

U.S. Department of Education

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Secretary

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"When it comes to the education of our children, failure is not an option."

President *George W. Bush*

Foreword

At the heart of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is a promise to raise standards for all children and to help all children meet those standards. In support of this goal, President George W. Bush is committed to promoting the very best teaching programs. Well-trained teachers and instruction that is based on research can bring the best teaching approaches and programs to all children and help to ensure that no child is left behind.

However, the hours in a school day are few and the time a teacher can spend with any one child is limited. For children to be successful in school, parents and families need to be actively involved in their children's learning. They need to become involved early and stay involved throughout the school year. In fact, many studies show that what the family does is more important to a child's school success than how much money the family makes or how much education the parents have.

By showing interest in their children's education, parents and families can spark enthusiasm in them and lead them to a very important understanding—that learning can be enjoyable as well as rewarding and is well worth the effort required.

We hope that you will use the information and activities in this booklet to get involved and stay involved and help your child to read better, to take on challenging math and science classes, to value the study of history, the social sciences, art and music—and to prepare for a rewarding life of continuous learning.

Let's get started.

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Introduction

Every child has the power to succeed in school and in life and every parent, family member and caregiver can help. The question is: *How* can we help our children succeed? The answer comes from a combination of common sense and research about how children learn and about how to prepare them to learn.

We know, for example, that children tend to do the same things as their parents do. What we say and do in our daily lives can help them to develop positive attitudes toward school and learning and to build confidence in themselves as learners. Showing our children that we both value education and use it in our daily lives provides them with powerful models and contributes greatly to their success in school.

As our children's first and most important teacher, it's important that all parents build and keep strong ties to our children's schools. When parents and families are involved in their children's schools, the children do better and have better feelings about going to school. We help our children to succeed by working with teachers to make sure that they provide curricula and use teaching methods that are based on strong scientific evidence about what works best in helping students to learn.

The purpose of this booklet is to make available to you information that you can use to help your child to succeed in school. The booklet includes

- information about things that you can do at home to contribute to your child's school success;
- activities that you can use to help your child acquire the skills to succeed in school;
- answers to often-asked questions about how to work with teachers and schools; and
- tips on how to help your child with test taking.

The Basics

If you think about it, although school is very important, it does not really take up very much of a child's time. In the United States, the school year averages 180 days; in other nations, the school year can last up to 240 days and students are often in school more hours per day than American students. Clearly, the hours and days that a child is *not* in school are important for learning, too. Here are some things that you can do to help your child to make the most of that time:

Encourage Your Child to Read

Helping your child become a reader is the single most important thing that you can do to help the child to succeed in school—and in life. The importance of reading simply can't be overstated. Reading helps children in all school subjects. More important, it is the key to lifelong learning. Here are some tips on how to help your child become a reader.

- Start early. When your child is still a baby, reading aloud to him[□] should become part of your daily routine. At first, read for no more than a few minutes at a time, several times a day. As your child grows older, you should be able to tell if he wants you to read for longer periods. As you read, talk with your child. Encourage him to ask questions and to talk about the story. Ask him to predict what will come next. When your child begins to read, ask him to read to you from books or magazines that he enjoys.
- Make sure that your home has lots of reading materials that are appropriate for your child. Keep books, magazines and newspapers in the house. Reading materials don't have to be new or expensive. You often can find good books and magazines for your child at yard or library sales. Ask family members and friends to consider giving your child books and magazine subscriptions as gifts for birthdays or other special occasions. Set aside quiet time for family reading. Some families even enjoy reading aloud to each other, with each family member choosing a book, story, poem or article to read to the others.
- Show that you value reading. Let your child see you reading for pleasure as well as for performing your routine activities as an adult—reading letters and recipes, directions and instructions, newspapers, computer screens and so forth. Go with her to the library and check out books for yourself. When your child sees that reading is important to you, she is likely to decide that it's important to her, too.

[□] **Please note:** In this booklet, we refer to a child as “him” in some places and “her” in others. We do this to make the booklet easier to read. Please understand, however, that every point that we make is the same for boys and girls.

If you feel uncomfortable with your own reading ability or if you would like reading help for yourself or other family members, check with your local librarian or with your child's school about literacy programs in your community.

- Get help for your child if he has a reading problem. When a child is having reading difficulties, the reason might be simple to understand and deal with. For example, your child might have trouble seeing and need glasses or he may just need more help with reading skills. If you think that your child needs extra help, ask his teachers about special services, such as after-school or summer reading programs. Also ask teachers or your local librarian for names of community organizations and local literacy volunteer groups that offer tutoring services.

