

Helping Create the School-Parent Reading Partnership

Tips for Your School Newsletter

Read with a child. it's the most important 20 minutes of your day.

Parents are critical partners in helping children learn to read. Yet sometimes parents just don't know how to encourage reading at home or how to make it fun and interesting. We've created 24 paragraphs to help you help parents.

These short, concise articles are intended to provide parents real help in supporting elementary-age children become successful readers and writers. Some answer questions that parents often ask about how to help their children. Others give suggestions about ways to encourage reading and writing at home. They are grouped by topics but they are written so that they may be used in any order.

These articles are designed to be dropped into school newsletters, principals' letters, posted around the building, or any other way you can implement them at your school.

Working Together

You Are an Important Member of the Team

As another school year begins, keep in mind that you play a big role in your child's success at school. Teachers appreciate notes or e-mails about what you see at home that might help them understand your child better. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you don't understand assignments or expectations after talking to your child. Attend Open House and read the newsletters - better yet, have your child read the newsletter to you and talk about what is happening at school. If you still don't understand something, schedule a conference. You don't have to wait until the formal conference time if you have a concern. Work together with you child's teacher as a team to ensure a great year for him or her.

Importance of Reading at Home

Reading at Home Builds Closeness

Reading at home with your child is important in helping your child develop the skills necessary to become a successful reader, and it can also build relationships at the same time. Sitting close together and snuggling over a good book sends the message to your child that he or she is important to you and that you value time together. Sharing ideas about the story shows that you value your child's ideas and feelings. By making reading time special, you increase the chances your child will see reading as an experience he or she doesn't want to miss.

Give the Gift of Time

When kids are reading, we often jump in to make corrections very quickly. Try just waiting to see if they correct themselves. You will be surprised at the number of times that they make changes without your help, and it will give them more confidence in their ability as a reader.

When reading together, it is fun to discuss the story and ask questions about your child's response to the book. Remember to give kids plenty of time to respond to questions. As adults, we process questions more quickly than children do. You will discover that the answers you get will be worth the wait.

Be a Good Reading Role Model

The most effective way children learn is by watching parents and adults in their lives. Modeling the behavior that you want teaches manners and respect, but it can also teach reading and writing.

Children need to see you reading for a number of purposes: enjoyment, recipes, directions, and to answer questions. The same is true for writing. Be sure to talk about what you are doing, Say "Let's read the directions to figure out how this works." "I think that I will write this down, so that I don't forget how to do it." Seeing adults who are important to them read and write speaks much louder than words that reading is valued.

Who Should Read - Parents or Kids?

The answer to that questions is both! When children learn to read by themselves it is easy to drop the read aloud habit. The reality is that until at least middle school, reading aloud is important. That's when their reading level begins to match vocabulary - but too many families have stopped reading aloud by this time.

When you read aloud you can read books at a child's listening level which is higher than their reading level. You model what good reading sounds like and expand a child's vocabulary. It gives you a chance to talk about more complicated stories and ideas. You can read about things that your child may not choose to read on his or her own. When reading aloud together, you also give your child the attention from you that is so important.

Building Skills

Read to Build Vocabulary

One of the most important factors in your child's ability to understand what he or she reads is whether he or she knows the meaning of each word. When you read aloud, you can read books that are more difficult than what the child could read on his or her own, and it gives you the opportunity to build the child's vocabulary as a apart of the reading time together. The wonderful words found in children's books are often words that we don't use in every day conversations. Talk about the words and how they could be used in other situations. Make a game of trying to use the words. A large vocabulary will really improve your child's comprehension as he or she reads more complicated books.

Do I Tell Them the Word?

We want our kids to become independent readers, but we don't want them to become discouraged. Help your child develop some strategies to use. Here are some things you can do to encourage young readers:

- Sound it out - We want children to use this skill effectively, but many words sound differently than they are spelled. When they have some sounds but not the correct word try the next two strategies.
- Think about what you are reading. Ask what word might sound somewhat the same but might be in the story.
- Always ask if what you are reading makes sense and sounds like how you would have say something.

It is fine to sometimes tell them the word because you don't want them to get bogged down and stop enjoying the book. If you have to tell them often, you may want to just read the book together. Reading should be fun!

Do I Correct All Reading Mistakes?

When children are reading, they will make mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes when they read, and we usually get by with it unless it's a favorite book that your child has memorized! It isn't important to correct every mistake that the child makes if it doesn't change the meaning of the text, but children shouldn't get in the habit of reading inaccurately either. Help your child make corrections by asking if what they read makes sense and by sounding out the words. Keep it fun so children enjoy reading and aren't worried about making a mistake.

