

25 ways to help YOUR CHILD AT SCHOOL

The most important lessons your child needs for success aren't taught in the classroom, they're taught at home



As thousands troop back to school with heavy hearts and shiny shoes, this is a good time for parents to consider how we can help our children succeed. In such a competitive world, they'll need every advantage. Children's performance in school has more to do with parents than with their natural brainpower or even their teachers. One recent study claimed the parental effect on exam results at 16 is five times greater than any other factor. So what should we be doing to maximise their chances? Here are 25 ideas to get your family started...

1 Do inspire, don't nag
Not every child is going to find inspiration in school, so it's up to parents to provide it. Teacher Phil Beadle, author of *Could Do Better!*, believes 80% of a child's achievement is based on parental inspiration. That might

mean looking up science experiments on YouTube or going on bug hunts if your child is studying mini-beasts.

2 Help their reading
Recent research from the University of Edinburgh shows children who read well at seven do better in IQ tests as teenagers. Reading is the number-one skill for parents to encourage in the early years of school. Have your child read to you for 10 minutes every day - if you do it at the same time each day, it becomes automatic and moaning should be minimal. Keep the habit going even when your child becomes fluent, as it improves comprehension.

3 It's not a competition
Don't get sucked into peeking into other children's bags to see if they've got a harder reading book. Children's progress isn't

steady or linear - many are late starters, and an early mastery of a subject is a poor guide to future brilliance. Professor Joan Freeman, who has worked with hundreds of gifted children, says initiative, creativity, motivation and a certain 'twinkle in the eye' can be a far better indicator of future cleverness.

4 After-school clubs
There's a balance to be struck here: you don't want so many activities that your child has no downtime (studies show this damages self-esteem as it doesn't allow them space to find out who they are and what they're good at). But research also shows a few well-chosen activities can boost behaviour and exam results - and teach a child that working at something produces tangible results. If your child isn't grabbed by the usual rugby or ballet, think outside the square and see what's available in your area.

Make them persevere for at least a term, but don't continue after that if they hate it - try something else.

5 How are they sleeping?
There is a direct link between lack of sleep and behavioural problems - one study in Israel showed losing just one hour a night can lower a child's IQ. Many school-age children, especially teenagers, are sleep-deprived: one US study showed they get at least an hour less sleep per night than 10 years ago. Millpond Children's Sleep Clinic founder Mandy Gurney says children need 11 hours at age five, 10-and-a-half hours at seven, 10 hours at nine, nine-and-a-half hours at 11 and nine hours at 14.

6 Let them climb trees
What does climbing a tree have to do with academic prowess? A lot, surprisingly. The skills gained from having the freedom to play outside - balance, risk assessment, co-ordination and planning - have a direct effect on 'executive function': the part of the brain that controls their behaviour, which is vital for school success. Studies show that in 2010, the executive function of five-year-olds was the same level as three-year-olds in 1950.

7 Protect family time
It's easy for older children to slink off into their rooms with phones or tablets, only emerging for late-night cheese sandwiches. But some family time each week is vital to keep communication going. Research in the US showed teens who spend more time with their parents have higher self-esteem and confidence. Eat together as often as possible - it's the best way for parents to stay in touch with older children and subtly pass on their values by debating the news or what's on TV.

8 Focus on basic skills
Your school would prefer you to teach basic skills at home, rather than spend hours on extra reading or maths. For primary school kids that means being able to zip up their coat, use a knife and fork, go to the toilet and be able to understand basic instructions. In one survey, teachers said 50% of children arriving at primary school lacked the communication skills to learn anything.

9 Find out about their day
Asking, "What did you do at school today?" tends to get you the answer, "Nothing!" Try open-ended, positive questions instead, such as, "What was the best thing about school today?" or specific questions such as, "Who did you have lunch with?" Listen to the gaps: what they are not talking about? Beware of 'it's boring' - it can mean 'I'm not coping'. Avoid immediate post-school interrogation - with younger ones, bathtime is better. With older children, the best communication is ad-hoc chats while both of you are half-doing something else.

10 Never say you're hopeless at maths
Even if you weren't much of a mathematician at school, don't pass on your fear and loathing. "We must get away from the idea it's okay to be hopeless at maths," says Dr Rosemary Russell, author of *Help Your Child With Numeracy*. "Research shows a maths qualification counts most in the job market later on." If you suspect your child is falling behind, see the teacher immediately because maths is a linear subject - if you don't get one part, you'll struggle with the next, too. Help by using maths in cooking, shopping, memory games and snakes and ladders.

11 Decode reports
There's no such thing as a negative report these days, so you need to read between the lines. If you see, 'He makes attempts to...', 'He is beginning to...' or, 'With help he can...', that's generally teacher code for the lower end of the academic spectrum. Whereas phrases like, 'He is developing his skills at...', 'He is approaching understanding...' or, 'He is benefiting from practice with...' mean he's probably somewhere in the middle. If you spot words like 'independently', 'capably', 'consistently' or 'effective', you can breathe a sigh of relief.

12 Turn off the telly
Your children will say they can do their homework while the TV is on, or that it sinks in better if they take Instagram breaks, but research proves otherwise. Continuous partial attention, as it's known, is taxing on the brain, and research shows facts you

learn will only reach the periphery of memory. "That doesn't much matter if you are washing up while the radio is on, but it will matter if you are trying to learn Spanish verbs," says Harriet Griffey, author of *The Art of Concentration*.

