

# Ten Tips for Good Grades

Study after study has shown that parental involvement is the number one determinant of how well all children -- regardless of their background — do in school. Try these ten ways to help your kids succeed in the classroom -- and beyond.

## **#1: Create an environment in your home that encourages learning.**

Doing so will have a major influence on how well your children do in school. Provide them with many different opportunities to become excited about learning. Make sure that appropriate materials — from puzzles to paints to computers — are available to stimulate their curiosity.

## **#2: Provide your children with a well-balanced life.**

A stable home filled with love serves as a solid foundation for getting straight A's. Establish routines so your children get enough sleep, eat regular, nourishing meals, and exercise. Limit time spent watching TV and playing video and computer games.

## **#3: Read to your children every day.**

Most of the learning your children achieve in school involves reading. Read to your kids to raise their interest in reading, to expand and enrich their vocabularies, and to broaden their experiences. Reading aloud exposes them to books that would be difficult for them to read on their own.

## **#4: Encourage them to read extensively.**

As your children progress through school, as much as 75 percent of what they learn will come from the printed page. The more children read, the better their reading skills become. Make sure there is a wide variety of interesting reading materials in your home to encourage the reading habit.

## **#5: Show your children how to be organized.**

Children who are organized find it much easier to succeed in school. One of the best ways to teach organizational skills is through example. Show your children how to use such organizational tools as assignment pads, calendars, notebooks, binders, and backpacks.

## **#6: Teach them effective study skills.**

Good study skills are absolutely essential to get good grades. Make sure your children know how to read their textbooks, prepare for tests, memorize facts, and use their time efficiently. Encourage them to have a regular time for studying, and provide a study place that is free of distractions.

**#7: Urge your children to listen and participate in class.**

Listening in class is the easy way for children to learn. Advise your older children to take notes, which will help them concentrate on what is being said. Encourage your children to participate in class -- it will greatly increase their interest in what they're learning.

**#8: Help your children learn how to tackle homework.**

Doing homework reinforces what your children learn in school. Show them how to do it so that homework quickly becomes their responsibility. Help them learn what assignments to do first and how to plan their time. Encourage them not to rush through their homework, but to consider every assignment a learning experience.

**#9: Talk to your children about school.**

Your children spend hours in school every day. A lot can happen during that time. Show that you are genuinely interested in their day by asking questions about what they did and talking with them about the papers they bring home. When problems occur, work with your kids to find solutions.

**#10: Develop a good relationship with your children's teachers.**

Good communication between home and school helps children do well in school and makes it easier to address problems. Be sure to attend parent-teacher conferences, visit your kids' classrooms, and volunteer to help their teachers. And don't forget to express your appreciation to teachers for all that they do for your children.

# Fine Motor Skills

Kids aren't able to write well until they have developed their fine-motor skills. Fortunately, these skills improve easily with lots of practice. Use the following activities to help your young child develop the precision, balance, and hand-eye coordination that are needed to perform the fine-motor skills used in handwriting:

#1: Give your child clay or play-dough to play with, to strengthen the major muscles used in handwriting.

#2: Encourage her to play with Legos™, miniature cars, small blocks, action figures, and other small toys.

#3: Do puzzles with your child.

#4: Provide creative art projects that involve using crayons, marking pens, scissors, and finger paints, as well as tearing paper.

#5: Play games with your child that involve the handling of cards and small game pieces.

#6: Ask your child to sort collections of loose coins into stacks of pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters.

#7: Help your child learn to manage such everyday skills as tying and lacing his shoes and buttoning his clothes.

Remember, every child has a different timetable in acquiring the fine-motor skills needed for handwriting. The more your child uses her fingers in activities, the sooner she will acquire these skills.

# Easing First-Day Jitters

For many kids, school is just a continuation of daycare. Playing and sharing with other kids is nothing new. But for some preschoolers and kindergarteners, this is their first experience away from home. Prepare your child for this big adventure by trying these ten tips from school counselors and teachers.

