

# Questions

## Parents Ask



About Schools





**U.S. Department of Education**  
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Secretary

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# Introduction

Would you like to know more about how you can help your child succeed in school? This publication answers questions frequently asked by parents of elementary and middle-school-aged children who—like you—want to help their children learn and succeed. It suggests effective ways you can support your child's education.

As a parent or caregiver, you play an important role in your child's academic achievement. By taking steps to get involved in your child's education, you can bridge the gap between home and school to ensure your child's success in learning and in life.

The research-based tips in this publication provide both practical guidance and valuable information about a range of topics, including:

- ★ preparing your child for school;
- ★ knowing what to expect from your child's kindergarten teacher;
- ★ monitoring school work;
- ★ working with schools and teachers effectively;
- ★ helping your child with reading and homework; and
- ★ ensuring that your child's school is safe and drug-free.

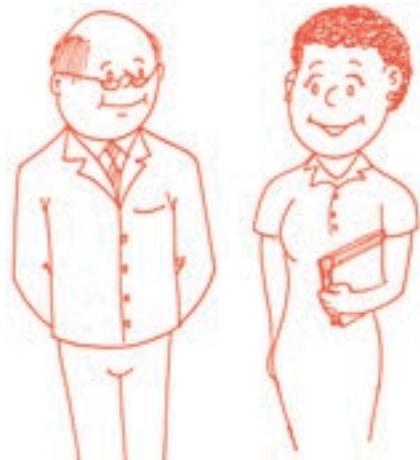
We hope that you will find the information in this booklet helpful, as you get involved and stay involved in your child's education and help prepare her for school success and for a rewarding life of continuous learning.



# Getting Ready for School

## What should I do before my child starts school?

- ★ Before the school year begins, find out as much as you can about the school your child will attend. Schools—even schools in the same district—can differ greatly. Don't rely only on information about a school from other parents—their child might have different needs and expectations from a school than yours.
- ★ Ask the school principal for a school handbook. This will answer many questions that will arise over the year. If your school doesn't have a handbook, ask the principal and teachers questions such as the following:



- ★ What teaching methods and materials are used? Are the methods used to teach reading and math based on scientific evidence about what works best? Are science and social studies materials up to date?
- ★ How much time is spent on each subject such as reading, math, science and history?
- ★ How does the school measure student progress? What tests does it use?
- ★ Does the school meet state standards and guidelines?
- ★ Are teachers highly qualified? Do they meet state certification requirements?

- ★ For children beginning kindergarten, ask: What areas are emphasized in the kindergarten program? How focused is it on academic instruction?
- ★ If you have not seen it, ask to look at the school's report card. These report cards show how your school compares to others in the district and indicate how well it is succeeding.

- ★ Find out if the school has a Web site and, if so, get the address. School Web sites can provide you with ready access to all kinds of information—schedules of events, names of people to contact, rules and regulations, and so forth.
- ★ Talk with your child about school. Let her know that you think school and learning are important.

Children develop positive attitudes toward school when they see that their parents and families value education.

## What will my child's kindergarten teacher expect of my child?

- ★ Although teachers' expectations vary, here are some social skills and behaviors generally expected of children entering kindergarten:
  - ★ Children should be able to follow school and classroom rules.
  - ★ Children should be able to listen attentively to and follow instructions.
  - ★ Children should be able to concentrate on and finish a task.
  - ★ Children should show self-control.
  - ★ Children should respect the property of others, share and take turns.
  - ★ Children should do as much for themselves as possible, such as taking care of their personal belongings, going to the toilet, washing their hands and taking care of and putting away materials.



Kindergarten programs with clear expectations and goals are effective in helping children gain the knowledge and skills they need for future learning and school success.

