

STUDY SKILLS TO SUPPORT LEARNING: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Improving study skills can improve test scores and grades. Students of all ages and abilities, even those with disabilities, benefit from improved study skills.

Students with good study skills learn independently. They learn how to focus on important information, tie new information to previously learned information, space learning sessions over different days, and spend more than one session learning new material. They learn how to use different senses (sight, hearing, writing) when learning material, review corrected homework and tests, plan learning strategies and keep track of success, and work to improve listening and reading comprehension.

To help children improve study skills, we must first develop their motivation and understanding that their efforts affect success. Second, we must develop their ability to plan and check their own learning. Third, we must teach them study strategies so that they can choose the best approach to each subject and teacher style.

Motivating Learning

Help children understand that they have control over their academic success. Success in school is not simply luck. Nor does it depend entirely on your help or in good teachers. Success in school is a result of effective studying. Have your children keep track of the time they spend studying and the resulting grades. Encourage them to remind themselves, "I can do it if I try!" And remember that your support is one important key to developing independent, effective learners.

Help children understand that learning is important. Children need help to see how reading, math, science, and social studies are important in their lives. Point out examples of how what is taught at school helps us solve problems and enjoy activities outside of school. Be sure your children know that you think learning is important.

Help children develop goals and plans for studying. A long-term goal might be going to college or having a certain career. A short-term goal might be to obtain a score of 80% on a math test or to be able to read a desired book. Remind your children that the best goals are about learning rather than grades— children learn this best when you as a parent consistently send this message.

Help children recognize that they enjoy learning. Learning is a natural activity. Most of us can identify a topic we like to learn about—lives of celebrities, a hobby, sports, or an academic subject such as computers or astronomy. We can help our children link learning about their favorite topic to their schoolwork. Although they may dislike some of the practice exercises of their homework, children often enjoy

related games, projects, and activities that help them use what they are learning. When your child dislikes a subject or a particular assignment, help make it less frustrating by alternating a half hour of studying with a half hour of a favorite activity, or setting a small goal such as completing five math problems and then taking a break.

Help children reduce anxiety about schoolwork. Anxiety affects more than one third of all students and can significantly interfere with learning and school success. Good study skills help reduce anxiety. Remember that you can help your child reduce anxiety through physical exercise, relaxation, slow breathing, positive thinking, or meditation. If your child is worried about poor grades or not completing homework, talk it over with your child and, as needed, to his or her teachers to determine if it is the difficulty level, the amount of work, or other factors that are causing stress.

Helping Children Plan

Help children plan and review their learning. Children in upper elementary and secondary school can be taught these four steps:

1. **Commit** to a study plan. Make note of where, when, and how they will study or complete a homework assignment.
2. **After studying**, have them ask themselves: How did I know when I had studied enough? How did I check my studying? How did I keep myself motivated? How much time did I plan to study today? How much time did I really spend studying? Do I feel prepared for class? Do I feel prepared for the test? What grade do I expect to get? Did I follow my plan? How did I change my plan? What changes in my study plan will I make for the future?
3. **Compare** the study plan and answers to the above questions with grades. Determine which strategies are most and least successful.
4. **Change** the next study plan.

Provide an atmosphere conducive to learning. Make homework completion a positive experience. At home, agree on a daily, quiet study hour that takes into consideration activities, chores, and favorite TV shows. Your child's ability to concentrate at different times of day should also be considered: some children focus best in the early morning, some after supper, and others after school. Ideally, during the study hour the television and other distractions are turned off, phone calls are ignored, and the entire family studies, reads, or completes paperwork.

Encourage collaboration between home and school. Teachers need to communicate with you about problems with homework, and you need to be available to help with homework and organization. Let your child's teachers know when excessive time is being spent on homework, particularly by students with disabilities, so that assignments can be modified.

Help children find additional sources for homework support. Younger students can participate in supervised study periods at after-school daycare programs. Most secondary schools have after-school help provided by teachers. Sometimes a neighbor or another family member can help. Some communities have a homework hotline. Some students prefer to ask a teacher for help before school, after school, or via e-mail. Often it is helpful for children to have study buddies, friends who telephone or e-mail one another to talk through assignments. Study buddies and study groups are particularly helpful in advanced math and science.

Help children determine their best learning style and location.

For many children the ideal location is a quiet bedroom with a desk. Others find working in a bedroom difficult because they are tempted by distractions or because they are lonely and study better at the kitchen table or another location. Others prefer working in the public library.

