

When parents are involved in their children's education, children succeed at higher rates. Analysis from the [National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools](#) concluded that when schools and parents work together, students earn higher grades, perform better on tests, enroll in more advanced courses and more often graduate and continue onto post-secondary education.

These findings come as no surprise to Jim Dillon, educator and author of "[No Place for Bullying](#)." "Kids need to see school as a place where their efforts lead to success -- their investment in school increases when they know their parents and school staff are on the same team, ready and willing to help them should they need it."

Even the busiest families can get involved. Ask Sue Robinson of the [National PTA](#). "As a working parent, I do have to free up some time to stay up to speed with what is happening in my child's life and school activities," Robinson says.

Determine the amount of time you can realistically devote to your child's school and find an activity that fits your schedule. Here are a few examples for inspiration:

If You Have Three Hours a Day:

Become a class parent: At the elementary level, teachers always welcome an extra set of hands for classroom projects and parties. While you may wish to work with your child's teacher, Dillon suggests you offer to help in other areas of the school as well, from the main office to the art room. It will give you more insight into the school's programs, and it will give your child the space he or she needs to develop a sense of independence.

It's easier than you think for hard-working parents to pitch in. There are free school and volunteer scheduling apps and tools (like [VolunteerSpot](#)) that make it

simple to ask for help and get parents to sign up for things like reading to the class, bringing snacks or helping with a party.

Organize an after-school homework club: With so many parents working 9-to-5 jobs, many children are left with little structure during those hours following the end of the school day. You can hold a homework club at the school, a public library or community center.

Assist with extra-curricular activities: Extra-curricular activities enhance children's educational experience and, for many, provide a positive way to develop a sense of belonging. Drama clubs, civic organizations and hobby clubs require a time investment many teachers lack. A parent volunteer can play a vital role in ensuring these activities are available -- whether it's running the program, being an extra helper or acting as a chaperone.

Participate in a reading partners program: Read-alouds help budding readers develop fluency and decoding skills. Many teachers at the elementary level have programs that bring community members into the classroom to serve as reading partners for students.

If You Have Three Hours a Week:

Get involved on the policy-making level: Dillon sites his school's Shared Decision Making Team as one of the most effective vehicles for involving the community in policy-making and building trust between parents and schools. These teams of teachers, administrators and parents meet on a regular basis to discuss problems within the school and develop solutions. "When you get people together, great ideas emerge," says Dillon. Many boards of education seek parents to sit on similar advisory committees. A seat on one of these committees is a rewarding way to get involved with your child's school.

Help produce school newsletters and other community outreach materials: If you have writing or publishing skills, your school may need you. Because you can do this work from home, this may be the perfect way for parents who aren't available during school hours to contribute.

Become a class adviser: Graduating classes need one or more advisers, and high schools often seek parent volunteers to fill these positions. As a class adviser, you assist class officers in fundraising projects, bookkeeping and planning special events such as a junior prom or senior class trip.

Start a community book club: Is your child's English class reading "Great Expectations"? Have the community join in by gathering copies of the novel and start an online discussion between students and parents, as everyone in the club works through the chapter assignments.

If You Have Three Hours a Month:

Get involved with your school's PTA: The Parent-Teacher organization in your school district is perhaps the best resource for finding out what you can do to help your school. According to Robinson, "joining your local PTA is the best thing for busy parents." In addition to keeping you informed about school events, it provides a support system. "Don't be afraid to reach out to the PTA for help," she advises. Many PTAs offer child care at their meetings, making it even easier for parents to attend.

Attend board of education meetings: Most board of education meetings are held in the evenings and offer great insight into what is going on in your school district. The board's agenda will provide a specific time for public comment so your ideas and opinions can be heard.

Organize your neighborhood: If you live in a neighborhood with many school-aged children, get your neighbors together for a barbecue or block party, and discuss issues affecting your kids and schools. You may find your neighbors have concerns similar to your own. Brainstorm ideas and present them to your school administrators. This is also an opportunity to organize car pools, [walking school buses](#) or neighborhood homework clubs.

