

Children Need Success in Basic Skills

When the U.S. Department of Education looked at the causes of failure and poor performance in school, it found that the primary reason was a lack of basic skills. More than any other potential cause, inadequate competence in basic skills held children back from accomplishing success in school. *And parents are key figures in the findings of this study.*

Successful students most often have parents who work with them on the basic skills of reading, writing, and computing. Some parents understand intuitively that practice is an important necessity in the basics. Fluent performance in basic skills depends heavily on practice, practice, practice. Teachers may introduce math facts, decoding skills, grammar, and spelling, but those skills need to be repeated until they become second nature. That's where family members enter the picture. Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa and other caregivers figure prominently into the basic skills formula for most students.

To help you understand what you can do, we have arranged this bulletin into a series of questions and brief answers on how to work on the basic skills with your children. These are merely starting ideas, but they can get you moving in the right direction. You can find

more extensive ideas and practice activities in your school library and in the books listed elsewhere in this bulletin. **The Family Learning Association** has many titles and web resources to help you with basic skills. If you'd like more information, call **1-800-759-4723** or visit **www.kidscanlearn.com**.

In this bulletin you will find answers to the following important questions:

- ◆ How do I improve my child's reading?
- ◆ How do I improve my child's writing skills?
- ◆ How do I improve my child's spelling skills?

Set up a simple plan

Your first step, of course, is to let your child know that you intend to work with him or her in becoming smooth and efficient in these skills. That doesn't mean the child practices only when you are sitting next to her. But it shows that you will help, will listen, will give question, will give hints—as needed. More importantly, you will check regularly to see how they are progressing, whether or not they are taking time to practice. And you will be there to encourage and to work with them from time to time. In other words, you will ask them to demonstrate their skills at preset times. Of course you will be sure to praise them for their efforts and for their improvements.



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How do I improve my child's reading skills?

Most educators and parents consider this to be the fundamental question that underlies all school learning. Without fluent reading skills the young learner is blocked from much of what takes place in school. In the Information Age, reading has become doubly important, making it an essential requirement for almost all future employment. Let's examine, therefore, the specific questions that lead us to help our children build this essential set of skills called reading.

Basic Skills Questions

What are basic word-recognition skills?

Several skills come into play, often simultaneously, when a child sees a word and successfully reads it.

◆ **Phonics.** Your child recognizes the first letter-sound and gets a good start. Your child recognizes common word endings (rhyming endings or noun end-

ings, such as *-es* or *-s*; verb endings, such as *-ed* or *-ing*) and uses this knowledge when reading a word.

◆ **Context.** Your child uses the meaning of the whole sentence as a clue to identifying a word that fits in the sentence.

What can I do to help my child learn phonics?

Give your child specific, concrete guidance. Here are four techniques for teaching phonics:

1. Associate the sound with the letter or symbol.

Demonstrate the sound associated with a particular letter. EXAMPLE: “You know that the letter *b* usually stands for the sound that we hear at the beginning of *boy*. Can you think of other words that begin with this sound?”

2. Demonstrate the sound-symbol correspondence in words.

Use examples to show how a target sound can be at the beginning, middle, or end of a word. For example, *b* might be presented in simple words like *boy*, *robin*, *tub*. Demonstrate where short vowel sounds can be found in words, such as the *a* sound in *cap*, *bat*, *mad*.

3. Substitute letters in words to demonstrate different sound-symbol correspondences and to produce new words.

For example, substitute a new first letter and *hop* is changed to *mop*; substitute the middle letter and *bit* is changed to *bat*. Play substitution games to see how many words your child can develop from the word that you give.

4. Supply rhyming words.

In a variation to the previous technique, ask your child to supply words that rhyme with a given word. Focus attention first on the unchanged sound in the rhymes, then point out the changed sound at the beginning of the words. EXAMPLE: *bat*, *fat*, *sat*, *mat*; *mop*, *top*, *shop*, *pop*.

How can I help my child learn to spell?

Three Major Principles for Teaching Spelling

1. Common spelling patterns should be taught early to give children control over many familiar words.
2. The word list in spelling books should contain the words that children use most often in their own writing.
3. The target words should be used in context, that is, in writing messages.

What are basic comprehension skills?

Reading is more than the ability to recognize and pronounce individual words. The purpose of reading is to communicate ideas. Beginning readers often concentrate so hard on recognizing each word that the meaning of the material is lost or forgotten. For this reason, teaching comprehension is an important part of teaching reading. Your child learns to comprehend as he or she learns to:

◆ Recall Details.

Your child can understand and recall the important statements.



◆ Make Inferences.

Your child is able to analyze, interpret, draw conclusions, and make judgments about what is being read.

