

## Creating a Home Environment for Learning

As a parent, you share responsibility with the school for your child's learning and school success. What goes on in your home affects how prepared and ready your child will be to learn in school. This paper provides some ideas for how you can send your child to school on time and ready and prepared to learn.



### SENDING YOUR CHILD TO SCHOOL ON TIME

Your child has the best chance of learning if he has regular school attendance and gets to school on time each day. Missing valuable instruction time can decrease learning. Research has shown that missing too much school was one of three things that explained most of the differences in students' 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores. Students who miss too much school do not do as well as students who attend school regularly. Below are some ideas for reducing tardiness and absences.

- Make sure you and your child understand your school's policy on tardiness and absences. This policy often has important information on attendance requirements and information on how to handle tardiness and absences.
- Help your child get to the bus stop or school on time each school day. Arrange your family life to allow for plenty of time to get ready for school.
- Keep unexcused absences to a minimum. Your school policy should explain the difference between an excused and unexcused absence.
- If possible, schedule appointments to occur after school. If you must schedule an appointment during the school day, try not to schedule it during times of reading, math, or writing instruction.
- Talk with the teacher about providing a list of assignments for your child to complete during or after absences.

### SENDING YOUR CHILD TO SCHOOL READY TO LEARN

You can do some things in the home to send your child to school ready to learn. Your child will pay attention and learn best if she comes to school in a good physical and mental state. Regular physical activity, enough sleep, and good nutrition are important for maintaining a good physical state. A child with a good mental state is calm, happy, motivated, and well behaved. Below are six ways you can send your child to school physically and mentally ready to learn.



#### **Sending your child to school physically fit**

Regular physical activity has many positive benefits for children. Regular activity promotes health and fitness, improves sleep, and reduces stress. You play an important role in providing your child with opportunities for physical activity.

Children and teens should do at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day.<sup>1</sup> Your child can get this hour in many ways. Any episode of activity, however brief, can count toward this hour. You can replace inactivity with activity in your daily life, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator or parking further from an entrance and walking. Recess and free-play time can count toward this hour. Your child can also participate in a formal program, such as sports, dance, or cheerleading.

Three types of physical activity are important for your child: at least moderately intense activity (aerobic), muscle-strengthening activity, and bone-strengthening activity. Most of your child's 60 minutes of daily activity should be either of moderate- or vigorous-intensity. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is sitting and 10 is the highest level of effort, moderate-intensity is a 5 or 6. In moderately intense activity, the heart beats faster and breathing is heavier than normal. A fast walk is an example of a moderately intense activity. Vigorous activity is a 7 or 8 on the scale. In vigorous activity, the child will feel his heart beat much faster than normal and breathe much harder than normal. Running is an example of vigorous activity. It is important that your child do some vigorous activity at least 3 days a week. Vigorous activity improves fitness.

*Physical Activity Guidelines for Children*

- At least 60 minutes per day
- Most of the hour should be at least moderate-intensity aerobic
- Some vigorous-intensity aerobic, muscle-strengthening, and bone-strengthening activities at least three times per week

Muscle-strengthening activities are important for good fitness and can include any activity that makes muscles do more work than usual. Children can get this type of activity through free play, such as playing on a playground, climbing trees, and playing tug-of-war. Children do not need a formal program, such as lifting weights; however, teens can strengthen their muscles through formal programs, such as push-ups, sit-ups, or lifting weights. It is important that your child do some muscle-strengthening activities at least 3 days a week.

Any activity that produces a force on the bones improves bone growth and strength. Bone-strengthening activities commonly involve impact with the ground, such as running, hopscotch, and jumping rope. Part of your child's 60 minutes of daily activity should include bone-strengthening activities at least 3 days a week.

**Examples of different types of physical activity for children**

<i>Moderate-Intensity Aerobic</i>	<i>Vigorous-Intensity Aerobic</i>	<i>Muscle-Strengthening</i>	<i>Bone-Strengthening</i>
Hiking Skateboarding Rollerblading Riding a bike Fast walk	Game involving running (chasing, tag) Riding a bike fast Running Sports that involve running, swimming, or fast movement	Tug-of-war Climbing trees Swinging or climbing on a jungle gym	Hopscotch Jumping rope Hopping, skipping, jumping Running Sports that involve running

**Sending your child to school well-rested**

A good night sleep will help your child pay attention and learn better in school. Generally, children need more sleep than adults need (see table at right<sup>2</sup>). If your child looks tired during the day, falls asleep in class or

*How much sleep do we need?*

Preschool:	11-13	hours
Children:	9-11	hours
Teens:	9	hours
Adults:	7-8	hours

<sup>1</sup> 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans; Office of Disease Prevention & Health Promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

after school, or is irritable, he may have a sleep problem. If you think your child has a sleep problem, you should talk with his doctor.

