

Getting Involved in your Child's Education

Did you know that parents are their children's most important teachers, guides, and advocates? It's true. Parents' opinions and actions play an important role in shaping their child's development. Being an involved parent means guiding and connecting with our children. Parents who are involved in their child's lives find that their children are more successful in school, choose better friends, and have fewer discipline problems. Effective parents try to be involved in both their child's formal and informal education. These parents work with their children's schools and use community resources to meet the needs of their families.

Being involved is more than just sending the child to school. Besides helping with their children's schoolwork, involved parents also find time to talk one-on-one with their child and really listen to what they are saying. Effective parents also validate their children, by letting them know that they can see things their way. These parents aren't afraid to have fun and goof off with their child. They do special things together, go on outings, plan family events, and model how to behave in these different settings.

Parents should advocate for their children's needs. It is the parent's right to voice their opinions about school activities and policies. By speaking up, parents help their child feel supported, secure, and successful in school. Some parents may feel apprehensive about getting involved in how their child's school is run, and that is only natural. Start by talking to other successful parents, and try attending school meetings (e.g., Parent Teacher Associations [PTO/PTA]).

Here are some ways parents can be involved in their child's life in a caring way:

Make an extra effort to get to know your child's teacher. Talk with the teacher even when things are going well and there are no problems with your child. Ask about your child's learning. Ask what you can do at home to help your child learn better. By taking the time to get to know and talk to your child's teachers, you will find that teachers will better understand how to meet your expectations and your child's needs. In fact, this will help teachers to know how to best teach your child. You may feel uncomfortable at first speaking with teachers and other school personnel. This is normal and will become easier with time. Ask about ways you can get involved at the school. For example, helping out in the classroom or attending class field trips.

Tell the school when there is a change at home or you will be out of town, especially if you will be gone for an extended period of time. Do not assume that your children will tell their teacher about these plans. If not notified teachers and administrators will worry about your child, possibly creating negative repercussions. If your child is sick or injured, let the teachers and school administration know about any effects it may have on their schooling, and arrange appropriate adaptations if necessary.

When it comes to your child, you are the expert. When you talk with teachers and administrators, you can teach them about ways to work better with your child. Keep in mind that your opinion and family story is important. It helps school staff understand your child and your family better, so they can better help your child. You should let them know if your child learns better when he sits closer to the teacher. You should tell them if something difficult has happened in the child's life (e.g., death of a loved one, a divorce, an accident). They will be better able to help if they know what's going on.

Plan to attend conferences with teachers. To understand your child's school better, it is important to ask questions. Ask why the teacher does certain things. Ask how the child behaves in class. The better you understand what's happening, the better it will be for your child. If you can't meet during the regular times when conferences are scheduled, call and find a time that fits your schedule. Come prepared with your own questions about things you would like to know, or things that are worrying you. Remember to really listen and keep an open discussion with your child's teachers; they want your child to succeed too!

Tips for supporting your child's academic success:

- Make a routine for completing homework. Arrange a quiet place to do homework, find a good time that works for your family, and be attentive as he/she works so your child will be more likely to ask questions.
- Be on the lookout for school announcements and assignments.
- Keep track of your child's activities. Make sure you know who they are with, where they are going, and what they will be doing. Be friendly with your child's friends. Remember, if they like coming over you will be able to keep better track of what they are doing.
- Visit your child's school. Go to concerts and games, chaperone dances, and help out in other ways that can.
- Keep learning and reading. Your child will value the things you value. Read with your child and let them see you reading. Take on challenges together.
- Limit TV and video games. They can hamper the learning skills children need to succeed.
- Find time to play together often and enjoy the one-on-one time. Play games inside and out. Fresh air and activity are good for you.
- Learn about school rules and school programs. Find out how they affect your child and how he or she can benefit from them.

What do I do if I have problems with the school?

- *Just keep trying.* Just like you, teachers and school administrators are busy people. If you tell them about a problem and nothing changes, it's possible that they have forgotten or didn't have time yet to take care of it. Try to talk with them again or leave them a message. If you don't follow-up you can be sure nothing will happen. Remember to listen to them and expect to be listened to in return. If you feel they aren't taking care of your problem, you can set up a special meeting or try the following suggestions.
- *Arrange a special meeting with the individual with whom you have a problem.* Start by setting an appointment to speak with them about your concern. If that doesn't work, try meeting with the principal or vice-principal. Keep in mind that even though you may feel upset, they will be more likely to act on your concern if you stay calm and offer solutions.
- *After a decision is made, you can appeal it if it does not meet your needs.* If you disagree with the course of action that has been chosen, take the steps necessary to appeal the decision. Generally, you can learn how to start the appeal process by asking someone at the school or the school district office.
- *Remember you're not alone.* If things continue to go in a direction that you feel is not best for your child's education then seek outside help. Talk to other parents and parent advocates outside of the school. You might start by thinking about others you know (e.g., friends, church members, colleagues) who may have experienced a problem similar to the one you're facing. Start by asking for advice and keep track of the advice you receive. Schools really do have your child's interest at heart. Work with them and you will find a solution.

References:

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