The good news is that no matter how long it takes, most children *can* learn to read. Parents, teachers and other professionals can work together to determine if a child has a learning disability or other problem and then provide the right help as soon as possible. When a child gets such help, chances are very good that she will develop the skills she needs to succeed in school and in life. *Nothing is more important than your support for your child as she goes through school. Make sure she gets any extra help she needs as soon as possible and always encourage her and praise her efforts.*

For more information about reading, see the U.S. Department of Education booklet, *Helping Your Child Become a Reader*, listed in the **Resources** section, page <TK>.

Talk with Your Child

Talking and listening play major roles in children's school success. It's through hearing parents and family members talk and through responding to that talk that young children begin to pick up the language skills they will need if they are to do well. For example, children who don't hear a lot of talk and who aren't encouraged to talk themselves often have problems learning to read, which can lead to other school problems. In addition, children who haven't learned to listen carefully often have trouble following directions and paying attention in class.

Think of talking with your child as being like a tennis game with words—instead of a ball—bouncing back and forth. Find time to talk any place, for example:

- As you walk with your child or ride with her in a car or on a bus, talk with her about what she's doing at school. Ask her to tell you about a school assembly or a field trip. Point out and talk about things that you see as you walk—funny signs, new cars, interesting people.
- As you shop in a store, talk with your child about prices, differences in brands and how to pick out good vegetables and fruit. Give your child directions about where to find certain items, then have him go get them.

- As you fix dinner, ask your child to help you follow the steps in a recipe. Talk with him about what can happen if you miss a step or leave out an ingredient.
- As you fix a sink or repair a broken table, ask your child to hand you the tools that you name. Talk with her about each step you take to complete the repair. Tell her what you're doing and why you're doing it. Ask her for suggestions about how you should do something.
- As you watch TV together, talk with your child about the programs. If you're watching one of her favorite programs, encourage her to tell you about the background of the characters, which ones she likes and dislikes and who the actors are. Compare the program to a program that you liked when you were her age.
- As you read a book with your child, pause occasionally to talk to him about what's happening in the book. Help him to relate the events in the book to events in his life: "Look at that tall building! Didn't we see that when we were in Chicago?" Ask him to tell in his own words what the book was about. Ask him about new words in a book and help him to figure out what they mean.

It's also important for you to show your child that you're interested in what he has to say. Demonstrate for him how to be a good listener:

- When your child talks to you, stop what you're doing and pay attention. Look at him and ask questions to let him know that you've heard what he said: "So when are you going to help your granddad work on his car?"
- When your child tells you about something, occasionally repeat what he says to let him know that you're listening closely: "The school bus broke down *twice!*"

Monitor Homework

Let your child know that you think education is important and so homework has to be done. Here are some ways to help your child with homework:

- Have a special place for your child to study. The homework area doesn't have to be fancy. A desk in the bedroom is nice, but for many children, the kitchen table or a corner of the living room works just fine. The area should have good lighting and it should be fairly quiet. Provide supplies and identify resources. For starters, have available pencils, pens, erasers, writing paper and a dictionary. Other supplies that might be helpful include a stapler, paper clips, maps, a calculator, a pencil sharpener, tape, glue, paste, scissors, a ruler, a calculator, index cards, a thesaurus and an almanac. If possible, keep these items together in one place. If you can't provide your child with needed supplies, check with her teacher, school counselor or principal about possible sources of assistance.

- Set a regular time for homework. Having a regular time to do homework helps children to finish assignments. Of course, a good schedule depends in part on your child's age, as well as her specific needs. You'll need to work with a young child to develop a schedule. You should give your older child the responsibility for making up a schedule independently—although you'll want to make sure that it's a workable one. You may find it helpful to have her write out her schedule and put it in a place where you'll see it often, such as on the refrigerator.
- Remove distractions. Turn off the TV and discourage your child from making and receiving social telephone calls during homework time. (A call to a classmate about an assignment, however, may be helpful.) If you live in a small or noisy household, try having all family members take part in a quiet activity during homework time. You may need to take a noisy toddler outside or into another room to play. If distractions can't be avoided, your child may want to complete assignments in the local library.
- Don't expect or demand perfection. When your child asks you to look at what she's done—from skating a figure 8 to finishing a math assignment—show interest and praise her when she's done something well. If you have criticisms or suggestions, make them in a helpful way.

One final note: You may be reluctant to help your child with homework because you feel that you don't know the subject well enough or because you don't speak or read English as well as your child. But helping with homework doesn't mean *doing* the homework. It isn't about solving the problems for your child, it's about supporting him to do his best. You may not know enough about a subject such as calculus to help your child with a specific assignment, but you can help nonetheless by showing that you are interested, helping him get organized, providing a place the materials he needs to work, monitoring his work to see that he completes it and praising his efforts.

For more information about homework, see the U.S. Department of Education booklets, *Helping Your Child with Homework* and *Homework Tips for Parents*, both listed in the **Resources** section, page <TK>.

