

Helping at School When Volunteering Isn't an Option

by Ann Barbour

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As you settled into the new school year, did you receive requests to volunteer at your child's school? I thought so!

Schools encourage parent involvement primarily because children do better academically and have fewer behavior problems when families are involved. Schools also benefit from the resources and support families can provide, which are particularly important in these economic times.

Even though we know this type of involvement is a good thing, parents with overloaded work and family responsibilities can find participation difficult. If helping out at school isn't possible for you, there are many other ways to participate. The most important type of parent involvement happens at home. And it involves much more than overseeing homework. On the most basic level, you can encourage your child's learning during every day conversations and activities, by paying attention to his interests and questions, and by reading together on a regular basis.

Also, whenever you can help your child make outside-of-school connections to curriculum, you're reinforcing and extending classroom learning. Being able to do so hinges on actually knowing what's happening at school. And since kids aren't always the best sources of information about this, it's good to keep in touch with your child's teacher.

The teacher may already have established regular communication channels to help you keep up-to-date with and give feedback about your child's educational experiences. Whether or not that's the case, you can take the initiative to let her know you're interested in your child's learning and offer whatever kind of support you can. If she knows something about your other responsibilities, schedule and preferences, she'll be more likely to tailor messages and requests accordingly.

Understanding what your child is learning will also help you talk with him about it and connect other experiences to it. You'll be able to say, "Tell me about Curious George (your poem, the neighborhood map, the mealworm habitat)" rather than asking "What happened in school today?" which can yield a "Nothing" reply. If information about curriculum topics, lessons or investigations isn't part of the teacher's regular communications with families, you can respectfully request it. You can also follow up by letting her know what your child does outside of class that's related e.g., "Emma emptied out my change purse to look for nickels so she could count by 5s."

Here are some other ways you can be actively involved without volunteering at school or committing a huge amount of time:

- Make sure you review with your child any work he brings home. Think about displaying it in a prominent place in your home to show how much you value his education.
- Schedule occasional phone conferences or ask the teacher if you can "talk" by email when you have a question, concern or something to share.
- If your child brings home a weekly folder, include short notes in it for the teacher to read.
- Make a point of briefly touching base with the teacher when you drop your child off at school. A quick greeting and comment will continue to let her know you're an active partner in your child's learning.
- Ask the teacher how you can support classroom activities at home. You can even make suggestions based on your particular skills or talents. For example, you could offer to:
- Help make learning activities or repair broken equipment.

- Donate materials.
- Use your technology skills to help publish a class newsletter.
- Organize or participate in a telephone tree that informs families about school activities.

You might also consider thinking about how you might be present occasionally. If you have a flexible work schedule or a vacation day, consider joining your child for lunch. You might even decide to help out at a one-time event such as a field trip or school festival. Your child will look forward to and remember these special times, and you'll further reinforce the importance of his school experiences.

I'd like to hear your ideas about how parents can be involved, without a heavy time commitment. Thank you!

From: <http://www.pbs.org/parents/experts/archive/2011/10/participating-at-your-childs-s.html>

Nurturing the Relationship

Read School Memos

“Read the school memos, rules and schedules so you know what’s happening and what’s expected of your child and of you. Keep school information in one place, or better yet, in a loose-leaf binder so it doesn’t get lost. This information should help you answer your child’s questions about homework and school policies. This is the single most important thing you can do to foster a positive relationship with the school.”

Diane Levin, Ph. D., Professor of Education, Wheelock College.

Try these strategies to build a positive relationship with your child's teacher.

Approach this relationship with respect. Treat the teacher-parent-child relationship the way you would any really important one in your life. Create a problem-solving partnership, instead of confronting a teacher immediately with what's wrong. "Meet with a teacher to brainstorm and collaborate ways to help your child, instead of delivering a lecture," recommends Susan Becker, M. Ed.

Let your child develop his own relationship with the teacher. "This is one of the first relationships with an adult your child may have outside the family unit. If you take a back seat and let the relationship develop without much interference, a special bond may develop," advises guidance counselor Linda Lendman. "For young children, the teacher-child relationship is a love relationship," adds Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "In fact, it may be their first love relationship after their parents and it can be pretty powerful and wonderful."

