

The Home-School Connection

Children benefit tremendously when you help them bridge their two most important worlds.

By Polly Greenberg

As a parent, you are the major provider of your child's education from birth through adolescence. You guide the development of her character and mental health and help form the foundation from which she'll develop lifelong attitudes and interests. And because your home is the primary environment in which your child's potential and personality will take shape, it's important to make sure that you create a positive, open atmosphere that will not only support what goes on in the classroom, but will also instill the desire to learn. It is through your love and encouragement that your kids will become motivated — first to please you, and then to please themselves. This leads to self-confidence, curiosity, the enjoyment of mastering new tasks, and other healthy attitudes, all of which contribute to successful learning.

But unless you are home-schooling, you will not be the one teaching your child science or geography. And while it's true that all of the facts, skills, and concepts your children learn at school are influenced by what you do at home, your child's education is equally impacted by the relationships you form with her teachers. **Building an effective relationship with the teacher is a critical task**, and, like you, every teacher wants to achieve this goal. As with any relationship, mutual respect, the ability to listen, and lots of communication form the foundation.

When parents and teachers work well together, everyone benefits. Parents and teachers can provide each other with unique insight and different perspectives about the same child, culminating in a more complete understanding of that child, her abilities, strengths, and challenges. The teacher will know much more about the curriculum and the school culture, while you know more about your child's personality, tendencies, and family life. A successful parent-teacher partnership also shows a child that an entire team of adults is on her side.

Why What You Do at Home Is So Important at School

A positive relationship with your child is more important to her school career than your constant presence in the classroom. Because young children identify strongly with you, your attitudes, values, and innermost feelings are contagious. They become embedded in your child's mind at the deepest levels.

If your own experience with school was miserable, you might feel anxious about your child's school experiences. Your child will sense this, and it could hamper her ability to throw herself wholeheartedly into learning. She may feel disloyal if she allows herself to like school and work hard, even if your words are telling her to do so.

For your child's sake you'll need to put the past behind you and "start over," assuming that your child's teachers, school, and overall experience will be good and happy. Even if you didn't like school, the best way to help your child is to endorse her experience: Get involved, be positive, and trust her teachers. She will get the message: "School is important; I want you to engage fully."

Make Quality Time for Your Child

It might sound obvious, but today, parents' schedules are full to overflowing. The good news is that there are easy ways to enjoy time with your child that also support learning. You can be available during play dates, snuggle on the sofa while watching a good video together, take a nature walk in the park, make appreciative comments from time to time as your child plays, cook something yummy together, or just hang out and chat. All these things support your child's deep belief that you know her, care about her, and would never expect her to do something that isn't possible — such as learn in school.

Become an Active Partner in Learning

Most educators believe in parent participation in children's education, but "participation" means different things to different teachers. To some, it might mean helping children with homework, returning notes and sending things in on time, and coming to a conference when notified to do so. But it should mean much more. Work with the teacher to find out some ways you can contribute to the classroom, but always be sure to do it within the guidelines she'll provide for you. By the same token, you have valuable insight about your child — no one knows her better than you — so it's important to take initiative and communicate that knowledge to the teacher throughout the school

year.

First, be sure to **provide details about your child's home life** to your teacher. The most effective teachers have a fairly complete understanding of each child in their class. You can help by telling her about your child's family life, including any recent changes (divorce, a death in the family, or illness, for example), important traditions or rituals, languages spoken at home, and other significant details unique to your child.

Ask about ways to **share your culture** — food, music, photos, and traditions — with the class. Not only will this help strengthen your child's self-esteem, it will also enrich the learning experience for the entire class and foster an appreciation of diversity. Between the ages of 3 and 8, kids are beginning to deal with a world bigger than the family, and they become keenly aware of every difference between themselves and their peers.

Plan to **have a family discussion each week**. Try to pick a topic that emerges from your child's experiences at school. The more you familiarize yourself with the daily routines and activities at preschool, the more you'll be able to encourage this type of conversation. You can even extend the idea into an art project or create a family "book club" where everyone reads something relating to this theme.

Get the entire family involved. As often as possible, try to participate in field trips and classroom events such as story parties, art shows, and class celebrations. Include grandparents, siblings, caregivers, and family friends. Your child will be delighted.

For parents and teachers alike, the goal is to play active roles in your child's life and to work towards forming a real bond. The child's best interest is always served when she has lots of people rooting for her and all the pieces of her life fit together. A strong home-school connection will set the stage for a child who will grow up with a love for learning.

About the Author

Polly Greenberg has been a child/parent/staff development specialist for almost 50 years. She has worked for the U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the War on Poverty, and the NAEYC.