

How to Remain Involved in Your Child's Education

By Gemma Alexander

Nowadays, it can feel like every aspect of parenting is fraught with dilemmas and pitfalls. In 20 years, it probably won't matter what kind of diapers you used or if you packed boring lunches, but your kids' education is definitely important. So, how do you make sure that your kid thrives at school? Do you really have to join the PTA? When does helping become helicoptering? We talked to local educators about the best ways to support your child's education at every stage.

Find a community for preschoolers

"The most important thing is picking your school. Think about your personality and your child's personality," says Thomas Hobson, who is a teacher at Woodland Park Cooperative School, a blogger and the author of "[Teacher Tom's First Book](#)." Parental involvement varies widely depending on the preschool's model. It's critical to find an environment where you and your child feel safe and comfortable.

Whatever type of school you choose, "Try to get to know classmates' parents. Try to connect outside of school times by having families over for dinner or playdates. Hang out on the playground for a few minutes after school," suggests Hobson.

Whether you spend time in the classroom or not, learn your child's schedule and describe it to them as part of the daily transition from home to school. "Knowing what to expect gives kids a sense of control," notes Hobson. "There's going to be separation anxiety. It's okay to cry when Mommy leaves. But that should become less pronounced over time."

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"You know your child. Trust your instincts," advises Hobson. If something doesn't feel right, check in with the teacher. Describe your observations and really listen to the teacher's perspective without judgement. They see a different side of your child than you do, so between the two of you, it's usually possible to work out a solution.

The first time you talk to the teacher should not be when there is a problem. "Formal meetings are stressful for everyone. A few minutes of conversation at drop-off and pickup can help build a social, friendly relationship with the teacher before there is a problem. Remember, you and the teacher are colleagues. You are working together. The teacher is your greatest ally in creating a safe learning and growth environment for your kid," says Hobson.

Build connections through elementary school

Most homeroom teachers are straightforward about their preferences to

communicate by email or phone and give specific instructions to parents about how they want families to handle homework. But the need for parental involvement goes beyond following teachers' instructions. "When a single teacher is dealing with 500 kids — the entire school — it's just not possible without parent involvement," says Elizabeth Waltzer, an art teacher at Wedgwood Elementary School. In addition to teaching art classes in her school on a rotation schedule, Waltzer also manages the school concerts and musicals. These days, even public schools couldn't run without volunteers, so be assured that your child's school can benefit from as much time and energy as you can commit.

That said, teachers understand that not everybody has the ability to contribute directly to the classroom or attend special events at school. "The most impact you can have is not even at the school. It's at home. Find time to check in with your student and really talk to them about school. Knowing that someone at home is really excited about their learning makes such a difference," says Waltzer.

If your child is having trouble at school, "There has to be a conversation with the teacher," says Waltzer. "The trifecta of parent, student and teacher are all necessary and must be heard to build success. Remember that teachers really do have students' best interests at heart, so be prepared to work together, as opposed to assuming negative intent."

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Stay connected in middle school

"Middle school is a safer space to fail than high school," notes Chelsey Hays, a counselor in the Shoreline School District, so it's a good time to practice independence. But the trick for parents is to step back without disengaging. "It's a common misconception that kids don't want parents involved in middle school. They want autonomy, but all the research shows that kids with involved parents do better," she says.

"The parents' role is not to solve problems directly. It is to encourage kids to develop their own solutions," explains Hays. Parents can encourage kids to manage their own deadlines and talk to their teachers when they have a problem, and then check up to make sure they've succeeded. Consider asking kids how they would like you to be involved in special events and field trips. "Some kids love parents to be there, some don't," she says.

Open-ended questions can help draw kids out, but if they're reluctant to talk about school, parents can keep up on what's happening using online resources, such as The Source, Schoology, email newsletters, and school websites and Facebook pages. Attending concerts, plays and other after-hours school events, even when your student is not a participant in them, can help students and parents feel like they're part of the school community.

Parents whose availability for community activities is limited can take heart, though. "The best way to be involved is to hold kids accountable. Research shows that kids whose parents hold them accountable and help them keep track of their academics and homework deadlines have the best success in middle school," says Hays. "Don't be afraid to be involved. Be quick to email the teacher or the principal when kids can't take the initiative or haven't had success. You can be a role model for how to have those conversations."

Trust but verify — communicating in high school

“Students often need support making healthy choices. The biggest thing is providing the structure and support at home. Kids are more independent [in high school], but they need the space and time and expectation to do homework,” says Ballard High School science teacher Samantha Maykut.

“Just because teens need independence doesn’t mean they don’t need you,” says Maykut. “No matter how distant they get, take time to make eye contact and say, ‘Hey, how’s it going?’ every day. It makes a difference.”

Theater and language arts teacher Shawn Riley, also at Ballard High, agrees. “I encourage parents to ask questions about social events and what’s going on in class,” he says. But he also suggests that they “not necessarily [believe] everything your student says.”

With the new Washington state graduation requirements, students cannot afford to fail even a single class. Riley says parents need to be informed about testing and graduation requirements, and students are not always the best sources for that information. Attending parents’ nights and open houses is helpful, but online resources make things easier for parents with limited time. “Befriend your student’s counselor. They can help with college, Running Start, scholarships, credit requirements and tutoring connections,” he says.

When do parents need to take a more active role? “Show up when kids ask,” says Maykut. “If possible, encourage them to find ‘their thing.’ It will help them get connected into the community.” Supporting your child’s extracurricular activities can also give you an unobtrusive glimpse into their world. “If you enjoy being involved, there is so much need,” says Maykut. Many extracurricular programs rely on booster clubs, school events require coordination, and field trips generate lots of paperwork.

“If grades are dropping, if a student is showing signs of anxiety or depression or aggression, talk to your kid first. Show interest without grilling,” Maykut suggests. Then, “Treat the teacher as part of your student’s community network and talk to them for data.”

Riley concurs. “I appreciate you getting involved in your child’s education.”