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How to help your kids succeed in school? Talk, talk, talk

By ADRIANA BARTON

Parents have tremendous influence over their kids' academic performance, experts say. The key is to ask the right questions

Parents who get cracking for school bake sales, volunteer to coach the soccer team or help in drafting school policies deserve kudos for community service. But if the goal is to boost academic achievement, one of the best things parents can do – according to at least two decades of research – is talk to their kids about school.

As a route to better grades, family conversations about learning trump parent-teacher interviews, chaperoning on field trips, and even helping with homework, says Carl Corter, a professor at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto.

Volunteering for a parent-school council may be an important democratic exercise, Dr. Corter says, "but it doesn't get kids achieving more in school." Rather, large-scale studies, which define academic success by a child's grades, suggest the biggest predictors of scholastic achievement "are really the things that aren't happening at school."

Parents have tremendous influence over a child's work habits, attitudes about learning and expectations of success, Dr. Corter explains. While parents may feel outnumbered by a child's teachers and peers, children take cues from their parents about learning before entering preschool, through the teenage years and beyond. "What parents say and do at home does matter, despite appearances to the contrary," he says.

The challenge for parents is to ask questions about school that elicit more than a grunt or a lacklustre "fine" from kids. Dr. Corter encourages parents to express genuine curiosity about the child's day, including the child's play time and social experiences. But the typical conversation opener – "How was school today?" – is often too vague to spark a meaningful exchange, Dr. Corter says.

Instead, parents could try asking for specifics, such as, "What kind of activities did you do in science class today?" and "How did you and your friends figure out how to build such a strong bridge out of Popsicle sticks?"

Stephen Hurley, an educator in Milton, Ont., says he's shifted his approach with his five-year-old son Luke. Instead of asking, "What did you learn today?" Mr. Hurley says, "We began asking, 'What cool things did you discover today?'"

Framing questions in terms of discovery has stimulated his son's natural curiosity, Mr. Hurley says. Recently, he and his son pulled out an iPad at the dinner table to follow up on a class discussion about sharks. A question about how

many types of sharks exist flowed into another: "How many types of fish are there?"

Some children are more resistant to probing from parents, of course. Ceci Vasoff, a mother of three in Barrie, Ont., says her 10-year-old son's response to questions about school is, "Mom, you've been asking me that since kindergarten. When something new happens, I'll tell you."

Over the years, Ms. Vasoff says, she has relied on other parents to learn more about her children's experiences at school. But she adds that her children do confide in her when they are excited about upcoming events or have concerns about homework. "The process is really driven from their point of need, not necessarily mine to know more about their lives," she says.

There is no formula for creating a positive learning environment at home, notes Dr. Corter, who adds that the best approach may depend on the family's cultural background.

When kids clam up about school, parents can try a variety of strategies to help them succeed. A 2008 literature review by People for Education, a Toronto-based non-profit group, identifies four areas of parental involvement that have the biggest impact on student achievement. They include having high expectations for one's child, talking about school, reading with a child in any language (even after the child can read alone) and helping a child develop positive work habits and attitudes about learning.

For parents, getting involved in a child's education "may be as simple as creating an educationally oriented atmosphere at home," writes Michelle Goldberg, a former researcher for the organization and currently an instructor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

Dr. Corter cautions against grilling kids about how they did on a test. Focusing on report cards and test results may interfere with a child's motivation to learn, he says. While setting high standards is important, he says a more balanced approach is to focus on progress by teaching children how to identify and reach steps toward appropriate goals – which may include improving grades.

Parents can best support a child by understanding that they are an integral part of a child's learning process, Dr. Corter says. If a parent can encourage a child to talk about experiences at school, and learning in general, he says, it probably strengthens their bond and "helps the child internalize parents' aspirations for his or her success."

4 tips to help your child succeed in school

1. Set high (but not unrealistic) expectations for your child.
2. Talk to your child about school.
3. Help your child develop good work habits and positive attitudes about learning.
4. Read with your child at home, in any language, even after your child can read alone.

Source: People for Education

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