★ The academic skills and knowledge expected of beginning kindergarten children will depend on the kind of curriculum offered by the school and on the standards that students are expected to meet by the end of the school year. Here

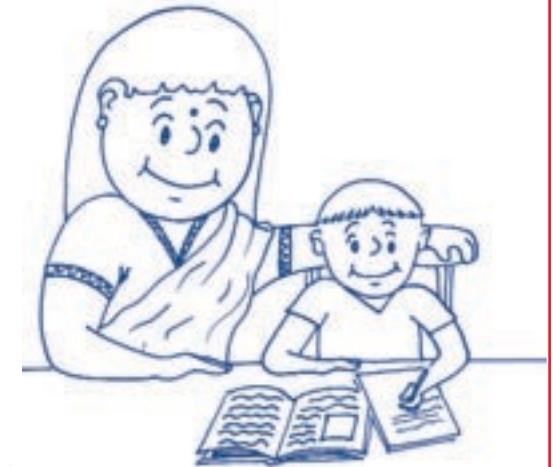
are some achievements that are commonly expected of beginning kindergarten students:

- ★ Children can recognize and name alphabet letters.
- ★ Children can recognize print they often see such as their own name, various logos and signs.
- ★ Children understand that words in books convey meaning, are able to recognize the parts of books, and know that words run from left to right across the page and from top to bottom.
- ★ Children notice and can work with the sounds of spoken language, for example through rhyming, and can recognize when a series of words begin with the same sound.
- ★ Children use spoken language to express their thoughts and ideas, tell a story about an experience and learn about themselves and their environment.
- ★ Children produce circles, lines, scribbles and letters as part of their early writing.
- ★ Children are able to recognize numbers and understand that numbers tell us about quantity, order and measurement.
- ★ Children can recognize, name and manipulate basic shapes and understand that shapes can be transformed into other shapes.
- ★ Children know how to hold and look at a book and are beginning to learn to read.

## Monitoring School Work

What can I do at home to help my child succeed in school?

- ★ Create a home environment that encourages learning and schoolwork. Establish a daily family routine of mealtimes with time for homework, chores and bedtime as well as time for family activities.
- ★ Show your child that the skills he is learning in school are an important part of the things he will do as an adult. Let him see you reading books, newspapers and computer screens; writing reports, letters, e-mails and lists; using math to figure change or to measure for new carpeting; and doing things that require thought and effort.
- ★ Make sure that your home has lots of reading materials that are appropriate for your child. Keep books, magazines and newspapers in the house. You can find many good books and magazines for your child at yard or library sales. Books make good gifts.
- ★ Encourage your child to use the library. Ask the librarian to tell your child about special programs that she might participate in, such as summer reading programs and book clubs and about services such as homework help.
- ★ Limit TV viewing to no more than one hour on a school night. Be aware of the shows your child likes to watch and discuss his choices with him. The same goes for video games.



- ★ Help your child learn to use the Internet properly and effectively.
- ★ Encourage your child to be responsible and to work independently. Taking responsibility and working independently are important qualities for school success.
- ★ Show an interest in what your child does in school. Support her special interests by attending school plays, musical events, science fairs or sporting events.
- ★ Offer praise and encouragement for achievement and improvement.

★ Although school is very important, it doesn't really take up very much of a child's time. In the U.S., the school year averages 180 days; in other nations, the school year can last up to 240 days, and students are often in school more hours per day than are American students. Clearly, the hours and days that a child is not in school are also very important for learning.

### ★ How can I tell how well my child is doing in school?

- ★ Ask your child to show you his school work, and note the grades and any comments made by the teacher.
- ★ Check report cards carefully for subject grades, attendance and conduct. Ask the teacher or school counselor for other kinds of information about your child's performance, such as test scores and teacher observations.



- ★ In the course of the school year, your child may take a variety of standardized tests, including tests for state standards. Your child's scores and other information may be sent home with her or mailed directly to you. Check with your child's teacher about when these tests are given and when to expect results.
- ★ Find out if your child's teacher uses e-mail to communicate with parents. Using e-mail will allow you to send and receive messages at times that are most convenient for you.
- ★ Ask teachers to show you examples of successful work and compare it to your child's work. Listen to the teacher's comments about your child's work and what she needs to do to improve. Plan with the teacher how you can work together to help your child do better work.
- ★ Use homework hotlines, school Web sites, and other dial-in services to get information about school activities or to ask teachers and school personnel questions.
- ★ Attend parent-teacher conferences that are scheduled during the year.