Teaching Children Effective Study Strategies

Help children improve organization. At home, have a special place to keep school materials. Have supplies on hand, including binders, notebooks, paper, pencils, pens, assignment books, erasers, dictionaries, calculator, ruler, hole punch, tape, glue, reference books, and relevant software if using the computer.

Encourage your child to keep study areas neat enough to locate necessary materials quickly.

Encourage the use of an assignment book and write all assignments into the book daily and check them off when completed. Your child should also break down long-term assignments into smaller parts and write each part into the assignment book. Many children also find it helpful to put other commitments into the assignment book as well, including music lessons, sports, and jobs.

Encourage your child to estimate how long it will take to complete each assignment and plan the schedule accordingly.

Help children improve listening skills. Check understanding by having your child state what he or she is to do in his or her own words. Have younger children circle action words in directions and cross off upon completion. Does your child seem to have trouble listening because of hearing problems? Some children's hearing will be affected by colds, ear infections, or allergies. If you suspect any hearing problems, it may be a good idea to consult your family physician or talk to your school nurse about a hearing screening.

Help your child practice good reading skills by making sure your child is paying attention if you are reading to them. Help your child connect what he or she is reading or hearing to his or her own life, and give frequent examples. Use visual aids. For instance, if your child is studying geography, have maps available and make use of magazine or newspaper pictures. Help your child distinguish

important from unimportant information, and ask questions such as, "What do you think is the most important thing you learned about the Declaration of Independence?" Frequently check to be sure your child understands what is read, and ask questions and ask your child to retell what was just read in his or her own words.

Help children improve reading skills. Encourage your child to pre-read before actually reading an assignment. For non-fiction, point out non-text cues (title, author, publication date, headings and subheadings, picture, graphs, charts), and then have your child read the introduction, preface, and conclusion, and skim the main text. For fiction, your child can pre-read by reading the front cover, back cover, and introduction, and skimming the first part of the story to become familiar with the setting, character, and plot.

You can help your child with reading assignments by using the following questions: "What is the assignment? What am I supposed to learn? What are the main ideas?" After each page or each section of the assignment, check for "clicks" (understanding) and "clunks" (non-understanding). Then have your child go back and re-read to correct the "clunks."

When your child has difficulty with a reading assignment,, remind your child to slow down, re-read, or look up unfamiliar material in a dictionary or encyclopaedia. You can also use your public library or online sites to find material on the same topic that might be easier to read. If you are not sure if your child understands what he or she has read, have your child orally describe an already-read chapter or story, and explain the pictures, graphs, and reading material. If reading seems to be an ongoing struggle, talk to your child's teacher to find out what other sources of help might be available at school.

Help your child to minimize distractions when reading by taking notes, outlining, and mapping. Your child can write down questions while reading or relate something familiar to the topic and can predict what will come next or visualize the material (making a mental movie) or make timelines or flow-charts to track events. Schedule brief breaks.

Help children improve math and science skills. Encourage your child to use on a daily basis what is learned in math and science. Point out activities that require knowledge of math and science, such as measurements in cooking or repairs around the house or predicting changes in the weather. Help your child understand why quick recall of math facts is helpful, such as in making change, estimating quantity, or calculating time. Encourage your child to review corrected math and science homework and check to see if all errors are understood. There are many games and activities available that reinforce the math and science children learn at school and provide opportunities to practice applying new skills.

Help children improve reporting skills. Help your child find information using book, maps, graphics, newspapers, dictionaries, libraries, the Internet, and other reference tools. At the public library, help your child learn to use the computer catalogue and locate material.

Encourage the use of outlines or maps to organize papers before writing and to review first drafts with you or a classmate. Encourage the checking over of assignments after completion for accuracy and appearance.

Help your child become skilled in using the computer keyboard and in effective word processing skills. These include editing, cutting/pasting, using spelling and grammar checkers, using electronic dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and determining which of the suggestions generated by a spelling checker are correct. Encourage practice through letter or story writing.

Help children improve test-taking habits. Help your child use good test-taking strategies. These include spreading out studying rather than cramming at the last minute, getting plenty of rest before a big test, coming to the exam with everything needed, reviewing the directions and sample items carefully, skimming through the entire test to see what will be expected, reading each question carefully, outlining the important points to be covered before responding to an essay question, attempting to answer every question, writing neatly, and re-checking work.

Summary

Remember, developing good study habits early will give your child a strong foundation for academic success throughout school. There are many simple approaches that parents can use to help motivate children to study, to help them plan and organize their work, and to teach them specific strategies that will enhance their school performance.