## **#1. Renew the route.**

Help your child overcome fears of the unknown by rehearsing for "opening day." As you drive by the school during the summer, take time to review the route from your home. Point out landmarks, familiar houses, and where your kids can stop if they need to. Talk about where the crossing guards are, and where kids may have to take extra care. Remind your kids where you will be dropping them off and picking them up each day.

## **#2. Visit the teacher and the classroom.**

Don't hesitate to call the school and ask if you may bring your child in before school starts. You can both meet the teacher and see the classroom. Point out the cubbies, the bathroom, and the offices of the school nurse and secretary. The building will feel different when it is filled with kids. Even so, getting to know the classroom will help to create a sense of security for your child.

## **#3. Supply the supplies.**

As parents, we want to buy everything that's on sale ahead of time. It usually pays to wait until the afternoon of the first day, when teachers have told students what they will need. Most kids up through first or second grade need only a two-pocket portfolio to use as a "take-home folder." Don't forget to label everything your child takes to school. Even young kids feel self-sufficient when they can go to the cubby or lunch cart and reach for their own things with confidence.

## **#4. Make clothes kid-friendly.**

Young children learn to tie their shoes, operate zippers, and undress quickly enough to prevent accidents during this period of their development. Here are some things to think about before buying anything new. Can your child easily put on and remove that jacket, or does it have a troublesome zipper? Buy Velcro closures while you're teaching your child to tie his shoes. And those adorable overalls? They'll do nothing for your child's sense of competence and esteem if she can't get out of them to use the bathroom.

## **#5. Adjust your clock.**

Summer has its own pace, while school days demand something slightly different. It'll be easier for your kids to ease into a new school year bedtime, wake-up time, and breakfast time if they adjust their schedule before summer comes to a close.

## **#6. Set the scene.**

Kindergarten and preschool are mostly about practicing expected behaviors until they become a habit. Help your child be organized at home by creating routines. If she sets her backpack down in the same place everyday, it will be easier to find it the next morning. If your kindergartner has homework, and she always does it at the same time and in the same spot, it will become a part of how she does things throughout her school career.

### **#7. Have a rehearsal lunch.**

Be picky about the snack and lunch foods you choose for your child. Some juice packs have challenging straws, some zip-top fruit cups need a lot of oomph before they unzip! Pack a lunch in a lunchbox or bag and sit down at the table with your child. Practice opening things together! Teachers and lunch aides will be there to help your child: Remind her to ask for help if she needs it.

### **#8. Sign up for a library card.**

Go to the local library before school starts and get your kids their own library cards. All teachers encourage parents to do whatever they can to foster early literacy and a love of reading. Spend 15 minutes reading each day with your young child. This is a great way to spend special time together, and create an association between reading and something wonderful -- time with Mom or Dad!

### **#9. Check in with yourself.**

How are you feeling: Enthusiastic? Apprehensive? Our kids pick up a great deal from us — spoken and unspoken. If you're positive about his beginning school, your enthusiasm will most likely become part of your child's experience. By the same token, your worries will be transferred to him, too. If you express concern about this separation from your child or about the teacher, take care that your child doesn't overhear. Give your child a picture of you to keep in his supply box, put love notes in his snack bags, and reassure him about what time you will be back for him.

### **#10. Celebrate the new (school) year!**

This is a great time to begin new rituals and traditions at home. Try these ideas to start the year off with a bang!

- The night before school starts, turn dinner into a party by setting the table with special dishes.
- Throw a "Beginning of the Year" party with hats, blowers, and a cake.
- Take a picture of your kids and mark their height inside a closet door.
- Have your first family meeting.

However you choose to celebrate the new school year, make it an annual event. Memories are one of the most precious things we can give our children. They'll be quick to remind you about your annual back-to-school celebration the first time you forget!

# Finding More Quality Time for Your Family

As you head into the back-to-school days, you may wonder: Can I really do it again? Pack lunches at dawn, dash from carpools to business meetings, apply mascara at stoplights, help with homework, race to piano-lesson pickups — only to return home, rush everyone off to bed, and then wake up to a go-go weekend of hockey practice, soccer games, and birthday parties?