13 Act quickly if things are going wrong
Don't wait for a bad report - if you suspect your child is falling behind or has a problem, make an appointment to see the teacher straight away. In primary school, ask to see their books so you can check for yourself, advises Caroline Bentley-Davies, author of *How To Be An Amazing Teacher*. Don't be aggressive - ask open questions like, 'She doesn't appear to be enjoying school - have you noticed anything?' "It's all in the tone you use, but a teacher always wants interested parents," she says.

14 Help with homework
Doing their homework for them to ensure a high mark doesn't help; it stops them learning. But that doesn't mean you should be totally hands-off. Noël Janis-Norton, author of *Calmer, Easier, Happier Homework*, advises a three-step approach. Spend five minutes on a joint think through before they get started. Offer help, but with questions not answers: 'What do you think they're asking you? How much do you need to write?' Then leave them alone to do the work. Afterwards, each come up with three good points about their work and three things to improve, then let them make the necessary changes on their own.

15 Read to them - even at the age of 10
Reading to your kids is the best educational benefit you can give them: it encourages a love of stories and increases vocabulary. Carry on even after they can read for themselves - it's a great way to introduce them to trickier books and classic works of literature they may not be able to tackle on their own.

16 Brush up on your maths
Maths teaching has changed since parents were at school. There's no more 'carrying' and 'borrowing' in sums and the methods in some schools are completely >>



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different. For instance, some schools have children adding using number lines and number squares, and multiplication or addition is done by partitioning. Don't try to teach it your way – ask the school if they can run a catch-up seminar for parents (some have leaflets to help) or try Naomi Sani's book, *How To Do Maths So Your Children Can Too*.

17 "I've got a tummy ache"

Girls tend to say this more than boys, and anxious girls most of all according to a study, although they tend to grow out of it by the age of seven or eight. Never let them stay at home if you suspect they're anxious rather than ill, advises Valerie Muter, co-author of *Prepare Your Child For School*. "It's important to get across the message that they have to go to school every day – there's no choice," she says. Instead, offer sympathy and a warm drink, rub their tummy and set off. If it continues, look for patterns – is it always on PE day? – and check for bullying.

18 Practise writing

Studies show children aren't getting enough practice with handwriting at primary school, which can severely hamper their progress later on. "Writing speed is crucial at secondary school," says Professor Rhona Stainthorp from Reading University's Institute of Education. When a child writes slowly, it shows they are still having to think about the act of writing, leaving less room in the brain for content. Try to encourage writing in any form: lists, stories, poems – anything.

19 Food for the brain

What they eat matters to their brains: a child's performance at school rises sharply if they've eaten breakfast, for example, and low blood-sugar levels impair concentration. Drinking water is also important: research in Leeds revealed children's ability to do arith-

metic was impaired if they were just 1-2% dehydrated, which is not even enough for them to feel thirsty. Give them a big drink of water just before they go into school.

20 Learn 7 x 8

You're not alone in finding the 7 x 8 times table tricky; mathematicians agree it's the hardest one of all. Maths expert Carol Vorderman advises getting stuck in from age six with the 2s, 5s and 10s, followed by the 3s, 6s and 9s, before the 4s and 8s and then 7s. The primary school curriculum is pretty crowded, and many schools leave it to parents to drill the tables. Reciting works for some kids, but not all. Try musical CDs, a giant poster, quizzes or games. It's vital to get fluent by Year 6. If multiplication tables are not automatic by secondary school, children will fall behind.

21 Class action

Research examining the progress of 3000 children concluded test scores at 22 months could predict what educational qualifications they would have at the age of 26 – but that children of middle-class parents who were slow as toddlers would eventually overtake the cleverer children from poorer backgrounds. It's thought higher parental expectations and active engagement with the school – as well as more money available for extra tuition – do make a difference, even if it takes a while.

22 Play sport

Exercise has an amazing effect on brain function. A study of eight to 12-year-olds showed running improved cognitive flexibility and creativity. And when it came to overweight seven to 11-year-olds who were prescribed 20 or 40 minutes of aerobic exercise a day – soccer, basketball, running and skipping – the high-dose group saw an improvement in

working memory and attention and did better at maths. It could be due to better blood flow to the brain or a boost in nerve cells and connections. Martial arts are also proven to improve cognitive development and classroom behaviour, especially among nine to 11-year-olds and boys.

23 Play an instrument

Studies have shown that, if started before the age of seven, musical study improves reading, language, maths and spatial awareness – and even increases IQ scores by up to 7½ points. It's better if they start early, but you will see the benefits whatever the age. No one instrument is more effective.

24 Don't drop lunch off

Constantly smoothing the path in front of your children stops them growing up and developing confidence and resilience – bigger predictors of life success than IQ or exam results. When they're at secondary school, don't drive in with forgotten lunches or PE clothes. "If your parents are always running after you with things you've forgotten, you're always the child, unable to develop responsibility or learn to face the consequences of your actions," says Hilary Wilce, author of *Backbone: How To Build the Character Your Child Needs to Succeed*.

25 Work with teachers

Teachers can sometimes appear prickly or defensive, but parents don't help by ignoring problems, then marching in at the end of term and venting their anger. It's better to see the teacher immediately if you think there's a problem. If it's a friendship issue or perceived unfairness, always take the side of the teacher, say Sue Atkins, author of *Raising Happy Children For Dummies*. Also, if you think something has gone well, be sure to praise and thank the teacher. □

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