Try not to brag. Of course you think your child is brilliant, but bragging over her many accomplishments may send a message to the teacher that you think he may not be good enough to teach your child. "You don't need to sell your child to the teacher," notes Michael Thompson Ph.D., "you have to trust that your teacher will come to know what's important herself. Telling a teacher that your child loves to read will thrill the teacher. But challenging your teacher with statements like 'Susie read 70 books over the summer' or 'Matthew is a whiz at math,' may backfire."

Remember how you liked (or disliked) your teachers. Your experience at school is likely to affect your attitude toward your child's teacher. "It's important to leave your own baggage at the door, so you can talk about your child with the teacher (and not about you!)" adds Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

From: <http://www.pbs.org/parents/goingtoschool/nuturing.html>

Talking With Teachers

Our experts (all teachers or school psychologists themselves) report on ways to approach teachers that will get their attention, and the ways that won't.

Find the right time to speak to the teacher. Always ask the teacher if she has time to talk at that moment, or better yet, when it might be convenient for her to do so. If a conference is not coming up soon, ask if you can make an appointment for a brief conversation. "Don't expect to have an extended conversation during drop-off and pick-up," advises teacher Susan Becker, M. Ed. "Mornings and after school can actually be quite hectic times. The teacher may appear free but she's not."

Write short, effective notes. If you want a quick response, keep your correspondence brief. Nobody (particularly teachers) has time to read more than one page, and a short paragraph will probably get the fastest response. Be specific about the issue and ask for guidance. For example, you might say, "Lucy's been having trouble with the math homework recently. She struggled for 30 minutes and then we stopped. Can we speak on the phone for a few minutes at your convenience about how to help?"

Make sure your message gets to the teacher. Handwritten notes, leaving occasional messages on teachers' voicemail or sending emails (if allowed by school policy) are effective ways to communicate. Sometimes mailing a note to the school can be the most reliable way to get information through, for parents who do not take their kids to school. But don't be upset if you don't get an immediate response. If you don't hear back after a few days, make sure your teacher got your communication, particularly if you sent it via your child.

Come prepared to conferences. Make a list in advance of what you want to discuss. Let the teacher know you have some questions and be specific: give concrete details that paint an objective picture of a problem. Instead of sweeping comments like "Denzel is having a terrible year," offer tangible data, like "at least three days a week, Denzel melts down while trying to do his math homework. He says 'I don't understand' and 'I'm stupid.'" This way you can collaborate with the teacher on solutions.

Discuss what matters most. Your teacher wants to know about how best to teach your child, so share what your child loves to learn about as well as any struggles he may have. This way, you can look at the whole picture of your child together. "Instead of focusing just on grades, focus on what your child loves, how he learns, and what he struggles with. Think of specifics you can offer the teacher to help her teach your child and listen to what he has to say," advises Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "If you have a report card to review, use it to brainstorm together how you can both support your child's learning, instead of dissecting each grade. Ask how your child functions in the classroom as a person. Does he make friends? How does he resolve conflicts?"

Supply data. Teachers will find comments from previous teachers useful, and giving this data is a non-threatening way to address issues. You might say, "Last year, Johnny's teacher noted he was struggling with attention issues. He was tested and this is how we are handling it." Or you might explain, "Betsy was put in a special reading group last year by Mr. Miller because he evaluated her and thought she needed more advanced books."

Accept your differences with your teacher. Recognize that your teacher may have a different style from you, but that doesn't make her a bad teacher. "Some teachers will be older and seasoned veterans, others will be younger and more idealistic. There are lots of differences in styles of communication and educational philosophy. You will need to really listen to your child's teacher to get a sense of who he is," notes Dalton Miller-Jones, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Portland State University and an advisor to the Portland School district.

Ask what you can do to help. When discussing a problem your child may have, ask your teacher for specific ways you can help at home. Ask her to define what your role should be in the problem-solving partnership, making sure the teacher, parent, and child all play important roles.

From: http://www.pbs.org/parents/goingtoschool/talking_teachers.html

Addressing Problems

There may be times when serious conflicts arise and you will need to meet with a teacher, a guidance counselor or principal to discuss them. Check out these ideas before you go to that meeting.