A growing number of concerned parents are thinking seriously about the enormous costs of frenetic living. Determined to put the focus on family, a group of moms and dads in Minnesota has organized a community group, Family Life First. Its mission: To get families in their community to rethink their hyperactive lifestyles. Try the group's ten hints on finding more quality family time.

## **#1: Limit kids' activities.**

Limit your kids to one after-school activity. Period. This may be harder decision for you than for your kids! You want Johnny to continue with piano; he wants to make the hockey team. How to choose? Think of it this way: Teaching kids to make choices is an essential part of a parent's job. These activities build skills, and give kids a sense of what they can do. But time spent with family gives them a sense of who they are. Try this approach: "You have to give up something (piano or hockey) to get something (peace of mind or time to breathe)."

## **#2: Limit yourself.**

As a parent, you also have your limits. Basically, you get one evening out during the week. Period. Mom has a book club or a yoga class. Dad plays squash. Simply put, you can't "be there" for kids when you're not around. The rituals that build closeness — bedtime stories, cuddles in front of the fire or a favorite TV show — can't happen when Mom and Dad use the front door like a revolving door. P.S.: This doesn't preclude a "date night" for Mom and Dad! Keep the Love Train on track by scheduling a quiet evening for two now and then.

## **#3: Kill the TV.**

Or at least dismember it. Turn off your TV during meals, and the result will probably be better table talk and a less circus-like atmosphere. Sitting down to watch a particular show or video can be a great way for families to relax together, but having the tube on in the background just adds another level of noise and stress. Or consider this: No TV Monday through Thursday nights. More time for homework, reading, talking, playing.

## **#4: Have candlelight dinners.**

When Bugs Peterschmidt's husband started coming home later and later each night, the couple had a chat about "Disappearing Daddy," MIA at the dinner table all too often. They agreed on a 6:15 p.m. standing mealtime, and Dad went in extra early each morning to make it work. Prompted by a Greek friend who said, "You Americans don't know how to dine," the couple decided to light candles each night for its "calming effect." No discipline issues are discussed and no phones get answered during dinner. Bugs reports that her family of four are enjoying their food and one another more, now that dinner is "an oasis in time."

## **#5: Brunch!**

Make brunch for your bunch every Sunday. Family Life First's Gina Coburn liked the idea of having one mandatory family meal each week, but it wasn't until she and her husband went off on their own one Sunday that she discovered what their weekly brunch meant to her teenaged children. "They called on my cell phone and said, 'What about our family breakfast?'" Gina says. "And I realized that they would never have missed it if we hadn't gotten so intentional about it."

**#6: Make a reacting tree.**

This is a great idea from Steve and Ruth Bennett, parents and co-authors of numerous activity books (including *365 TV-Free Activities You Can Do with Your Child*). Find a tree in your backyard or local park and claim it as your own. Bring a book and a blanket, and make it a regular spot for story time. It's a great way to savor fall foliage or the warm breeze of an Indian summer night.

**#7: Cook double.**

Cook double, and save time and trouble. Bugs Peterschmidt of Family Life First doubles every recipe and freezes half for another night. This makes half of her mealtimes a snap. "Last night, we had tamale pie. I made two of them. Add salad-in-a-bag and dinner's done!"

**#8: Pick your own.**

Go apple picking with your family (or pick any fruit or veggie, for that matter)! If you've got kids of different ages and temperaments, it's sometimes hard to find a movie or game for everyone. Picking apples or pulling carrots is something everybody can do well and do together, and these outdoor activities provide another chance to savor the waning warmth of the fall season.

**#9: Catch some winks.**

Get some sleep! Lights out by 10 p.m., 11 p.m. at the latest. When you feel rested, you feel calm. So pay bills in the morning, and turn on the radio to catch the news you missed from the night before.

**#10: Plan TGIF fun nights.**

Friday night, heralding the end of the work week, is one of the best times to focus on family. While others wait in line for tables at overcrowded restaurants, grab a takeout pizza and head back to the ranch. Let kids take turns each week setting the agenda: Video? Monopoly? Scavenger hunt for loose change? It's a time to remember that our home is not just our castle. In the 21st century, home and family are our fortress, our best protection from the onslaught of the 24/7 world.