How Do I Correct Reading Mistakes?

You can help your child make corrections while reading and still keep it positive. After your child has read to the end of a paragraph or page you might say, "Look at all of the words that you read correctly. Let's go back and look at this word again to see if we can figure out what it really is."

Be specific in your praise as well. Instead of saying "good job" try "I like the way you made your voice sound mad when the character was angry" or "You read a lot of hard words in that story." Your child will repeat the behaviors that you praise.

Read to Learn

Adults sometimes forget to share with children that we read for a lot of different purposes. Each of these takes a little different kind of skill.

For instance, reading directions sometimes takes patience and requires that we read something more than once. To practice this type of reading skill, have the children read the directions and learn how to play a new game together. If there is an argument over the rules, make them go back and read them. Or, find the directions on how to make a paper airplane or origami figure and then make it -- it takes some skill. Even if you can tell verbally how to do something, like planting a flower or following a recipe, have the kids figure it out by reading from the package, cookbook, or the internet. Plan an outing on the city bus by letting them learn how to read the schedule, and then see if the plan really works!

Encourage Reading Comprehension

The main goal of reading is to understand and enjoy what is being read. Children can be encouraged to focus on this as they read aloud.

Set the stage for the story by using the pictures or the back of the book. Relate the story to your experiences or your child's. Connecting with the story on a personal level makes it more fun. Ask "What if..." questions. For instance, "What if the story had happened in a different place?" Asking questions keeps kids involved and enjoying the story. Encourage your child to make pictures in his or her head about what the character looks like or where the story is happening. It might be fun to draw it, too.

Did You Remember What You Read?

Sometimes children zip through a book or story without processing what was read. Children are often asked to tell the main idea of a story or to summarize what the story is about. You can help develop that skill during your reading time at home.

It is easier to begin this if you use short sections of the book or chapters. After reading a part of the story, ask your child to tell you the most important things that have happened and predict what will happen next. Or have your child think about the story and see if the child can come up with one or two sentences that could be shared with someone to convince them to read the book. Discussing the story at the end is a great time to share ideas, and you might even learn more about your own child through his or her ideas about the story.

Homework

"I Don't Have Any Homework" Is Not an Option!

The school year has started and home work is back. Hopefully homework is a part of your family's daily routine and not a battle. Here are some ways to help! Set aside a time for homework every day and there are no excuses for missing it. Every elementary age child should read for at least 20 minutes even if they have no other assigned work.

Next, find a place that is the "homework center." It can be a chair at the kitchen table, a desk, or even the floor. It is ideal for this area to be away from any distractions, such as the television, and in a spot you can easily supervise. Remember to limit all distractions -- not all kids can deal with distractions and need a quieter place to work. Make sure that you have pencils, paper, erasers, and pencil sharpeners available at the "homework center" or in a folder that can be pulled out to use.

Rethink Homework Time

Sometimes we get locked into thinking something should be done at a certain time - and sometimes that extends to our thinking about homework. Remember that there is no right or wrong time for homework. The important thing is that it happens every day, because reading should happen every day. Your family schedule may require some creativity. If your child is an early riser, try an early morning time. Get other things done at night. If your child is a night owl, you can take this into consideration when setting a homework time. Allowing your child to help make the decision will help him or her feel more in control and be more willing to use the time. Just find a time that works and keep it as consistent as possible.

Reading and Writing

Write Your Own Reading Material

Writing is a pleasure for some kids and a pain for others. Try to find ways to encourage writing for enjoyment. Writing is often easier if built off a familiar story. Writing a new version of a fairy tale or a new ending to a story may be a good way to start. Cut out a comic strip and make a new conversation between the characters. Stop a story before you know the end and then have everyone write their own ending. Compare them. Do you like your endings better than the author's? Write your own book and draw the pictures to go with it. Using pictures from a family vacation or a trip to the park can be a great way to get kids to write about what they did. You can make a collection of books to add to the home library. These will become family treasures.

Writing Is Still Important

Even in this world of text messaging and e-mails, it is still important for kids to write. It is especially important for younger children to write because it is tied in with developing reading skills. Make writing a part of your daily life. Look for real reasons to write.

- Dictate the grocery list and have your child write it down. (It can make it a slow process!)
- Write notes to go in lunch bags. We can all use a little encouragement in the middle of the day!
- Use the computer to look up the websites of favorite authors and write to them. You may get an answer.
- Write an old fashioned letter to grandma or a distant friend or relative.
- Write out a plan for a trip or a way to spend a day around town.

