they are making a habit of using them.

Reinforce Your Child's Use of the Skills

In order to motivate your children to use good work habits, you will need to provide lots of praise and encouragement to them when they use the skills. Be sure to be excited and specific about what you liked about what they did. For example, as your child finishes her nightly planning time, an organizational skill, you can praise her: “*You did a good job of planning tonight! That's good work! This will really help you do well in school!*” You also can use tangible rewards and privileges to reward their good work habits, such as occasional trips to get ice cream. You should try and avoid criticism, punishment, and conflict in your efforts to teach your children to use the work skills.

Some Additional Resources

Sleep

Brain Basics: Understanding Sleep, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke:
http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/brain_basics/understanding_sleep_brain_basic.html

“Sleep Better! A guide to improving sleep for children with special needs” by V. Mark Durand (1998; Brookes Publishing Co.) (Book)

Nutrition

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005: <http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/>

Family Stress

The Family Stress Series, University of Minnesota Extension Service:
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/components/familystress.html>

Motivation

Motivation to Learn, Center for Effective Parenting handout:
<http://www.parenting-ed.org/handouts.htm>

Behavior

Information on child and adolescent behavior, Center for Effective Parenting handouts:
<http://www.parenting-ed.org/handouts.htm>

Study and Work Skills

Information on home study skills, Center for Effective Parenting handouts:
<http://www.parenting-ed.org/handouts.htm>

- Homework: How to Motivate Your Child
- Strengthening Your Child’s Home Study Skills
- Improving Your Child’s School Organizational Skills
- Parents Make a Difference: Helping Your Child Do Well in School



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