Acknowledge your child's feelings. "If you get repeated complaints that make sense, you do need to validate your child's feelings and then take some action," advises Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "Unfortunately this may interfere with the trust you want to exist between parent and teacher, but in these extreme cases, your child needs to know that you take her feelings seriously."

Consider the teacher's point of view. While it's important to acknowledge your child's description of an event, you should also keep an open mind and listen to what the school has to say before making a judgment, particularly when serious complaints and discipline issues arise. "The story you may hear from your child may not be the whole gospel truth," notes Lawrence Cohen, Ph.D., author of *Playful Parenting*. "It's usually a complex situation that requires a perspective from the teacher. But don't dismiss your child's complaint either."

Evaluate teachers fairly. There will be some teachers you may love and your child may dislike, there may be others your child may love, but you may not. "There are ways to work out a positive relationship with your child's teacher, even if you have issues about the teacher," advises Diane Levin, Ph.D. "Keep in mind that your child may feel very differently than you do, both positively and negatively. And your job is to advocate for your child and remember that you are not the one in the classroom, he is."

Meet with the administration. If a respectful meeting with the teacher does not produce solutions for your concerns, then you need to go to a guidance counselor or principal and say, "my child is having a difficult time," and explain why. Approach this meeting with specific information, and offer to brainstorm what can be done to help. Describe specific incidents in a factual way. "You cannot expect immediate action, but it's important to give the feedback, and to ask the school system to address these issues with the teacher and find a solution that works for your child," advises Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

From: http://www.pbs.org/parents/goingtoschool/address_prob.html

Supporting Your Learner

Caught in a battle over homework? Or working around the clock with your child completing a school project? Wondering what to do when your child forgets to hand in an assignment — a few days in a row? Baffled by experts who tell us we should help our children enjoy school and become independent learners? "Great," you might think, "but how?"

"Our children become independent learners very gradually," advises guidance counselor Linda Lendman, M.S.W. They learn at their own pace and you can support their process at home by nurturing what they are interested in and giving gentle guidance when they need assistance."

"What happens at home has a lot to do with supporting your child's success as a learner — and this goes way beyond making sure she gets her homework done or studies for the test. You want to help kids learn how to feel competent and positive about their learning. One way to begin is to help kids organize themselves (at their developmental level); create a schedule for doing their work and discover how they can follow it, so school work becomes a rich part of their after-school lives, but not the only part," advises Diane Levin, Ph.D., professor of education at Wheelock College.

While there's no magic recipe, there are ways to help kids plan their time, complete their homework, and make the most of school. These strategies can help you help your child get excited about learning (or at least get you through some tough spots along the way).

From: http://www.pbs.org/parents/goingtoschool/support_learner.html

The Parent's Role

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.

From: http://www.pbs.org/parents/goingtoschool/parents_role.html

Helping with Homework

Wondering how to help your children with homework — or how to get them to do it without a struggle? Here's how.

What's the point of homework? "Homework is designed to help students reinforce key concepts, process and solidify new information, provide time for extra practice of skills, and reflect on how much they've learned," notes teacher Susan Becker, M. Ed. However, approaches to homework vary from district to district, school to school and teacher to teacher. Some schools don't give children homework until the 2nd grade, others start in kindergarten. Some teachers create original homework, while other use or modify prepared work sheets.

Don't do the homework for your child. Most teachers use homework to find out what the child knows. They do not want parents doing their children's homework but do want parents to make sure homework is completed and review any mistakes to see what can be learned from them.

Don't take over your child's projects. Teachers do not want parents doing their kids' projects. Instead, they want parents to support their kids' learning and make sure they have what they need to accomplish a task. Check with your child's teacher for his policy and review it with your child.

Set up a good space to work. All children need the same thing: a clean, well-lit space. But keep in mind that each child may work differently; some will do their work at the kitchen table and others at their desks in their rooms.

Pay attention to your child's rhythms and help him find the right time to begin his work. Some children will work best by doing homework right after school; others need a longer break and must run around before tackling the work. Most will need a snack. If your child does after-school activities, set a homework time before or after the activity, or after dinner. Whatever routine you choose, help your child stick to it.

