



Tips for Teachers

Parent involvement that makes a difference



In August 2011, People for Education released a report, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*, which reviewed thirty years of research from Canada, the United States and England.

The four key things that parents can do to help ensure their children's success are outlined here, along with some tips that teachers can use to support parents' efforts in each area:

1. Having high expectations of kids.

The research shows unequivocally that high parental expectations have the greatest impact on student achievement. When parents consistently communicate their belief in their children's potential and communicate that they expect them to be able to succeed academically, students do better.

To support parents in having high expectations for their children, you can:

- Let them know about the research proving that high expectations make a difference, give them the parent tip sheet about it, and talk to them about their child's strengths and potential.
- Build on what parents are doing at home by having and communicating high expectations for every student in your class.

2. Talking about school at home.

A major study of 25,000 U.S. schoolchildren showed "home discussion"—parents talking with children about school activities and programs—had a greater impact on academic achievement than monitoring homework, being at home after school, or limiting kids' TV time or time they are out during the week.

To help parents talk with their children about school, give them something to talk about:

- Send home assignments that "force" students to talk to an adult in their home. For example, give students an assignment that requires them to ask their parents questions (such as writing about their family history), or assign TV watching as homework, but ask students to watch the program with a parent/guardian and discuss the show afterwards.
- Communicate frequently and use a variety of tools (newsletters, phone calls, electronic methods). Tell parents about major projects, topics and activities that students are engaged in. New evidence shows that electronic communication (email, blogs, a website) is associated with higher participation and better two-way communication.

3. Helping students develop positive attitudes towards learning and strong work habits.

As students grow older, many of the factors that directly affect achievement are out of parents' control. Parents can't teach their children everything they need to know, but they can play a critical role in students' chances for success by helping to shape their attitudes, their sense of personal competence and their work habits including persistence, seeking help, and planning.

To support parents in this vital role, you can:

- Assure parents that they do not have to 'teach' their children. Instead, parents should focus on helping children learn to handle distractions, negotiate crises of confidence, plan ahead, ask for help from the teacher, and build a positive attitude about school as a whole.

The evidence is clear. Parents do more to help their children succeed in school by chatting about what they learned today or reading them a story, than by “drill and skill” homework sessions, endless nagging, or racing off to a meeting at the school.

- Provide helpful tips to both parents and students about using their agendas effectively, planning for large assignments, preparing for exams, etc.

4. Reading with children.

Parents make a major difference by reading and talking about books and stories with their children. The skills that children learn at school are vital, but the motivation, comprehension and strong oral language skills children develop through conversation and reading together with adults at home are crucial foundations for successful literacy.

To encourage parents to read with their children, you can:

- Make sure they have something enjoyable to read! Send books home and encourage families to use both the school and public libraries.
- Encourage parents to instil a love of reading by making it fun and enjoyable, instead of focussing on the mechanics of reading (sounding out words, etc.) or homework assignments connected to reading.

School practices make a difference.

The good news: Teachers can influence what parents do at home.

But educators need to be cautious about adopting parent involvement strategies that seem to give parents homework, because the research clearly shows that the most effective parent involvement is centred on parents' interaction with their children as parents, rather than parents “teaching” their children.

It goes without saying that it is vital to treat all parents with respect. When parents are treated respectfully by the school, it is easier for them to instil a positive attitude towards schooling in their children. And just as teachers try not to make assumptions about, or pre-judge their students, it is important not to make assumptions about parents based on things like their participation in school events or their socio-economic status.

For more information:

Visit www.peopleforeducation.ca to read *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*. You will also find resources to help you communicate with parents, the full bibliography for the report, tip sheets in 15 languages, education research, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Teachers' Federations

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has information about engaging parents in its “Research for Teachers” (www.etfo.ca).

Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) has a resource called “Positive, Professional Parent Teacher Relationships” (www.oecta.on.ca).

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) has information for parents on its website (www.osstf.on.ca).

Research Sites

The SEDL National Centre for Family and Community Connections with Schools (<http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-syntheses.html>) and the Harvard Family Research Project (<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement>) have excellent, free research materials online.