◆ Relate to Personal Experience.

Your child can relate what is being read to his or her own ideas or experiences.

How do I motivate the early reader?

Sometimes simply giving a child the freedom to choose will prompt a reluctant reader to take up a book or magazine; for example, the child may choose to read a comic book during a free reading period. More often, however, the reluctant reader is seeking special attention and not just freedom. It may take all the wiles in a parent's repertoire before a reluctant reader succumbs to reading a book.

The mother of a nine-year-old girl once told me that she "teases" her daughter into reading to make it fun. By using newspapers, magazines, and books around the house, this girl's mother played three little games that all involved reading. Here are some examples:

◆ I'll Bet You

Can't Find (newspaper search): I'll bet you can't find out who Leonardo di Caprio's girlfriend is.



◆ Let's Make a Deal

(using a children's magazine): I read the first part of a story in this magazine. I'll tell it to you and then you read it and tell me how it ends.

◆ **It's a Secret** (using a book): You probably won't like this book. Mary (an admired, older neighbor) says that it has secrets for kids her age in it. She left the book for you to try.

What a clever mother that girl had! And the phrase "teases her into reading" sums up surveys of elementary children's feeling about reading. They want it to include fun and choice.

How can I help my child learn to organize his schoolwork?

As children move into the higher grades, teachers expect them to assume more responsibility for their own learning. This means that children need to develop a system for organizing their studying—and their time—to be successful. As a parent, you can help your child learn how to organize schoolwork.

Start with a calendar and a notebook. Make sure that your child has the right supplies. A loose-leaf binder or folder can hold papers, notes, homework, and handouts for each class. A calendar is essential—both to record upcoming assignments and to plan time to complete them.

At the beginning of the school year, help your child plan how to handle schoolwork and other activities outside of school. Make a point to ask, “When do you want to schedule your homework time?” Then have your child write down a schedule. You might describe how you get yourself organized. Do you make lists? Do you use a calendar? Help your child do similar planning.

Have a plan and follow up on it

Once your child has a plan, help him learn how to carry it out. Although homework is your child’s responsibility, you can show your support in many ways, such as:

1) **Respect your child’s study time.** That means no radio, no TV, no phone calls, and no interruptions from friends coming to play.

2) **Work on your own projects near your son.** You can pay bills, write letters, or read a book. This way, you can create a sense that “we’re all in this together.”

3) **Help with the planning for accomplishing longer projects.** Suggest a time plan or schedule for accomplishing the big task. Breaking a big job down into small tasks not only helps your child experience success, but also avoids the frustration and stress that come with trying to do too much in too little time.

How do I help my child focus on homework?

You can guide most homework tasks with a series of simple direct questions:

- ◆ What is the assignment? (What is the problem to be worked out?) How can you figure out the answer? What do you have to do first?
- ◆ Do you want me to listen (to reading)?
- ◆ Do you want me to read what you have written?
- ◆ Do you want me to check your knowledge (for example, in spelling)?



By asking those questions night after night, you are tutoring your child in a *method for doing homework* in addition to responding to the specific needs of the day. You are teaching your child to focus on the problem or how she might approach the task at hand. You are also showing her that she is responsible for the work. You are there to listen, to guide, to check her work, but she

is the responsible person.

Should I keep checking on my fifth-grade son’s homework?

By the end of third grade, many parents stop checking their children’s homework. They worry they can’t remember how to multiply fractions or they never took a course in earth science or computers. Sometimes they can’t correct their child’s homework, so they stop asking about it. But checking on homework is still important. It shows your

interest and it helps your child remain true to his responsibility.

You really do need to stay involved with homework, at least by showing an interest in what your child is learning. Ask your child to tell you about it. Remember to praise good work. Your daily interest will encourage your child to do good work.

How can I help my child improve her writing?

Purpose is critical.

To help your child with a written assignment, you need to ask her what the purpose is. Is it to tell a story, to respond to something she has read, to describe something? Those would be the three most frequent writing assignments in the elementary grades. Depending on the purpose of the composition, you can then ask whether or not the purpose was achieved.

In a **story**, characters work on a problem over time towards some conclusion.

In a **response**, the writer is usually asked to write her reactions, her likes and complaints, and her reasons why.

In a **description**, the writer tells the reader about the scene so the reader has a mental picture.

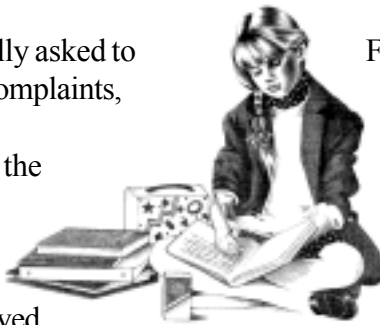
As much as possible, you want your child to show you that she achieved the intent of the composition, after she has reread it. If you feel that she has not achieved that purpose, you can then discuss remedies that are within her grasp.

