

The Role of Parents



Although a parent's role in their children's learning

evolves as kids grow, one thing remains constant: we are our children's learning models. Our attitudes about education can inspire theirs and show them how to take charge of their own educational journey.

Be a role model for learning. In the early years, parents are their children's first teachers — exploring nature, reading together, cooking together, and counting together. When a young child begins formal school, the parent's job is to show him how school can extend the learning you began together at home, and how exciting and meaningful this learning can be. As preschoolers grow into school age kids, parents become their children's learning coaches. Through guidance and reminders, parents help their kids organize their time and support their desires to learn new things in and out of school.

Pay attention to what your child loves. "One of the most important things a parent can do is notice her child. Is he a talker or is he shy? Find out what interests him and help him explore it. Let your child show you the way he likes to learn," recommends Dalton Miller-Jones, Ph.D.

Tune into how your child learns. Many children use a combination of modalities to study and learn. Some learn visually through making and seeing pictures, others through tactile experiences, like building block towers and working with clay. Still others are auditory learners who pay most attention to what they hear. And they may not learn the same way their siblings (or you) do. By paying attention to how your child learns, you may be able to pique his interest and explain tough topics by drawing pictures together, creating charts, building models, singing songs and even making up rhymes.

Practice what your child learns at school. Many teachers encourage parents to go over what their young children are learning in a non-pressured way and to practice what they may need extra help with. This doesn't mean drilling them for success, but it may mean going over basic counting skills, multiplication tables or letter recognition, depending on the needs and learning level of your child. "There may be times to review, but don't

take on the role of drill master,” adds Diane Levin, Ph.D. “And when you do review it should feel as if your child wants to be a part of the practice.”

Set aside time to read together. Read aloud regularly, even to older kids. If your child is a reluctant reader, reading aloud will expose her to the structure and vocabulary of good literature and get her interested in reading more. “Reading the first two chapters of a book together can help, because these are often the toughest in terms of plot,” notes Susan Becker, M. Ed. “Also try alternating: you read one chapter aloud, she reads another to herself. And let kids pick the books they like. Book series are great for reluctant readers. It’s OK to read easy, interesting books instead of harder novels.”

Connect what your child learns to everyday life. Make learning part of your child’s everyday experience, especially when it comes out of your child’s natural questions. When you cook together, do measuring math. When you drive in the car, count license plates and talk about the states. When you turn on the blender, explore how it works together. When your child studies the weather, talk about why it was so hot at the beach. Have give-and-take conversations, listening to your child’s ideas instead of pouring information into their heads.

Connect what your child learns to the world. Find age-appropriate ways to help your older child connect his school learning to world events. Start by asking questions. For example, ask a second-grader if she knows about a recent event, and what’s she heard. Then ask what she could do to help (such as sending supplies to hurricane victims). You might ask a younger child if he’s heard about anything the news, and find out what he knows. This will help your child become a caring learner.

Help your child take charge of his learning. “We want to keep children in charge of their learning and become responsible for it,” says Dalton Miller-Jones, Ph.D. “We want them to be responsible for their successes and failures, show them how engaging learning is, and that the motivations for learning should be the child’s intrinsic interests, not an external reward.”

Don’t over-schedule your child. While you may want to supplement school with outside activities, be judicious about how much you let or urge your child to do. Kids need downtime as much as they may need to pursue extra-curricular activities. “If a child has homework and organized sports and a music lesson and is part of a youth group in church or synagogue, it can quickly become a joyless race from one thing to another. Therefore, monitor your child to see that he is truly enjoying what he is doing. If he isn’t, cut something off the schedule,” advises Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

Keep TV to a minimum. “Watching lots of TV does not give children the chance to develop their own interests and explore on their own, because it controls the agenda,” advises Diane Levin, Ph.D. “However, unstructured

time with books, toys, crafts and friends allows children to learn how to be in charge of their agenda, and to develop their own interests, skills, solutions and expertise.”

Learn something new yourself. Learning something new yourself is a great way to model the learning process for your child. Take up a new language or craft, or read about an unfamiliar topic. Show your child what you are learning and how you may be struggling. You’ll gain a better understanding of what your child is going through and your child may learn study skills by watching you study. You might even establish a joint study time.