Help your child get a good night sleep by following a regular bedtime routine. At least 30 minutes before bedtime, have your child choose a calm activity to help him "wind down," such as quiet play or reading. During this time, have him avoid television, video games, computers, telephones, and physical activity. Dimming the lights in the house will signal your child's brain that it is night and time for sleep. Follow a bedtime routine, such as a light snack, a bath, brushing teeth, going to the bathroom, putting on pajamas. Many parents read a story to their young child at bedtime. Older children can read to their parents or on their own.

### **Sending your child to school well-fed**

The brain and body need fuel to work best. It will be hard for your child to pay attention if she is hungry. Your goal should be to arrange for your child to get three balanced meals each day. Having meals together can be very good for family life, when it includes pleasant conversation. Below are some recommendations<sup>3</sup> for a good diet.

- Eat about two cups of fruit each day; chose a variety of fruits
- Eat two and one half cups of vegetables each day; select from all five vegetable groups - dark green, orange, legumes (peas, beans, peanuts), starchy vegetables (corn, potatoes), and other vegetables
- Eat six or more ounces of grain products per day (a slice of bread or cup of dry cereal equals about 1.5 ounces); at least half the grain should come from whole grain. When choosing grain foods, look for the words "whole" or "whole grain" before the grain's name on the ingredient list on the food label. The whole grain should be the first ingredient listed (see example at right).
- Drink milk; children between the ages of two and eight should consume two cups per day of low-fat milk or milk products; children nine years of age and older should consume 3 cups per day.

**INGREDIENTS:** WHOLE GRAIN ROLLED OATS, BROWN SUGAR, WHOLE GRAIN ROLLED WHEAT, RAISINS, VEGETABLE OIL (PARTIALLY HYDRONATED COTTONSEED AND/OR SOYBEAN OIL), ALMONDS, DRIED UNSWEETENED COCONUT, NONFAT MILK, HONEY, GLYCERIN, NATURAL FLAVOR

**CONTAINS:** WHEAT, ALMONDS, MILK, SOY.

### **Sending your child to school calm and happy**

A stable and loving family environment helps children be happy and calm. Changes and certain events can create stress for children. Stress can lead to worry, anxiety, unhappiness, and behavior problems. Research has shown that high levels of stress can worsen children's memory. Prolonged stress can have a negative effect on a child's physical and mental health.

All families will face different types of life stressors at different times, such as busyness, financial stress, illness, changing residences, or conflict. If you have some of this type of stress in your family, you may need to do some things to reduce or cope with the stress. Your goal should be to provide a stable home environment.

Stress that involves some type of loss, such as the death of a family member, parental divorce, or a traumatic event, will require the family to adjust to the changes. In these situations, family members

<sup>3</sup> USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005

will go through a normal grieving process. For children, this can include behavioral problems or feelings of anger, unhappiness, and anxiety. If your child is experiencing this type of stress, he will need time and support in order to reach a level of adjustment and for his behavior and emotions to improve. Friends and family are important sources of help and encouragement during these times. Sometimes counseling with a mental health therapist can help with adjusting to this type of stress.

Some severe stressors can destroy family life, such as violence within the home, child abuse, or substance abuse. If these problems are happening in your family, you need to deal with them directly. Your family life will never be normal and healthy until you do. Mental health therapy is recommended for these types of severe family stress. Your family doctor can give you a referral for therapy.

## **Sending your child to school motivated**

To do well in school, your child needs to be motivated. The beliefs your child has about her abilities and the value she places on schoolwork are important parts of motivation. What you say and do with your child has a powerful effect on her beliefs and values. Below are some ideas for increasing your child's motivation to learn.