Chaperone field trips or social events: Most field trips require a specific ratio of adults-to-children. Volunteer to join a class on a trip to a museum or apple

orchard. At the high school level, you may find you're needed to oversee a school dance.

If You Have Three Hours a Year:

Attend school open house: Open house is your introduction to your child's environment for the entire school year. Use this opportunity to learn about the curriculum and expectations for your child.

Share your expertise: Do you have an interesting job? A fun hobby? Dillon suggests you let your child's teacher know about your areas of expertise. You may be able to supplement a unit of study with a classroom presentation.

Participate in an annual event: Robinson believes the National PTA's [Take Your Family to School Week](#) is an ideal time to make connections with your child's school. Local PTA units across the country schedule family events during this week in February. Some schools open classrooms to parents during the school day; others hold evening events.

Participate in a fundraising event: Bake sales, car washes and silent auctions are regular events at most schools. The funds raised support a variety of programs in the school. Volunteering a Saturday afternoon to help with one of these fundraisers will draw you closer to the school and demonstrate to your child the value you place in their education.

A positive and supportive school culture will bolster academic achievement and minimize behavioral problems. Parental involvement is crucial to building this culture. Kids need to know they're not making their life journey alone.

Being involved with schools is an important way to show you care about your child's learning.

How busy parents stay involved in school. One mother, who cannot volunteer in the classroom because of her work schedule, finds it easier to go to meetings at night, and has been to some school council meetings. Another mother volunteers to keep things organized in the halls at the end of the school day, when she is there picking up her child. In a family where the mother is taking care of a baby, the father is able to help out in his older son's classroom two hours a week. Even with a baby, there may be things you can do at school: sell tickets for a show, answer phones in the office, or help put away books in the library when the baby is napping. If it's hard for you to be in the school building, you can work on some things at home, like decorations or displays for the classroom.

How schools help busy parents. Some schools have after school child care or homework tutoring. Some schools provide transportation or child care to help parents come to school meetings at night. Schools in our study also made special arrangements to help. One school asked an older child to help a younger one from a different family with his homework because the younger one did not have anyone at home who could help. One school loaned a parent a video of a volunteer training meeting that the parent could not attend because of work.

Ways parents ask schools for help. Staying in touch with your child's teacher is the most important thing you can do at school, but sometimes it can be hard to find a good time to talk. One mother called her son's teacher and asked for the parent-teacher conference to be changed to a better time for her. Another mother asked the teacher to call her at work, when the teacher needed to talk to the mother about her child. If it is hard for you to come to classroom open houses at night, ask if they also can be held in the mornings before school. Ask about potluck breakfasts to feed busy families before they go to work and school. Maybe you could come to meetings at night if the school helped. For example, ask if the school can open a study hall or offer homework help for older children during the meeting.

Think about what's right for you. Some parents feel so overwhelmed from everything they have to do that they can't seem to do anything. All parents should remember that there are places where they can get help when they need it. Family resource centers can help. Parent education programs can give parents new skills that will help them better use their time with their children. Parents may know another parent they can talk and get ideas from.

Parents often feel guilty because they cannot spend as much time with their children as they would like. But it can help for parents to know that when they are busy, they can be setting an example for their children. Children watch their parents work hard at a job, attend classes, help out at church, or take care of relatives or friends. They can learn

about responsibility and work for a goal from your example. Talking about this can help reinforce their learning.

Take time to think about your own situation. There may be things you're doing now that help you to be a part of your child's learning. Maybe there are changes you can make or ask others to make. Maybe some of the ideas from parents in our study can work for you, too.

This article was prepared by Ellen Mayer, Holly Kreider, and Peggy Vaughan of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). For more information on the work of the School Transition Study, a large national long-term research project looking at how family, school, and community shape children's development, please call HFRP at (617) 496-4304, write to them at 38 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, or visit their web site at: <http://hugsel.harvard.edu/hfrp> .