Find out how your child studies best. "You should find the ways your child likes to study. For example, some kids will learn spelling words by writing them out, others by closing their eyes and picturing them and saying them aloud," advises teacher Susan Becker, M. Ed. "The sound environment is also important," adds Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "Some kids may want to listen to music, some are helped by being in the middle of noise, others need absolute quiet."

Don't hover — but stay close by. Keep in mind that it's their homework, not yours, but remain available in case you are needed. "The ideal set up would be for a parent to be reading nearby while the child is studying because then you both are doing your educational work together, but that's not always possible," says Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "A parent may be working out of the home, or need to be working in the home and cooking dinner. So if you are home, stay close, and if you are not there, have another adult check to make sure it's going OK. And remember that all homework is not equal, so not everything will need your rapt attention."

Limit media exposure. Turn off the TV and the iPod when your child does homework. And the computer too, unless it's being used for research. You might start by asking how much time he thinks he should spend on this, and negotiate from there. Remember, you have the final word. And keep in mind that if you watch TV when your child can't, the plan may backfire.

Let the teacher know if you gave your child a lot of homework help. "If your child needs extra help or truly doesn't understand something, let the teacher know. Write on the assignment, 'done with parental help,' or write a separate note," advises Michael Thompson, Ph.D. If your child resists, explain that homework is used to practice what you know and to show the teacher what you need help learning more about — so it's a parent's job to let the teacher know.

From: http://www.pbs.org/parents/goingtoschool/helping_homework.html

The Tough Stuff

No matter how hard you try, your child may struggle academically at some point in his school career. Here are some strategies to help you both cope when the going gets tough.

Let your kids get frustrated. When kids are having a hard time with homework or a school-related subject, they often explode with anger. And parents wonder "What did I do wrong?" "You didn't necessarily do anything," advises Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "Sometimes when kids feel misunderstood at school or frustrated by a subject, they get angry or provoke the parent — as a way of making you feel as helpless or angry as they feel. It's almost like your child is saying, 'would you hold my hopelessness for a while?' Or 'I need you to feel what I am going through, so I am going to make you angry.'"

Take a break. If your child says "I can't do it!" and throws the pencil down, take a little break. Maybe she needs to rant and blow off a little steam. Come back in five minutes and start fresh. (Those five minutes could save you an hour of struggle.) This also gives a child a chance to "save face" and start over, without even discussing the previous difficulty or outburst.

Don't always try to have a rational conversation. When kids get very upset about school, the upset may get in the way of their being rational. So wait it out instead of arguing or grilling children about the situation. Once they cool down, you might be able to talk it through.

Let your child make his own mistakes. It's hard not to correct a child's homework, but most teachers ask you not to take over unless your child asks for your help or the teacher requests it. Teachers generally want to know what the child understands, not what the parent understands about the material.

Put a time limit on the work. Most teachers will not expect younger kids to work longer than a half-hour on homework from any particular subject, but ask your teacher for a time limit. If your child struggles (while actively trying) and exceeds the limit, write the teacher a note explaining that's all that could get done.

Contact the school. If homework or a project is turning into a dreaded battle, talk with the school. Don't wait for your next conference. It's obviously time for some new insights and new strategies.

Help your child learn how to organize himself. This is a life-long skill that can be taught, but it can be challenging to do so. However you can help your child discover the organizational tricks that will work for him by sharing some of your own. "It's very difficult to teach children to be organized if it is not in their nature (or yours)," says guidance counselor Linda Lendman, M.S.W. "Encourage your child to label everything. Develop strategies, like the 'must-do list' before you leave school (put math book in backpack). Schedule a weekly 'clean out the backpack and clean off your desk' time so papers don't build up. Be patient, and try not to place blame."

Recognize that school work will never be conflict-free. No one ever raised a child without a homework battle. "There is no conflict-free homework strategy for most kids," says Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "At times, kids will find it fun and fascinating. Other times, it may be something they just have to do, and you have to help them find the structure for getting it done."

From: http://www.pbs.org/parents/goingtoschool/tough_stuff.html