- *Show interest.* One simple way to communicate that school and learning are important is to show interest in how your child is doing at school. Every school day, ask her about her school day, homework, tests, and classroom participation.
- *Set and communicate high expectations.* What you expect from your child is an important part of motivation. Your child will come to believe what you believe about his school, learning and work. You can communicate that you expect him to participate in class, do some work at home each day, put forth effort, stick with his work, ask for help if needed, complete his work, and use good study habits. You can communicate that you believe he can be successful if he does these things. Encouragement and praise are clear ways of expressing your expectations.
- *Set Goals.* Goals can be a powerful way of changing behavior. Progress toward and accomplishment of goals can be a source of satisfaction and motivation. The most motivating goals are short term, specific, and somewhat challenging, that is, not too hard and not too easy.
- *Use rewards when motivation is low.* Rewards can be important to use when natural, internal motivation is low. You can use rewards for reaching short-term goals. Praise and verbal attention is rewarding to children. You can also use physical rewards and privileges to reinforce effort and hard work.

### *Examples of Encouragement and Praise*

- "I know that assignment is tough, hang in there. I know you can do it!"
- "When it is time to study, work hard!"
- "Great job, I like how you worked really hard on that paper!"

## **Sending your child to school well-behaved**

In order for your child to contribute to a positive learning environment at school, she needs to go to school with qualities that are valued by your family, school and community. These qualities can include honesty, respect, caring about others, following teacher directions and school rules, taking responsibility for her actions, and making good choices. You can teach your child these qualities through careful guidance and by example. Below are some ideas for helping your child develop these qualities.

- *Teach your child to mind your direct requests.* Children need to learn to mind authority figures. A child who has trouble minding at home may also have trouble minding at school. The average child minds parent commands about 60 percent to 80 percent of the time. If your child is minding your direct commands less than 60 percent of the time, you may need to get some information and help. Recommendations on how to teach children to mind better are available through written material, videos, and counseling.
- *Establish and enforce rules.* Every home needs a reasonable set of rules. You should make these rules clear to your child and review them frequently. Once the rules are set, it is important to frequently catch your child following the rules and praise him. If a rule is broken, you can use mild, age-appropriate discipline.
- *Have your child help with chores.* A great way to teach responsibility is to develop a reasonable, regular schedule of chores for your child to do around the house. Younger children can help set the table, take out the trash, or put away their toys and clothes. Older children can help prepare meals, do the dishes, and clean areas of the house. Using a visible chart or checklist is a good way to keep track of chores.
- *Teach your child to be respectful of others.* You can teach your child respectful behavior by providing her with different examples of respectful behavior, having her practice the behaviors, reminding her to do the behaviors, and praising her when she is respectful.

Children can learn respectful behavior by watching you. You can model respectful behavior by showing interest in others, listening, talking in a pleasant tone of voice, spending time with your child, and sending clear messages of love.

#### *Examples of Respectful Behavior*

- Talking in a nice tone of voice
- Apologizing when wrong
- Saying please, thank you, and excuse me
- Allowing others privacy
- Stopping immediately if someone says "Please Stop"

## **SENDING YOUR CHILD TO SCHOOL PREPARED TO LEARN**

In addition to being physically and mentally ready to learn, your child needs to be prepared to learn by having good reading and work skills. Below are some ideas for providing your child with structure for and practice in reading and home study skills.

### **Develop daily family routines**

Regular family routines will help prepare your child for school. Routines can help by making life more predictable and enjoyable. Family routines can include regular times for doing homework, doing chores, eating meals together, and going to bed. Eating a meal together as a family and tucking your child into bed every night provide good opportunities to talk with your child.

Making time for daily homework, studying, and organizing are important family routines. You can set the expectation that your child will have regular study times at home. Even when he has no assigned homework, he can study for tests, practice work in weak areas, read, and organize. Although the amount of study time required will differ across children, grades, and schools, a good rule of thumb is 10 minutes per grade. For example, a child in the 5th grade should be spending an average of about 50 minutes per day in home study.

## Limit “screen time”

American children spend an average of 4 hours each day in front of the television. This rate will equal 22,000 hours of TV by age 18, more time than will be spent in the classroom. Research has shown that children who watch more than 10 hours of TV a week, or more than 2 hours per day, learn less than children who watch less TV. If your child is spending too much time watching TV, he will not have time to do other important activities, like reading, playing, exercising, talking, doing homework, or doing a hobby. Your child needs to spend time doing these things in order to learn and grow as a person. Other types of “screen time,” such as video games or computers, can also interfere with these important activities.