Clear writing demands rewriting.

After purpose, the most useful question you can

ask about your child's writing is: "Is it clear?"

For a child in the elementary grades, you can call attention to confused or unclear statements with a simple comment: "This is not clear to me." In his explanation, your child will probably use the words that remove the confusion. "Now I understand," you reply. "Why not write those words in place of the sentence that was not clear?"



Self-correct the mechanics of writing.

From month to month your child's teacher may ask the class to attend to punctuation, grammar, or spelling. As much as possible, you want your child to review her own writing to see if she has applied the punctuation marks or the grammar rules that the teacher has discussed in class. Encourage your child

to circle and correct any mistakes that she thinks she has made.

If your child continues to miss some of the targeted errors, you can circle them but ask her to make the correction. Explain, of course, if she does not understand.

How can I help with geography?

Along with mathematics, geography is one of the subjects that typically scares parents. Here are five questions to ask children about geography:

- 1. Where are things located?***
- 2. What characteristics make a place special?***
- 3. What are relationships among people and places?***
- 4. What are the patterns of movement of people, products, and information?***
- 5. How can the Earth be divided into regions for study?***

These five themes were developed by the Committee on Geographic Information of the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers. They are consistent with the standards for teaching geography to students K-12.



A Skills Plan

Assuming that reading instruction always starts with building meaning, one organized process that is used revolves around the use of three tested skills per reading selection. This skills plan allows parents to highlight decoding skills from about ages six to nine (without de-emphasizing comprehension) and to highlight comprehension skills from about ten to fourteen. This plan enables parents and children to have a sense of order in their long range scope of reading, and it encourages them to spend most of their time as more advanced readers to work on understanding expository structures.

How To Teach Skills

Recent studies of learning and effective teaching, give us strong indicators of how to teach skills:

1. **Motivate and give a clear focus to instruction.**
2. **Apply the skills immediately.**
3. **Practice sufficiently to achieve fluency.**
4. **Test and reteach the skill as needed.**

We need to teach systematically and then follow a consistent lesson plan in order to help children know how to proceed. They need to feel that there is order to the knowledge they are expected to learn.

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Skills Plan

Objective

Clearly stated at the beginning of a lesson.

Develop

Explain and develop the instruction for each skill through modeling, demonstration, and discussion. Checks for understanding through activities and questions.

Apply

Parent-directed activities and questions provide guided practice.

Check Understanding

Provide questions for checking mastery.

Reteach

Reteach and use Alternative Learning Activities for each skill.

Independent Practice

Independent worksheets or skills practice should be given to practice each skill.

Enrich

Encourage children to read from other books and ask them to be aware of their use of recently learned skills.

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How can I help my child learn to spell?

(continued from page 2)

1) Teaching Spelling Patterns

Since most English words fit one or the other spelling patterns, you can teach your children to make use of the major sound-spelling patterns. With only a little effort, you can give your children control over a large number of words, for example:

at	ut	ot	et	it
bat	but	pot	bet	bit
hat	cut	cot	met	hit
sat	hut	hot	pet	sit

What pattern do you see here? Each of these words has a single vowel which has the short sound of the vowel. Some linguists call it the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) pattern, a pattern that unlocks hundreds of words for the beginning speller. Look for a spelling program that gives your children the power of these sound-spelling patterns.

2) Choosing a Word List

In the past 50 years, only two published studies have word lists from a national sample of children's writing. These studies provide a basis for the target words used in spelling programs. Other words could come from the personal interests of each child. Personal words combined with a common word list give the child a base from which to write comfortably.

The words that children use change from one generation to another. In a national study in 1945, the word *computer* did not appear. In comparing the 5000 most frequently used words in the 1945 study with the 5000 from 1984, there was a difference of 1650 words. A host of new words has entered the language even since 1984, and are used frequently by children now. These words reflect current technology and sociology: *synthetic, cellular, laptop*. Many words are abbreviated, probably reflecting our fast-food, instant gratification society. Encourage children to learn to spell the words they use in their own writing.

3) Writing Messages

When children write, they don't write words; they write messages. They write letters to their friends, stories to share in class, and reports for their teachers. It is through these communication efforts that children realize the value of learning how to spell effortlessly, a condition that is achieved only through writing and attention to graphic patterns.

Certainly written communication, the message, is the central focus. The conventions of English spelling become important only because they make it easier for all of us to communicate easily with one another in writing. The more we can communicate an attitude of personal responsibility to our children, the more likely they will use a spelling program as a way of improving their writing.