

Start the School Year Off Right



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Each new school year gives you an opportunity to add to your child's successes in the wider world. You will not be able to control the curves that life throws him later on, but the positive messages that he receives about himself now will help him weather adversity later on. Here are a few tips.

Tell your child what you expect in the areas of grades, classwork, homework, peer relations, and respect for people in authority. Ask her to set some goals too. Once you've committed the rules to paper, invite her to decorate them (or to create a colorful version on the computer). Post the finished product on the refrigerator, where it can be consulted later on if need be.

Invite your child to help you make a list of incentives he can earn with a job well done. Have some small rewards earnable in a few hours and larger ones for feats that take more time. Use special activities and time alone with you rather than stuff that money can buy.

Limit your child's television time to one hour a day. Avoid placing the TV set or the computer in his bedroom. Instead, place them in a central spot in your home where you can monitor the programming and the Internet activity. Join your child often enough so that you view at least once each show that he sees routinely. Remember that television encourages physical inactivity, promotes passivity in growing brains, accustoms children to violence, and reduces the time available for developing new interests and abilities.

Have family dinners as often as possible--ideally every night. Give everyone a chance to talk. What was good about the day just past? What wasn't so hot?

Invite people to share news and to ask each other questions. Special rituals allow you to build family customs, which *enhance* your family's identity and will be remembered by your children when they start families of their own.

Invite family members to a weekly get-together where they can talk about matters of concern and also have fun. Plan for discussion of family issues, the positive as well as the negative—upcoming events or vacation plans as well as disputes between siblings and infractions of the rules. Invite the participants in this family hour to brainstorm solutions to shared problems (bathroom traffic jams, for example) and to thank each other for help and support given during the week.

Make time for a game or family project. Board games are better than most computer games because they promote face-to-face interaction and conversation. You can also involve everyone in building a pizza, playing charades, making a video, updating a family scrapbook, or creating a family version of Trivial Pursuit.

Model your values. Children learn life's most important lessons by watching you, a superstar in the drama of their lives. Don't worry about teaching them what feels good. Instead, consider what you are showing them about how to handle grief, loss, fear, sadness, and anger.

The best way to teach your kids that it is okay to make mistakes is by acknowledging yours. Don't miss an opportunity to tell your child, "You were right and I was wrong." Show her how not just to apologize but to listen, admit wrongdoing, make amends, and promise to act differently in the future. How you live your own life will teach your child far more than what you tell her to do.

Avoid shielding your child from developmentally appropriate challenges. If you are too quick to provide answers, he will question his own problem-solving abilities. Encourage him to ask for help when he needs it, and then wait until he does. When something goes wrong, invite him to look for the clue that will make the next attempt more successful.

Offer praise and encouragement daily. Keep your love for your child separate from your exasperation with his behavior. Your positive regard will be a major determinant of his self-esteem and his ability to take healthy risks later in life.

Lay the foundation for open communication. Listen without interrupting when your child talks about her school day. Reflect back the important points to show that you understood. Ask questions without judging the answer. Connect with the underlying feelings: "Did you feel angry when that happened?" When she is upset, help her learn about herself: "What do you think would make you feel better right now?"

When things go wrong, speak in a normal voice, without yelling. Avoid scolding or lecturing. Expect to be heard the first time. Use humor to defuse tension. When in doubt, think back to your own childhood. Remember how it felt to have no money and no power? Let your child know that you were her age once.

Promote exploration and discovery. The more children learn about themselves and their environment, the safer they feel and the more secure. Join your child in exploring your neighborhood, the natural world, and the communities to which you belong.

Catch frogs. Go to church. Listen to different kinds of music. Play games. Join groups. Visit museums. Try different sports. Develop a few hobbies--collect something! Experiment with cooking, gardening, and art. Engage as a family in some volunteer activity that benefits other people. Encourage your child to help someone younger acquire skills he has already mastered.

Throughout her lifetime your child will draw on the template created by early experiences. Positive learning will increase her confidence in herself and will deepen the vision of parenthood and community that she will pass on to your grandchildren. The values you teach are your legacy.

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