Your involvement in education increases your children's chances for success in school. Studies show that children whose parents are involved in education are more motivated in school. Motivated students are more likely to participate in class, more likely to complete homework, and more likely to achieve academically. In short, motivated children become students with good chances for bright futures.

When you participate in your children's education, say hello to the warm feeling of satisfaction you get when you know that you've helped your children. The easy and effective tips that follow will show you how to get involved even if you are a busy parent with little time to spare from your work at home or at your place of employment.

Throughout these pages, brought to you through the combined efforts of the National PTA and JCPenney, you'll find many ideas for getting involved with your children, getting involved with your children's teachers, and getting involved with the school community. Start first with the ideas that appeal to you most and will easily fit into your schedule, and then add others as time permits. The good news is that no matter how little time you have, you will find a number of things in these pages that you can do to help your children.

The important thing to remember is this: Involved parents do make a difference.

Getting Involved With Your Children

Put on a happy face

At the end of a busy day your feet may hurt and your head may pound, but when your youngsters come running to you full of enthusiasm about something at school, put on a smile and match their excitement. When you put them off with "Later, later," their joy in the accomplishment disappears.

Table talk

Talk about what your children are learning in school while at the table eating supper. After the meal is finished, pass around any papers they've brought home for everyone to discuss and admire.

Don't stow it, show it!

Instead of stowing school papers and artwork in a forgotten drawer, show it off. Use a wall, the refrigerator door, or a bulletin board for the display. Take a minute now and then to look at the changing displays with each child and talk about how proud you are of the work that's exhibited. When papers are taken down from the bulletin board, preserve in a special folder for periodic review.

Change "Whatdja get?" to "Whatdja learn?"

When tests and reports come home, take the emphasis off the grades and focus instead on the information and skills they learned by doing the work. Give children a chance to show what they know by asking simple questions about the subject. Increase your children's knowledge by sharing anything you know about the topic, or by looking it up in an encyclopedia.

Talking texts

Ask your youngsters to read their textbooks to you while you fix dinner, sort laundry, or drive the car. Any text will do—a reader, a social studies book, even a math book. When they finish a section, discuss any questions the book presents in order to expand their comprehension of the ideas in the text.

Classroom chronicles

Children who get home before their parents can record descriptions of the school day on cassette tape, while events are still fresh in their minds. These Classroom Chronicles don't replace the time you spend with your children, but rather serve as springboards for discussion when you listen to them with your kids later in the evening.

Family merry-go-round

When you ask "What happened in school today," and get the answer, "Nothin' much," it's time to hop on the Family Merry-Go-Round. Start a sentence that each person in the family must complete in turn. "The most surprising thing I learned today was . . ." "One of the things I did well today was . . ." The sentence merrily goes 'round till everyone has shared their experiences.

"I can" cans

Give each child an empty juice can covered with contact paper and labeled "My 'I CAN' Can." Whenever your children learn a new skill, be it academic, artistic, or athletic, write it on a piece of paper and stuff it in the can. Review the contents of the cans periodically, and watch your children's self-esteem soar.

Make mistakes okay

When children can learn from their mistakes, instead of feeling discouraged by them, they are on the road to success. Make mistakes okay by talking about your own errors: "One mistake I made today was . . ." Encourage your youngsters to describe mistakes that they made, and then talk about solutions: "One way I can keep from making this mistake again is . . ."

Getting Involved With the Teachers

Happygrams

Keep a small pad of brightly colored paper handy, and use it to write a brief note of thanks to the teacher whenever your children demonstrate new skills or

express excitement about something that happened in school. The short time you spend on this happygram will greatly enrich your parent-teacher partnership.

Telephone talk

To keep in touch with teachers between formal conferences, use the telephone for occasional 5-10 minute "catch-up" conversations. Ask teachers before hand for good times to call.

Banish blaming

Take a "no fault" approach when your children experience difficulties in school. Blaming teachers or classmates only strains relationships. Join forces with teachers to reach a common goal: helping your children overcome difficulties and find success.