Monitor TV Viewing and Video Game Playing

American children on average spend far more time watching TV or playing video games than they do completing homework or other school-related activities. Here are some suggestions for helping your child to use TV and video games wisely:

- Limit the time that you let your child watch TV. Too much television cuts into important activities in a child's life, such as reading, playing with friends and talking with family members.
- Model good TV viewing habits. Remember that children often imitate their parents' behavior. Children who live in homes in which parents and other family members

watch a lot of TV are likely to spend their time in the same way. Children who live in homes in which parents and other family members have “quiet” time away from the TV when they read (either alone to each other), talk to each other, play games or engage in other activities tend to do the same.

- Watch TV with your child when you can. Talk with him about what you see. Answer his questions. Try to point out the things in TV programs that are like your child’s everyday life.
- When you can’t watch TV with your child, spot check to see what she’s watching. Ask questions after the program ends. See what excites her and what troubles her. Find out what she has learned and remembered.
- Go to the library and find books that explore the themes of the TV shows that your child watches.
- Limit the amount of time your child spends playing video games. As with TV programs, be aware of the games he likes to play and discuss his choices with him.

Encourage Your Child to Use the Library

Libraries are places of learning and discovery for everyone. Helping your child find out about libraries will set him on the road to being an independent learner. Here are some suggestions for how to help:

- Introduce your child to the library as early as possible. Even when your child is a toddler, take him along on weekly trips to the library. If you work during the day or have other obligations, remember that many libraries are open in the evening.
- If your child can print his name, it is likely that your library will issue him a library card if you will also sign for him. See that your child gets his own library card as soon as possible so that he can check out his own books.
- When you take your child to the library, introduce yourself and your child to the librarian. Ask the librarian to show you around the library and tell you about the services it has to offer. For example, in addition to all kinds of books, your library most likely will have magazines of interest to both your child and to you. It will likely have newspapers from many different places. Most libraries also have tapes and CDs of books, music CDs and tapes, movies on video and on DVD and many more resources. Your library also might have books in languages other than English or programs to help adults improve their English reading skills.

Ask the librarian to tell your child about special programs that he might participate in, such as summer reading programs and book clubs and about services such as homework help.

- Let your child know that she must follow the library's rules of behavior. Libraries want children to use their materials and services. However, they generally have rules such as the following that your child needs to know and obey:
 - Library materials must be handled carefully.
 - Materials that are borrowed must be returned on time. Your child needs to learn how long she can keep materials and what the fine will be for materials that are returned late.
 - All library users need to be considerate of each other. Shouting, running and being disruptive are not appropriate library behaviors.

Help Your Child Learn to Use the Internet Properly and Effectively

The Internet/World Wide WEB—a network of computers that connects people and information all around the world—has become an important part of how we learn and of how we interact with others. For children to succeed today, they must be able to use the Internet. Here are some suggestions for helping your child learn to do so properly and effectively:

- Spend time online with your child. If you don't have a computer at home, ask your librarian if the library has computers that you and your child may use. Learn along with your child. If you're not familiar with computers or with the Internet, ask the librarian if and when someone is available at the library to help you and your child learn together to use them. If your child knows about computers, let her teach you. Ask her to explain what she is doing and why. Ask her to show you her favorite Web sites and to tell you what she likes about them. This will help her build self-confidence and pride in her abilities.
- Help your child to locate appropriate Internet Web sites. At the same time, make sure that she understands what you think are appropriate Web sites for her to visit. Point her in the direction of sites that can help her with homework or that relate to her interests.

Pay attention to any games she might download or copy from the Internet. Some games are violent or contain sexual or other content that is inappropriate for children. Resources such as GetNetWise (<http://www.getnetwise.org/>), a public service provided by Internet corporations and public interest groups and FamiliesConnect (<http://www.ala.org/ICONN/familiesconnect.html>), a service of the American Library Association, can help you to make good Web site choices and give you more information about Internet use.

You might consider using “filters” to block your child from accessing sites that may be inappropriate. These filters include software programs that you can install on your computer. In addition, many Internet service providers offer filters (often for free) that restrict the sites that children can visit. Of course, these filters are not always

completely effective—and children can find ways around them. The best safeguard is your supervision and involvement.

- Monitor the amount of time that your child spends online. Internet surfing can be just as time consuming as watching TV. Don't let it take over your child's life. Have her place a clock near the computer and keep track of how much time she is spending online. Remember, many commercial online services charge for the amount of time the service is used. These charges can mount up quickly!
- Teach your child rules for using the Internet safely. Let him know that he should never do the following:
 - tell anyone—including his friends—his computer password;
 - use bad language or send cruel, threatening or untrue e-mail messages;
 - give out any personal information, including his name or the names of family members, home address, phone number, age, school name; or
 - arrange to meet a stranger that he has “talked” with in an online “chat room.”