Parents help children succeed by working with teachers and schools to make sure they provide curricula and use teaching methods that are based on strong scientific evidence about what works best in helping children learn.





## How can I get the most out of parent-teacher conferences?

- ★ Set up a conference early in the school year. Let the teacher know that you are interested in your child's education and that you want to be kept informed of his progress. If English is your second language, you may need to make special arrangements, such as including in the conference someone who is bilingual.
- ★ If possible, also arrange to observe the teaching in your child's classroom. Afterward, talk with the teacher about what you saw and how it fits with your hopes for your child and your child's needs.
- ★ Before a conference, write out questions you want to ask and jot down what you want to tell the teacher. Be prepared to take notes during the conference and ask for an explanation if you don't understand something.
- ★ Talk with the teacher about your child's talents, hobbies, study habits and any special sensitivities he might have, such as concerns about weight or speech difficulties.
- ★ Tell the teacher if you think your child needs special help and about any special family situation or event that might affect your child's ability to learn. Mention such things as a new baby, an illness or a recent or an upcoming move.



- ★ Tell the teacher what kind of person you want your child to become and what values are important to you.
- ★ Ask the teacher for specific details about your child's work and progress. If your child has already received some grades, ask how your child is being evaluated.
- ★ Ask about specific things that you can do to help your child. At home, think about what the teacher has said and then follow up. If the teacher has told you that your child needs to improve in certain areas, check back in a few weeks to see how things are going.
- ★ Approach the teacher with a cooperative spirit. If you disagree with the teacher about an issue, don't argue in front of your child. Set up a meeting to talk only about that issue. Before that meeting, plan what you are going to say. Try to be positive and remain calm. Listen carefully. If the teacher's explanation doesn't satisfy you, and you do not think you can make progress by further discussion with the teacher, arrange to talk with the principal or even the school superintendent.

Many teachers say that they don't often receive information from parents about problems at home. Many parents say that they don't know what the school expects from their children—or from them. Sharing information is essential, and both teachers and parents are responsible for making it happen.



# Helping with Reading

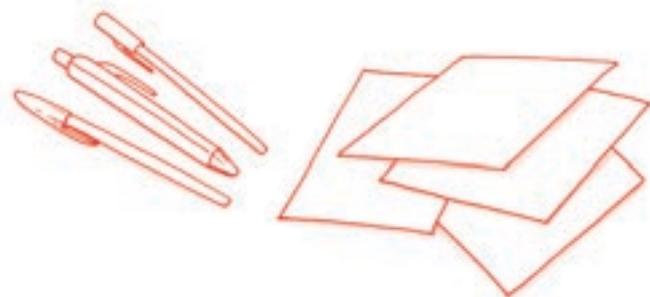
## How can I encourage my child to read?



- ★ Read aloud to your child often. Start reading to your child when he is a baby and keep reading as he grows up. As you read, talk with your child. Encourage him to ask questions and to talk about the story. Ask him to predict what will come next.
- ★ Encourage your child to read on her own. Children who spend at least 30 minutes a day reading for fun develop the skills to be better readers at school.
- ★ Set aside quiet time for family reading. Some families even enjoy

reading aloud to each other, with each family member choosing a book, story, poem or article to read to the others.

- ★ Visit the library often. Begin making weekly trips to the library when your child is very young. See that your child gets his own library card as soon as possible.
- ★ Buy a children's dictionary and start the "let's look it up" habit.
- ★ Make writing materials, such as crayons, pencils and paper, available.