Ask for advice

Teachers like sharing their specialized knowledge with concerned parents, so don't hesitate to ask for advice. Teachers can assist you with behavior problems, homework hassles, and how to reinforce at home what's learned at school.

Lend a hand

Even busy parents can pitch in when teachers call for help with school projects. Let the teacher know how much time you have and what talents you could offer. No matter how small, your contribution will be a help to the teacher and noticed by your child.

Respond to report cards

When report cards come home, take time to thank the teachers in a quick note. Teachers usually spend their own evening and weekend hours to write these reports, and your thanks will help them feel appreciated. If you're pleased with your children's progress, say so. If any of the grades or comments disappoint you, ask what you can do to help your child improve.

Beat the clock

Punctuality counts. When a teacher sets a specific time for a conference, make every effort to be there on time. Teachers often schedule many conferences back to back, and one late parent can throw everyone off schedule.

Be prepared

Bring a list of questions to parent-teacher conferences. Prepared questions help the conference stay focused and keep you from rambling into overtime. The National PTA has an excellent pamphlet entitled "Making Parent-Teacher Conferences WORK for Your Child." This pamphlet tells you how to prepare for conferences and what questions to ask.

Information, please

Be sure to give teachers any information about changes in home circumstances

that may affect your children's behavior or performance. A death in the family, an extended sickness, a separation or divorce—even the loss of a pet can put a strain on children that spills over into the classroom.

Getting Involved With the School Community

PTA at the school

Today's PTA has kept up with the changing times. Recognizing that in many families both mothers and fathers work outside the home, the PTA often schedules meetings at night. PTA meetings are still the best way to keep informed about, and involved with, the school community.

PTA at the office

You can form a PTA unit at your workplace. Though the parents involved would have children in different schools, a monthly brown bag luncheon with planned programs can help everyone stay abreast of the latest educational trends and family issues. Programs can feature speakers from local schools or focus on the various topics addressed in publications, kits and other materials developed by the National PTA.

No excuses

Next time back-to-school night or parent programs roll around, don't make excuses for not going. Your attendance clearly demonstrates to your children how much you care about their education. To make it easier to get out of the house, freeze leftovers or casseroles with "save for back-to-school night" labels.

Know the neighborhood news

Be sure to read school newsletters to keep informed of the latest developments. If these newsletters tend to get overlooked during hectic evenings and weekends, take them with you so you can read the newsletters while eating lunch at work or on the train or bus. Check your daily newspaper for reports on neighborhood schools and school board proceedings.

Know the national news

Read Our Children magazine, What's Happening in Washington (both available by subscription through the National PTA), and education related articles in parent magazines to keep abreast of the latest national developments affecting education and families.

Do your bit

Busy parents who want to volunteer at school but can't usually be present for long periods of time during the day can still contribute their talents. Call the PTA president or the volunteer coordinator and offer to write an article for the

newsletter, speak about your career at a student assembly, coordinate a student site—visit at your workplace, or call other parents as part of a telephone tree.

Become a more informed parent

It isn't easy to raise children with drugs, gangs, and peer pressure against you. If you're doing the job alone, or in a stepfamily, you have even more to consider. Learn what works with today's youngsters by joining one of the many parent education programs that more and more schools and PTAs are offering. When you have effective parenting skills at your fingertips, the time you took to become a more knowledgeable parent will be well repaid.

Tips To Motivate Your Children To Do Well In School

- Take the time to read with your children daily.
- Provide enrichment material, including children's books and magazines, and educational toys.
- Provide quiet, private work spaces where children can study undisturbed.
- Keep your children's work spaces well-stocked with all the supplies they need to complete their assignments.
- Take time to sit down with your children and help them schedule homework into their daily routine.
- Reward good grades with recognition and praise, and avoid the temptation to use money as a bribe for good performance.
- Take advantage of educational events in your community as often as possible.
- Value your children's uniqueness, and avoid comparing them to others.
- Limit the amount of television children watch to one hour on school days and two hours on weekend days.
- Encourage creative thinking by asking your youngsters for help solving problems.
- Encourage your children to practice school skills in real life situations.