Be creative. You will come up with lots of ways to make writing a fun activity.

Helping a Struggling Reader

But I Don't Like to Read!

Reading can be such a joy and it is so important to success that it can be very frustrating to hear a child say "I don't like to read!" But it can happen. Be a good listener and try to decide what the reason is.

- Is reading difficult? Check with your child's teacher to see if she or he is having trouble reading at school.
- Is it just more fun to be on the computer or watch television? Establish a reading time that is consistent and balanced with screen time.
- Is there reading material available about things that he or she is interested in? Magazines, comics, and other material can help get kids started reading again.
- Are you modeling the fact that reading is important and valued in your home? Sometimes it is really hard to find the time to read, but it does send a clear message to your child.

Struggling Readers

When something is hard for us to do, we are not likely to want to do it. That is true of kids who have a hard time with reading. As a parent, it is important to find ways to make the task more enjoyable for your child. The teacher will be working on the skills, so you need to make the practice at home more fun.

- Take turns reading the dialogue from a different character and the parts in between.
- Alternate reading either by paragraph or pages to lighten the task.
- Look at the pictures or read the back of a book before starting and use the words to talk about what the story will be about.

Helping Your Struggling Reader

When children struggle with reading, look for ways to support their reading. It can be helpful to look at the pictures in the book and discuss what the story might be about. For older children, it is always good to read the back cover of a book.

Another strategy you can use to support your reader is to sit directly behind your child. When the child hesitates on a word immediately read the word. If your child gets bogged down, read along and then back off on your reading as your child is able to manage the words alone. This will help the child to hear what good reading sounds like and to use the story to figure out the words.

How Do We Choose the Right Book?

The library can be a confusing place. There are lots of choices! Choosing a book has a lot to do with a child's reading success. Here are some suggestions:

- Listen to your child's interests. If your child has a lot of background knowledge about a subject, she or he will be able to read a more difficult book or be willing to work harder to read it.
- Choose a book that will encourage more reading by reading the first book of a series or one by an author who has written several books.
- A child needs to be able to read about 96 percent of the words without errors to successfully read a book independently.
- Choose a balance of books that are right at the child's reading level and those that are below. Reread old favorites. We all like the feeling of doing something very well, and we want to let our kids shine as well as stretch.

Making Reading Fun

Keep Reading Interesting!

We are fortunate to have such a wonderful variety of children's books and other reading resources available today. Some are motivating even for children who are not as willing to read. Consider these when you are choosing reading materials:

- Libraries have lists of books for all ages, books that have received awards or children's choice books. Ask the librarian.
- Non-fiction books - There are books with information about every interest that you could imagine and for every reading level.
- "Comic books" - many books are being written in that format to encourage young readers.
- Consider magazines from sources such as National Geographic, Sports Illustrated, National Wildlife Foundation, and Cricket.

By mixing up what you read, you can keep reading interesting - for you and your child!

Break the Rules

Reading is fun and it can be even more fun when you do it in an unusual time or place. Reading can help pass the time when waiting at the doctor's office or bus stop but think about different times that might break normal family rules:

- Find a night to read under the covers with a flashlight.
- Have a "Bring a Book to Dinner" night and share what you are reading.
- Make a tent outside to read.
- Have a book picnic at the park. Make sure there is time to eat and play, too.

Have your family think "outside the box" and make it fun.

Encouraging Summer Reading

Summer is Coming, but Don't Forget to Read!

Summer is a busy time for families, and it's not always easy to find time to read. It is critical for children to keep reading during the summer. It is a skill that can be lost for them if they don't continue to practice. Here are a few quick tips to help keep kids reading this summer.

- Sign up for the library reading program.
- Read bedtime stories outside to enjoy the longer daylight hours.
- Have a DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time each day, and don't forget to model the behavior you want by reading yourself.
- Invite the neighborhood kids for a book swap party. Have kids bring a book or two that they enjoyed but are willing to trade.

Summertime Reading

Children need to continue reading and writing over the summer to maintain their developing skills. You don't have to be sitting inside with a book to be reading. You can keep children engaged in reading by:

- Reading the directions and making bubbles to play outside.
- Making up a new game and writing down the directions for others to play.
- Making a list of things that would be fun to do and checking them off as you do them.
- Starting a collection of rocks, baseball cards, etc. and reading about them.
- Reading lots of books in lots of different places.