- ★ Ask family members and friends to consider giving your child books and magazine subscriptions as gifts for birthdays or other special occasions. Set aside a special place for your child to keep her own library of books.
- ★ Get help for your child if he has a reading problem. If you think that your child needs extra help, ask his teachers about special services, such as after-school or summer reading programs. Also ask teachers or your local librarian for names of community organizations and local literacy volunteer groups that offer tutoring services.
- ★ If you are uncomfortable with your reading ability, look for family or adult reading programs in your community. Your librarian can help you locate such programs. Friends and relatives also can read to your child, and volunteers are available in many communities to do the same.



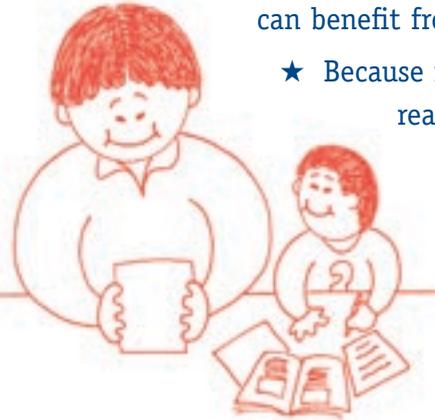
Helping children become—and remain—readers is the single most important thing that parents and families can do to help their children succeed in school and in life.



# Helping with Homework

## How much homework should my child have?

★ The right amount of homework depends on the age and skills of the child. National organizations of parents and teachers suggest that children in kindergarten through second grade can benefit from 10 to 20 minutes of homework each school day. In third through sixth grades, children can benefit from 30 to 60 minutes a school day.



★ Because reading at home is especially important for children, reading assignments can increase the amount of time spent on homework beyond the suggested amounts.

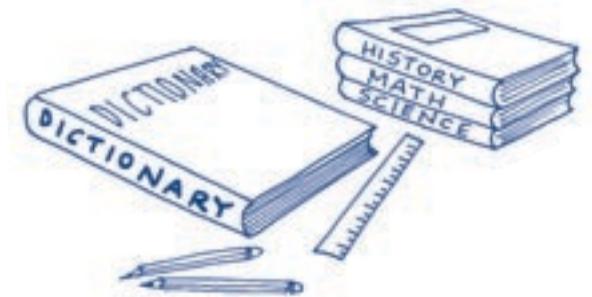
★ Notice how long it takes your child to complete assignments. Observe how he is spending his time—working hard, daydreaming, and getting up and down? This will help you prepare for a talk with the teacher.

★ If you are concerned that your child has either too much or too little homework, talk with his teacher and learn about homework policies and what is expected.

The difference in test scores and grades between children who do more homework and those who do less increases as they move up through the grades.

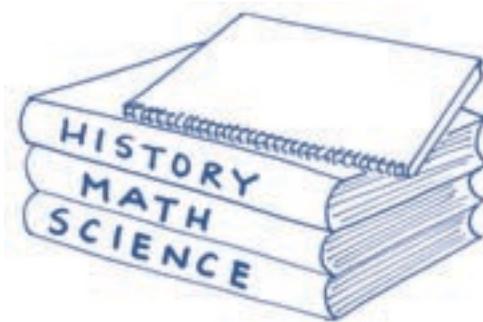
## How should I help my child with homework?

- ★ Talk with your child's teacher about homework policies. Make sure you know the purpose of the homework assignments, how long they should take, and how the teacher wants you to be involved in helping your child complete them.
- ★ Agree with your child on a set time to do homework every day.
- ★ Make sure that your child has a consistent, well-lit, fairly quiet place to study and do homework. Encourage your child to study at a desk or table rather than on the floor or in an easy chair. Discourage distractions such as TV or calls from friends.
- ★ Make sure the materials needed to do assignments—papers, books, pencils, a dictionary, encyclopedia, computer—are available. Show your child how to use reference books or computer programs and appropriate Web sites. Ask your child to let you know if special materials are needed and have them ready in advance.
- ★ Talk with your child about assignments to see that she understands them.
- ★ When your child asks for help, provide guidance, not answers. Doing assignments for your child won't help him understand and use information or help him become confident in his own abilities.
- ★ If you are unable to help your child with a subject, ask for help from a relative. Also see if the school, library or a community or religious organization can provide tutoring or homework help.