About the Author

Parent, educator, and syndicated columnist, Dr. Linda Albert travels around the country helping parents and teachers. Her engaging style and lively presentations have made her workshops and seminars popular with thousands of parents, teachers, and professionals in all fields. Linda is the author of *Coping with Kid*, *Coping with Kids and School*, *Strengthening Your Stepfamily**, *Quality Parenting**, and *A Teacher's Guide to Cooperative Discipline*. Dr. Albert also writes a weekly column for Gannett newspapers and is featured monthly in *Working Mother Magazine*. Linda, a mother of three, lives in Tampa, Florida.

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Younger Children

- **Be a class reader.** Offer to come in to read to the whole class of children or to individual children who need more support.
- **Work as a center/lab helper.** Teaching things like science, art and computer lab to young children requires lots of hands-on help, and under tight budgets, these are often the first areas to be cut. If you have an interest in one of these areas, offer to come in once a week to lend a hand.
- **Offer to tutor.** Teachers usually have to teach to a wide range of abilities. Having parents on hand to give one-on-one support to students on the high and low ends of the spectrum gives the teacher more time to focus on the middle.
- **Volunteer as class parent.** If you have more time to give, this is a fantastic opportunity, usually involving organizing parties and teacher gifts throughout the year.

Older Children

- **Assist with a special interest club or drama group.** With teachers being asked to do more and more with fewer resources, sometimes it's up to parents to keep extracurricular activities going.
- **Speak to classes about your career or special expertise.** One of the most important gifts you can give a child is the gift of inspiration. Older kids have moved beyond wanting to be a fireman or the president and need role models to teach them about other career opportunities.
- **Work as library assistant.** Helping kids discover books they love or research topics they're excited about can be a really rewarding experience for parents.
- **Volunteer to help with sports programs.** Keeping kids active is critical to their physical and emotional health. Parent involvement can do a lot for increasingly underfunded school sports programs.

Make all families feel welcome.

- Greet other parents at school activities and events; sit with someone you don't know and get to know them.
- Recruit bilingual parents to greet and interpret for families whose first language isn't English. Ask the school district to provide translation headsets for parent meetings.

- Offer family activities at low or no cost so everyone can participate; budget PTA/parent group funds for this purpose.
- Hold meetings in a variety of community locations (such as the local library, a community center, a church) to make them accessible to all.

Communicate effectively.

- Design and print "Happy Grams" as an easy way for teachers to regularly report positive behavior and/or achievements to parents.
- Consider using color-coded lines on hallway walls, or footprints on floors, to help direct parents to important places like the school office, parent resource center and library.
- Include a two-way communication mechanism, such as a question-and-answer section or mini survey, in each edition of your newsletter.
- Distribute calendars so parents can record upcoming events, assignments and dates to check with teachers on their children's progress.

Support student success.

- Create a checklist and tip sheets for effective parent-teacher conferences.
- Invite teachers and professionals from the community to speak at meetings on various topics.
- Provide parent involvement tips and suggestions through signs at the school and articles in the local newspaper.

Speak up for every child.

- Match new families at the school with a buddy family to show them the ropes.
- Plan workshops on how to ask the right questions about children's progress and placement.
- Involve parents in ongoing training on topics such as being an effective advocate, identifying and supporting learning styles, resolving difficulties and fostering student achievement.

Share power.

- Working in partnership with the principal, identify ways the PTA/parent group can support one or more goals of the school improvement plan.
- Host a forum for candidates running for public office; focus questions on issues that affect children, families and education.

- Get to know your elected officials at all levels of government, as they influence public policy decisions related to children and education.

Collaborate with the community.

- Reach out to senior /retired citizens and invite them to volunteer at the school.
- Work with the local newspaper to promote special events that are happening at the school.
- Invite school alumni to make a donation to the school or to participate in an alumni sponsors program through which they can volunteer time.