# Tips for a Successful Parent-Teacher Conference

## General Hints

Parent-teacher conferences are an excellent opportunity to find out how your child is adjusting to the new school year and to get to know her teachers. Here are some general hints on how to have a successful conference:

- Ask your child if there is anything that he would like you to discuss with the teacher.
- Jot down everything that you want to talk about at the conference. (See Helpful Questions, below.)  
Arrive promptly or a few minutes early. Begin with positive comments about the teacher or classroom. Avoid lengthy discussions of topics that are not related to the purpose of the conference.  
Be open to suggestions from the teacher.  
Keep your emotions under control.  
Take notes about what has been discussed and share them with your child.  
Express appreciation for the conference. Do not stay beyond your allotted time.

## Helpful Questions

In order to help your kids have a successful school year, you need to know what will be expected of them academically from now until June. You can find out by asking some questions. Take this list with you to your next parent-teacher conference. And don't forget to take notes.

1. What skills and knowledge will my child be expected to master this year?
  - What will my child learn this year in key subjects like math, science, history, and English?
  - Are there challenging academic standards in place at this school? How do they compare with those at other school districts? May I see them?
  - How do you inform students about the academic standards they're expected to meet? What kind of projects and assignments have you planned that will help my child meet higher academic standards?
2. How will my child be evaluated?
  - What kind of information do you use to evaluate students?
  - How do you know if a child is academically ready to move on to the next grade?
  - How are grades determined in your classroom?
3. What can I do to stay more involved in my child's academic progress?
  - What can I do at home to complement what is happening in the classroom?
  - How can I know on a daily basis what homework has been assigned?
  - How can I support teachers' efforts in implementing higher academic standards?
4. How do you accommodate differences in learning?
  - What if my child is a slow learner and falls behind, or is a fast learner and is bored?
  - Are summer school, tutoring, or other programs available for students who need more help?

# Improving Reading Skills

Nothing is more important to academic achievement than being a good reader. You know your kids best, and can provide the one-on-one time and attention that will lead them to success in reading. Here is a list of ways to help your children become more effective readers.

## **#1. Set aside a regular time to read to your children every day.**

Studies show that regularly reading out loud to children will produce significant gains in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and the decoding of words. Whether your children are preschoolers or preteens, it will increase their desire to read independently.

## **#2: Surround your children with reading material.**

Children with a large array of reading materials in their homes score higher on standardized tests. Tempt your kids to read by having a large supply of appealing books and magazines at their reading level. Put the reading materials in cars, bathrooms, bedrooms, family rooms, and even by the TV.

## **#3: Have a family reading time.**

Establish a daily time when everyone in the family reads together silently. Seeing you read will inspire your children to read. Just 15 minutes of daily practice is sufficient to increase their reading fluency.

## **#4: Encourage a wide variety of reading activities.**

Make reading an integral part of your children's lives. Have them read menus, roadside signs, game directions, weather reports, movie time listings, and other practical everyday information. Also, make sure they always have something to read in their spare time when they could be waiting for appointments or riding in a car.

## **#5: Develop the library habit.**

Entice your children to read more by taking them to the library every few weeks to get new reading materials. The library also offers reading programs for children of all ages that may appeal to your children and further increase their interest in reading.

## **#6: Be knowledgeable about your children's progress.**

Find out what reading skills they are expected to have at each grade level. The school's curriculum will give you this information. Track their progress in acquiring basic reading skills on report cards and standardized tests.

## **#7: Look for reading problems.**

Teachers may not always detect reading problems until they've become serious. Find out if your child can sound out words, knows sight words, uses context to identify unknown words, and clearly understands what he reads.

## **#8: Get help promptly for reading problems.**

Reading problems do not magically disappear with time. The earlier children receive help, the more likely it is that they will become good readers. Make sure your children receive necessary help from teachers, tutors, or learning centers as soon as you discover a problem.