For more information about helping your child use the Internet, see the following publications, listed in the **Resources** section, page <TK>: American Library Association, *The Librarian's Guide to Cyberspace for Parents and Kids*; Children's Partnership, *The Parents' Guide to the Information Superhighway*.

Encourage Your Child to Be Responsible and to Work Independently

Taking responsibility and working independently are important qualities for school success. Here are some suggestions for helping your child to develop these qualities:

- Establish rules. Every home needs reasonable rules that children know and can depend on. Have your child help you to set rules, then make sure that you enforce the rules consistently.
- Make it clear to your child that he has to take responsibility for what he does, both at home and at school. For example, don't automatically defend your child if his teacher tells you that he is often late to class or is disruptive when he is in class. Ask for his side of the story. If a charge is true, let him take the consequences.
- Work with your child to develop a reasonable, consistent schedule of jobs to do around the house. List them on a calendar. Younger children can help set the table or put away their toys and clothes. Older children can help prepare meals and clean up afterwards.
- Show your child how to break a job down into small steps, then to do the job one step at a time. This works for everything—getting dressed, cleaning a room or doing a big homework assignment.

- Make your child responsible for getting ready to go to school each morning—getting up on time, making sure that he has everything he needs for the school day and so forth. If necessary, make a checklist to help him remember what he has to do.
- Monitor what your child does after school, in the evenings and on weekends. If you can't be there when your child gets home, give her the responsibility of checking in with you by phone to discuss her plans.

Encourage Active Learning

Children need active learning as well as quiet learning such as reading and doing homework. Active learning involves asking and answering questions, solving problems and exploring interests. Active learning also can take place when your child plays sports, spends time with friends, acts in a school play, plays a musical instrument or visits museums and bookstores.

To promote active learning, listen to your child's ideas and respond to them. Let him jump in with questions and opinions when you read books together. When you encourage this type of give-and-take at home, your child's participation and interest in school is likely to increase.

Activities

What follows are activities that you can do with your child to help build the skills, attitudes and behaviors needed for school success. There is no one “right” way to do the activities. You should make changes and shorten or lengthen them to suit your child’s attention span. You might want to use them as a starting point for some activities of your own. If you don’t have some of the resources listed for an activity, remember that most public libraries offer free use of books, magazines, videos, computers and other services. Other things that you might need for these activities are not expensive.

Age levels for the activities are indicated at the start of each activity:

Ages 5-7

Ages 7-9

Ages 9-11

Keep in mind, however, that children don’t always learn the same things at the same rate. You are the best judge of what your child may be ready to try, so use the age levels as guides as your child learns and grows, not as hard and fast rules. For example, an activity listed for children ages 7–9 may work well with your 5-year-old. On the other hand, the same activity may not interest your child until he is 9 or 10.

As a parent, you can help your child *want* to learn in a way no one else can. That desire to learn is a key to your child’s later success. Enjoyment is important! So, if you and your child don’t enjoy one activity, move on to another. You can always return to any activity later on.

Can You Top This?

For children ages 5 to 7

Learning to take turns helps your child build spoken language skills as well as learn to work with others.

What to Do

- With your child, make up a story for the two of you to tell together, taking turns saying one sentence at a time.
 - Begin by deciding on a topic, such as *pirates*.
 - Say the first sentence: “Once upon a time a pirate lived in . . .”
 - Continue taking turns with your child making up and telling parts of the story until you decide to end it—maybe after eight or ten sentences.
- Take turns beginning and finishing a story. Ask other family members and friends to join in.

Working with others, listening to what they say and making good contributions are all valuable in helping children to complete school projects.

Listen!

For children ages 5 to 7

Listening to and giving directions helps your child to sharpen listening and speaking skills.

What You Need

Any small object, such as a ball or a photograph

Objects that can make noise, such as keys, water glasses, spoons and decks of cards

What to Do

- Hide a small object. Give your child directions to find it such as, “Take five steps straight ahead. Turn right. Keep the lamp to your left. Bend down and look to the right.” Next, have your child hide the object and give you directions to find it.
- Have your child close his eyes. Use something to make a sound, such as rattling your keys, tapping a spoon against a glass or riffing a deck of cards). Ask your child to guess what’s making the sound.
- Clap your hands to tap out a rhythm. Have your child listen and then clap that same rhythm back to you. Make the rhythms harder as he catches on.
- Take a walk with your child. Find a place to sit for a few minutes and both close your eyes for 30 seconds or so. Tell each other what you hear: a baby crying, an airplane, a bird singing, cars on the street, leaves rustling.
- Take a walk with your child. This time, take turns telling each other what to do: cross the street, turn left, look down.

For success in school, children need to learn to listen carefully, to see and hear details and to follow and give clear directions.

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