

Helping Children Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School



December 2022

Emphasize that your child has the ability to learn and get smarter

It's likely your child will find learning some concepts or subjects more challenging than others—most students do. Your child's response to a learning challenge will affect the outcome.

Help your child develop what researchers call a *growth mindset*. This means that students believe that even if they don't understand something now, they will be able to learn it and get smarter if they keep trying. When a concept is confusing, these kids don't say, "I'm not a science (or math, or grammar) person" and quit. Instead they say, "This is a challenge and I can do challenging things!"



To help your elementary schooler develop this outlook:

- **Be a role model.** Your example influences your child's mindset.
- **Explain that there are no limits** to how smart your child can become. The brain is like a muscle that can get stronger.
- **Encourage your child to brainstorm** more strategies to try if something isn't working. These might include rereading the instructions, looking for an explanatory video online, asking the teacher for help, etc.
- **Praise your child's effort.** "That was a challenge, but you kept trying things until you got it! And now you'll know how to do it next time."

Source: C. Cornwall, "How to Instill a 'Growth Mindset' in Kids, U.S. News.



Encourage feelings of gratitude with a writing project

Research suggests that feelings of gratitude are linked to increased happiness and school satisfaction.

Help your elementary schooler think about gratitude with a writing project. On a relaxed afternoon, give your child a sheet of paper. Ask your student to:

- **Think of things** that make life better, or that your child would not like to do without.
- **Write one thing** at the top of a sheet of paper. Your child might write: "I am grateful for my dog."

- **List reasons** for feeling grateful for it. For example, your child may enjoy having the dog for company at night. Or love being greeted by the dog's wagging tail on arriving home from school.

- **Illustrate the ideas** on the list. Repeat this activity once a month—gratitude is not just for one day!

Source: S. Allen, Ph.D., "The Science of Gratitude," Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley.

Practice math vocabulary

Mastering math involves learning math words (*quotient*, *product*, etc.) as well as numbers and formulas. To build your child's math vocabulary:

- **Play Math Concentration.** Write a math term on an index card. Write its definition on another card. Repeat with several terms. Mix the cards and place them face down. Take turns turning over two cards to try and make a match.
- **Combine words and pictures.** Your child could write the word *circumference* around the edge of a circle.
- **Make connections.** Many terms share a common root. Talk about how there are 100 *cents* in a dollar, 100 years in a *century*, and 100 *centimeters* in a meter.

Give your child your time

One of the best ways to influence your child's behavior is simple: Spend time together. The more low-key moments you share, the more time you'll have to talk about your values and model positive behavior. This month, take a few minutes to:



- **Admire** a colorful display together.
- **Have** your child help you fix something.
- **Watch** people as you take a walk.

Avoid a learning freeze

The winter vacation is a break from school routines. But learning can continue anywhere, anytime. To encourage it over break:



- **Brainstorm ways** your family can help the less fortunate.
- **Have your child interview** older family members about the past.
- **Read a book together** that was made into a movie. Then watch the movie. Talk about the similarities and differences.



What should I do about a bad attitude toward school?

Q: My child has been complaining about school. I've heard "I hate it" more than once. I'm not sure how seriously to take this. How should I respond?

A: Sometimes, kids say they hate school when they are really looking for attention or a chance to vent or put off doing work. The feeling is temporary, and they don't actually hate school. However, since your child has said this more than once, it's important to figure out why.

Here are five steps to take:

- 1. Choose a time** when you and your child are both calm to start a conversation. "You've said you hate school a couple of times. What's making you feel that way?"
- 2. Listen closely** to your child's answers. Don't try to change them. Ask follow-up questions if your child can't identify the problem. Is a subject very challenging? Are kids being mean on the bus?
- 3. Help your child think of possible actions to take.** For example, if math is a struggle, your child could spend more time studying it each day and write down questions to ask the teacher.
- 4. Remind your child** that nearly every situation has positives and negatives. Ask what your child likes about school.
- 5. Talk to your child's teacher.** Explain how your child is feeling and ask for suggestions and support. Plan to follow up to see what's working.



Are you teaching time management?

It takes time for students to develop the time management skills that support success in school and life. Elementary schoolers are the right age to start! Are you helping your child learn to use time wisely? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- 1. Do you help** your child create study schedules and adjust them as necessary?
- 2. Do you show** your child how to use a calendar to keep track of due dates and commitments?
- 3. Do you maintain** a balance in your child's schedule? Kids need time for exercise, sleep, and family time.
- 4. Do you encourage** your child to get an early start on long-term projects, and break them down into small pieces?

- 5. Do you have** your child time how long tasks take?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are demonstrating techniques for making the most of time. For each no, try that idea.

"A plan is what, a schedule is when. It takes both a plan and a schedule to get things done."

—Peter Turla

Set learning goals for 2023

What areas would your child like to improve in during the second half of the year? What can your student do to make that happen? Help your child establish some specific, realistic, measurable goals. Then, be supportive. If your child slips up, say "Falling short once doesn't mean you can't get back on track."

Offer fun ways to read

Students strengthen their reading skills when they read often. Encourage frequent reading with enjoyable reading activities. You can:

- **Follow current events.** Is there a developing news story that interests your child? Read the latest reports together.
- **Sign your child up for a pen pal.** Ask a teacher or librarian how to get involved.
- **Listen to audiobooks.** Have your child follow along in a printed book while listening.
- **Give reading coupons.** Some might be for 30 minutes of reading with you. Others might be good for a new book.



Plan on family meetings

Family meetings encourage communication and help your child learn key school and life skills like responsibility, negotiation and cooperation. For effective meetings:

- **Meet regularly**—every week or two.
- **Create an agenda.** Ask what ideas and issues family members want to discuss. Include time to talk about successes.
- **Brainstorm solutions** together. Make sure everyone has a chance to be heard. Parents should have the final say.
- **Write down decisions.** Evaluate how they are working at future meetings.

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P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

1-800-756-5525 • www.parent-institute.com