

## **Back to School**

As the summer closes and fall is in the air, the new school year comes to greet us. This is almost always a big step for children and their caregivers. Back to school is a time that refocuses families, helping them prepare for the excitement and challenges of new academic and social skills necessary for successful learning. Because children's primary caregivers are also their first and most important teachers, you have an important role to play in their education. There are many simple, yet important things that can be done to promote and support this transition, and encourage school success.

While your role may differ depending upon the ages of the children in your home, all children benefit from knowing that someone cares about their schooling. It might help to think of yourself as a bridge between the child and the school. By being involved with the child as they move into the school setting (whether it is kindergarten, third grade, middle or high school), both they and the school get the message that "this family cares about a positive educational experience." Some of the issues to be considered as this new school year begins include: trust, partnership, and realistic expectations for success.

By supporting children as they enter the new school year (getting school supplies, setting up a comfortable place to do homework, reviewing schedules), then gradually letting go to let them "take over" the routine, you act as the bridge between the familiar security of the home and the independent world of the school. This process can be started before school actually begins by giving children appropriate freedoms and responsibilities that convey the message that you trust them. Being trusted helps children to feel competent and confident to handle new situations. Some ideas to help build trust, and encourage responsibility in new situations include:

- Encouraging your child to spend more time with friends, even sleeping over at a friend's house if you feel they are ready.
- Beginning to let your child solve problems in their own way, then praise their success when done.
- Assigning simple chores that you know your child is capable of doing. Let them know how much you appreciate their assisting the family in their "work."
- Encouraging your child to take responsibility for their own belongings. For young children this may include hanging up their coat and cleaning up their toys; for older children this may include cleaning their bathroom or doing their laundry.
- Let children of all school ages choose their own clothes. You may need to give them a selection from which to choose to make sure they are school appropriate, but the choice should be theirs. (Sometimes it really helps if this is done the night before!)

By letting children know that you will assist them when needed, they can count on you as a partner in their learning experience. This assistance may involve listening, gathering materials, "teaching", and other general support. Also be sure that they know that you

consider yourself to be a partner with their school. The message that you are all working together toward a common goal can be reinforced by the doing the following:

- Read all communication that comes from the school, and discuss with your children. Keep the necessary information in a place where older children can also get access to it and read it.
- Before school begins, review expectations and rehearse skills as needed. For example, help young children practice zipping up their jackets and getting backpacks on and off (this saves teachers a lot of time, and reinforces the notion that this family cares!) Help older children learn to use an assignment pad, and organize their backpacks so that everything necessary will come home each day.
- Homework is a big issue, and probably requires a whole separate column! The simple answer is that the child should be expected to know what their assignment is, and the basics for completion. You can assist by making sure that they have the proper environment to work and study, including a quiet space, all needed materials, and enough distraction-free time to get assignments completed. Reviewing assignments and homework with children each day is a good idea; doing homework for them is not!
- Attend all open school night and “parent- teacher” conferences. Listen carefully to the expectations that the school and teacher have for the children, and review them with your children. Always let your children know the positive things you have heard from their teacher, and work with the teacher to gently correct any problems.
- Communicate with your child’s teacher and/or school whenever you feel necessary, especially when you have information to share that you think might affect the child’s school performance. Any significant change in the child’s life, both good and bad, may be important for the teacher to know, including: the birth of a sibling, a change in the parent’s living arrangements, or even a recent parental visit.

Helping your grand and relative children behave responsibly regarding school begins with the setting of clear and realistic expectations for their school success. The first step is to help them understand that you consider school to be their number one priority. Next, work with each child to develop appropriate expectations that are both realistic and achievable. It is frustrating for both the child and the caregiver to have unrealistic expectations for children. A balance between what they are inherently capable of, and what they would like to achieve, is the goal you seek. The more confident a child feels in their abilities, the more likely they will be to try to reach “above and beyond.” Some ideas to promote realistic expectations include:

- Know each child for the individual person they are. Avoid comparing them with other children of the same age, or to other children in the home.
- Help your child recognize their own strengths and areas in need of improvement – this may include academic, self-help or social skills.
- Be clear about your own expectations for school performance, and let your children know what they are. Make sure that they can re-state these to you.
- Consistently follow through to make sure that these expectations are met. If there is a continuing problem, it may be that the expectations are unrealistic, or that there is still a lack of understanding on the child's part.
- Model the desire to learn new things yourself. Children thrive in a household where learning of all sorts is a priority, and is fun!
- Always praise children for their successes, and gently remind them about their need for improvement; be as specific with both as possible. For example – If a child brings home a 75 on a math paper, you might say: “ I like the way you answered all of the addition problems correctly - you must really feel good that you can add so well! It seems as if all of the problems you answered wrong were subtraction, let's figure out a plan to work on these before the next test. “

Giving children trust, support and clear expectations are concrete ways that can help you and your grand and relative children feel more confident about this next school year. Adults also change when their children go off to school; it is an indication that your own lives are changing and passing. Moving from the caretaker role to one of less responsibility can be scary and elating at the same time. Give yourself credit for the work you have done so far, and also treat yourself! Take the time for a second cup of morning tea or coffee after the school bus leaves, a chat with a neighbor at the bus stop, or a bit of quiet time before you start your busy day.