- ★ Check to see that your child has done all the work assigned. Sign the homework if your child's school requires this.
- ★ Watch for signs of frustration or failure. Let your child take a short break if she is having trouble keeping her mind on an assignment.
- ★ Reward progress. If your child has been successful in completing an assignment and is working hard, celebrate with a special event—reading a favorite story or playing a game together—to reinforce the positive effort.
- ★ Read the teacher's comments on assignments that are returned. If a problem comes up, arrange to meet with the teacher and work out a plan and a schedule to solve it.

★ Helping with homework can be a way for families to learn more about what their children are learning in school and an opportunity for them to communicate both with their children and with teachers and principals.



### How I can be more actively involved with my child's school?

- ★ Attend back-to-school nights, student exhibitions and other school events. Get to know the teachers and other school personnel. Listen to their plans, know what they hope to accomplish with their students, and understand why they chose these goals.
- ★ Attend parent organization meetings. Voice your hopes and concerns for your child and for the school. Help organize parent-teacher meetings around your interests and those of other parents.
- ★ Offer to tutor students. If you are comfortable with technology, volunteer to be a computer tutor for both students and teachers, or ask if there are other ways that you can help the school to use technology.
- ★ Offer to help in the office or the cafeteria or to chaperone field trips and other outside events.
- ★ Agree to serve on parent and community advisory groups to your school. They may consider everything from school policies and programs to the kinds of parent involvement activities the school plans.
- ★ Work in a parent resource center or help start one. In these school centers, parents may gather informally, borrow materials on parenting and children's schoolwork, and get information about community services.
- ★ If you are unable to volunteer in the school, look for ways to help at home: Call other parents to tell them about school-related activities, edit the school newsletter or make educational materials for teachers. If you are bilingual, help translate school materials or interpret for non-English speaking parents in your school.

When parents get involved in their children's education, the children do better in school, are better behaved, have more positive attitudes toward school and grow up to be more successful in life.

## Creating Safe and Drug-free Schools

What can I do to help make sure that my child's school is safe and drug-free?

- ★ Review school discipline policies with your child. Make sure that she knows what behaviors you expect of her in school. Let her know that you will support teachers in their efforts to enforce the policies.
- ★ Work with the school to develop a plan to handle safety and drug problems, such as drug education and violence prevention programs. Make sure the school has clear consequences for students who break school rules.
- ★ Get to know your child's friends and their parents. Make sure their attitude about drugs is compatible with yours. If not, encourage your child to find new friends.
- ★ Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, states must identify "persistently dangerous schools" and provide families with an alternative to sending their children to schools that are unsafe. If your child attends such a school—or if your child has been a victim of school violence—talk with school officials about your options.



Under the provisions of *No Child Left Behind*, teachers and school personnel can undertake reasonable actions to maintain order and discipline without fear of being sued.

## No Child Left Behind

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). This new law represents his education reform plan and contains the most sweeping changes to the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* since it was enacted in 1965. It changes the federal role in education by asking America's schools to describe their success in terms of what each student accomplishes. The act contains the president's four basic education reform principles:

- ★ Stronger accountability for results;
- ★ Local control and flexibility;
- ★ Expanded options for parents; and
- ★ An emphasis on effective and proven teaching methods.

In sum, this law—in partnership with parents, communities, school leadership and classroom teachers—seeks to ensure that every child in America receives a great education and that no child is left behind.

For more information about *No Child Left Behind*, or to sign up for *The Achiever* newsletter full of announcements, events and news, visit [www.NoChildLeftBehind.gov](http://www.NoChildLeftBehind.gov). For questions about the U.S. Department of Education and its programs, call 1-800-USA-LEARN.



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