Surveys of parents show that most parents want to limit their children’s TV viewing; however, this can be difficult. Below are some ideas for managing screen time.

- Limit your child to no more than about 2 hours of “screen time” per day
- Provide alternatives to TV, video games, and computers, such as books, kids' magazines, toys, puzzles, board games, and trips to the library or park
- Do not have a TV or computer in your child’s room.
- Turn off the TV during meals.
- Do not allow your child to watch TV while doing homework.
- Use screen time as a privilege for your child completing his chores and homework.
- Help your child select programs to watch. Many television programs show scenes of violence and sex that will not be right for children. Some shows may promote values that are different from your own. Help your child select programs that are more wholesome and educational.
- Watch programs with your child. The program may provide you with a chance to talk with your child about important topics.

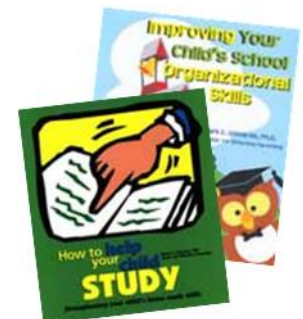
## Read each day

One of the most important activities your child can do at home is read each day. You can help your child improve her reading skills by reading to her and listening to her read. Research shows that reading at least 30 minutes a day helps children become strong readers.

You can schedule reading time as part of your family routine. At or just before bedtime is a good time to read. Getting your child a library card and making frequent trips to the library will help you supply a variety of reading materials to your child. You can help your child find books and magazines related to her interests and hobbies. She needs to learn that reading can be enjoyable.

## Teach your child the skills to succeed

In order to learn, get good grades, and succeed in school, your child will need to use good work habits. You play an important role in helping your child to use good work habits. You can use a four-step process to teach your child good work and study habits.



- *Set and communicate high expectations* about your child's work and study habits
- *Teach your child specific organization and study methods.* You can get some good information about effective study and organizational skills and become familiar with them before you teach them to your child. You should expect to spend most of the school year working with your child each night, showing him how to use the skills.
- *Monitor your child's use of the skills.* You should frequently remind your child to use the skills and watch that she uses them. You should closely monitor your child's use of the skills until they become a habit. You will always need to stay involved with your child's education; however, you can expect to spend less time as she develops her skills.
- *Reward your child for using the skills.* You can increase motivation and strengthen your child's work habits by rewarding him when he uses the methods. Make a special effort to give your child frequent praise for the effort he puts into his home study time. Praise him immediately after you see him use a skill correctly. You can use tangible rewards or privileges to increase his motivation to use good work habits. Provide him with a small, but meaningful reward or privilege each day for using the skills. In addition, you can add up the good days and provide a larger weekly reward for meeting some set goal. You should try to avoid criticism, punishment, and conflict in your efforts to teach your child to use the work skills.

It is important for you to share responsibility with the school for your child's learning and school success. Creating a home environment for learning will help you send your child to school on time and ready and prepared to learn.

## **SOME ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Sleep**

Brain Basics: Understanding Sleep, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke:  
[http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/brain\\_basics/understanding\\_sleep.htm](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/brain_basics/understanding_sleep.htm)

Sleep Better! A guide to improving sleep for children with special needs by V. Mark Durand (1998; Brookes Publishing Co.) (Book)

### **Nutrition**

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005:  
<http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/default.htm>

### **Exercise**

2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans:  
<http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/guidelines/default.aspx>

### **Family Stress**

The Center for Effective Parenting has additional information on managing stress  
<http://parenting-ed.org/parent-handouts-sec3.asp>

## Motivation

Increasing Your Child's Motivation to Learn, Center for Effective Parenting:

<http://www.parenting-ed.org/handout3/Parental%20Involvement/Motivation%20Handout.pdf>

## Behavior

Information on child and adolescent behavior, Center for Effective Parenting:

<http://parenting-ed.org/parent-handouts-sec3.asp>

## Study and Work Skills

Information on home study skills, Center for Effective Parenting:

<http://parenting-ed.org/parent-handouts-sec1.asp>

- Homework: How to Motivate Your Child
- Strengthening Your Child's Home Study Skills
- Improving Your Child's School Organizational Skills



*AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting*

*Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580*

*NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166*

*For additional resources, visit our website:*

**[www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org)**

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