

5 Ways To Help Your Child Succeed in School

Get your children ready to perform like heroes in school with these teacher-recommended tips.

by June Allan Corrigan



You do a lot to get your kids ready for school—buying school supplies, making lunches, and enforcing bedtimes. But there’s more to it than No. 2 pencils and a coordinating outfit. It’s just as important that students arrive at school with a positive attitude and enthusiasm for learning.

We asked schoolteachers from across the country how to make sure kids walk into the classroom ready to learn and perform at their best. Here’s their top 5 list.

1. Fine-Tune the Morning Routine

Every teacher polled stressed the importance of a well-oiled morning routine, one that starts the minute a child’s feet—and yours—hit the floor. “It’s when we are rushing and doing things last minute that stress starts to mount, arguments happen, and kids can get upset. This is carried with them into the classroom and the day begins on the wrong foot,” says Keith Tomasek, a 5th grade teacher at Whispering Oak Elementary in Winter Garden, Fla.

You can help make mornings less stressful by making sure everyone gets a good night’s sleep and by organizing as much as possible ahead of time. Pack lunches the night before and lay out clothes. Have your kids fill their backpacks and line them up by the door. It’s amazing how attention to these little details can help the morning go more smoothly.

Finally, don’t forget the most important item of all on a winning morning agenda: a good breakfast. Keep healthy cereals and fresh fruit on hand, and stock your refrigerator with proteins that are easy to prepare. “A protein breakfast is huge. I can tell the difference between kiddos who have this and those who do not,” says Linda McElreath, a 4th grade teacher at Daffron Elementary in Plano, Texas.

Try whipping up some scrambled eggs with tofu crumbled in. Cook some breakfast sausage or bacon and serve it on the side. An easier route is to simply spread some peanut butter on toast. And if you’re really pressed for time, grab some hard-boiled eggs (made ahead of time) and peanut butter granola bars for your kids to munch on in the car.

2. Teach Self-Reliance

Every step of the educational journey should take your child closer to self-sufficiency. As he gets older, he’ll need to make more and more decisions on his own, and you want him to be ready. Your child’s early school years provide the perfect opportunity to work with his teachers to help him learn to take responsibility for himself. Laura James, a 1st grade teacher at John Adams Elementary in Alexandria, Va., assigns her students tasks to help the classroom run smoothly and suggests that parents do the same at home.

Think of some tasks your child can handle: gathering and emptying wastebaskets from around the house, making his bed, or unloading the silverware from the dishwasher each morning. Taking responsibility for simple tasks like these will pay big benefits down the road.

Tomasek, who teaches 10-year-olds, takes an even firmer stance. “I don’t like it when kids use ‘My mother forgot to...’ or ‘My mother didn’t...’ to start their excuses,” he says. “Start to let your kids be responsible for themselves. They have to stop thinking their parents will swoop in to fix their missing assignments and low grades before the report card comes out.”

When children take responsibility for their own learning, they will work to earn good grades rather than waiting until they receive bad grades to make studying a priority. Parents should encourage their children to become more independent learners as they get older but recognize that it will take time for them to become truly self-reliant.

3. Set a Good Example

Reading to your child is one of the most important things you can do to help your child be prepared for school, say teachers Linda DeSousa and Cathy Chomistek, who teach grade 2. Reading to a child instills a love of reading—the basis for all learning—and opens a child’s imagination.

Tomasek is on the same page. “Model the behaviors you want your children to have,” he says. “Make sure your children see you reading if you expect them to. Why not read the same book as a family and start an at-home book club?”

DeSousa and Chomistek recommend playing board and card games with your children. Besides being a good way to spend time together, the give-and-take of playing such games teaches children how to take turns; it also helps them learn that they won’t always get to go first, and they won’t always win. Children must learn to be good sports when winning or losing.

4. Support the Teacher

There may come a point in your child’s education where you disagree with his teacher on some issue. That’s fine and not unexpected—people are bound to have different perspectives. The important thing to remember is not to talk negatively about the teacher in front of your children.

“If you have an issue with a teacher, talk to the teacher or school administration privately,” says Tomasek. You don’t want your child to get the message that you think the teacher doesn’t know what he is doing. A child may lose respect for a teacher, which can contribute to behavior problems. It can also lower a student’s interest in school.

McElreath could not agree more. “A positive attitude about school must be communicated at home,” she says. “Keep a dialogue open between yourself and your child’s teacher through emails, scheduled meetings, even informal hellos and goodbyes at drop-off or pickup. Students must feel that parents and teachers are a team with them.”

5. Stay Positive About Homework

In many homes, the very word “homework” is met with a groan. Stop to think about who makes the first complaint about homework. Is it you, the parent, or your student? As a parent, you help shape your child’s attitudes about education. That’s why it’s so important to keep a positive attitude about homework, as with all other things school-related.

Laura James explains the importance of homework to the parents of her 1st graders at the beginning of each school year. “It’s a valuable aid in reinforcing what we are learning in class, and it teaches responsibility, as well. It also helps develop positive study habits for the future,” she says.

By the time children reach Tomasek's grade 5 classroom, homework is a given. He urges parents to have a homework schedule or plan in place and a designated area to study. He likes parents to concentrate on teaching their kids how to plan out long-term assignments and break the workload into parts so they will be completed on time.

He frowns upon parents who bring assignments to school that students left at home. Rather than rescue their children, Tomasek suggests letting them suffer the consequences. Missing a homework grade in elementary school is not going to keep them out of college. "Only by correcting bad behaviors at a young age will you help them be more responsible for the future," he says.

Keep Kids Learning

Successful students have a natural curiosity. Encourage your child's curiosity by helping him learn more about his special interests.

- Take your child to the library and explain how to use library services. Help her find books on topics she's especially interested in.
- Bookmark educational websites for your kids to explore. Find a few sites with educational games your children can play.
- Take your children to local historical sites, art museums, and cultural festivals. Try to connect what you see to what they are learning in school.
- Show your own curiosity. Let your child see you trying out a new hobby or reading a book on a topic you're interested in.

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