



BACK TO SCHOOL FOR OUR KIDS – AND THEIR PARENTS

I always love this time of year. I remember as a young girl marking big red X's on my calendar as each day passed in anticipation of the first day of school. A new school year meant a new grade, new teachers, probably a few new friends, and catching up with all the old ones. A time to check out the latest fashions and also stock up on lots of brand new, shiny school supplies. Of course, it usually wasn't all that long before the "newness" was replaced by too many heavy textbooks, classes dragging on for what felt like days, and tons and tons of homework.

Ask any kid what they like least about school and the answer is almost always "too much homework!" As the mother of two children – one getting ready for her third year in college and the other a high school senior, I've certainly heard my fair share of moans and groans. I've even uttered a few of my own. From food chains and 50 state capitols to algebraic equations, the French and Indian War and thesis papers, many long nights were spent around the kitchen table helping my kids get through their homework.

And according to the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, all of my relearning efforts were well worth it. When parents play a more active role in their child's learning, whether in the school or the kitchen, their kids are much more likely to succeed. They have fewer behavioral problems, enhanced academic performance, better attendance and homework completion, a more positive attitude, and ultimately higher graduation rates and greater enrollment in college. And all of this translates into other kids in the classroom learning more, improved teacher morale and stronger learning environments.

Of course, this is not breaking news. We hear all the time how valuable it is for us to participate in our child's education. Following more than 30 years of research, the U.S. Department of Education reports that their findings clearly demonstrate the direct correlation between parental involvement and greater student achievement.

As parents, we are the most important link to how well our kids will do in school. Whether we're making copies of materials, reading to our child's class, chaperoning a field trip or attending a parent-teacher conference, there's certainly no shortage of opportunities to get involved in the classroom. Still, while we are encouraged to help out at school in any way we can, educators remind us that our involvement should first begin at home. Making sure our child finishes their homework, reads at least 15 minutes a

night, and completes a science project on time is just as important as serving as PTA president or coordinating a big fund-raiser.

Now take a moment to savor the squeaky clean pair of sneakers on your child's feet and the perfectly organized school supplies in their stain-free backpack. Before order and neatness are overcome by broken pencils, scraps of paper and too many cookie crumbs, consider the following suggestions on how you can assure your child greater academic success by more actively participating in their learning:

Read to your child. The benefits are endless. Reading aloud to them sparks their imagination, helps build their vocabulary, and stimulates their desire and capacity to learn new things. Furthermore, Education World, a comprehensive Web site for educators, reports "the single most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." And remember, it doesn't have to end – nor should it – once they are reading on their own.

Help your child set goals for the year. Talk to your son or daughter about what they would like to achieve. If they want their Math grade to go up from a C to a B, for example, start by listing some of the challenges that likely contributed to the "C" and come up with steps to help them improve. Perhaps they didn't spend enough time on homework or studying, or maybe they need a tutor. Then meet with their teacher, review your child's goals and assign some responsibilities. Most importantly, write it all down in a contract and have everyone sign it. The goal is simple - to help your child learn and succeed. A contract is a great tool for you to help them meet that end.

Demonstrate your support. Let your child know how important their education is to you. Start by setting a family routine so that they know what to expect. As much as possible, have them do their homework the same time each day, and make sure their study space is well-lit with few distractions and has plenty of supplies they might need (i.e. sharpened pencils, paper, dictionary, etc.) Be available to help them and make certain their assignments are understood and finished. It's OK to let your child know you expect them to achieve. Just remember to also praise their successes and efforts as much as possible.

Keep on learning! Make it a point to find out what your child is being taught and how they are being taught. Find out more about how children learn and develop, and what you can expect at different stages of their maturity. Ask your child questions about what they are studying in school. Why not take a trip to the library and do a little extra research with them? Make it fun – then stop for an ice cream cone on the way home. And remember, there are no age limits on learning. Signing up for a class at a local community college is not only a wonderful gift to yourself but also a great way to show your kids how much your family values education.

It's Back to School – for parents, too! Educators can't stress enough how vitally important it is for us to actively participate in our child's education. So take a look at

your school's year-long calendar. Mark down all the PTA meetings, beginning with "Back to School Night." This will give you the opportunity to not only meet your child's teachers and become familiar with their classroom, it's also the perfect chance to sign up to help with a few activities during the year. Set a goal and make a commitment to volunteering in some way five hours a semester. It's great for your child and their school, and good for you, too!

Sometimes it's breathtaking at how quickly our children grow up before us. Play an active role in your child's life while you can because before you know it, you'll be sending care packages to one child's dorm while checking out college campuses with another. But then you can take heart in knowing you made a meaningful difference in your child's life and their school. And if you're lucky, you'll remember how to calculate the circumference of a circle and that Pierre is the capital of South Dakota.

For more information about your child's education and getting more involved, check out www.education-world.com.