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Eight Tips to Help You Help Your Children Be the Best Students They Can Be

by Kirk Noonan

The classroom door swung open to a weary-eyed parent who stomped her way toward my desk. When she reached the edge of my desk, she slammed down her daughter's late report. "This was a ridiculous amount of work for fifth graders," she said.

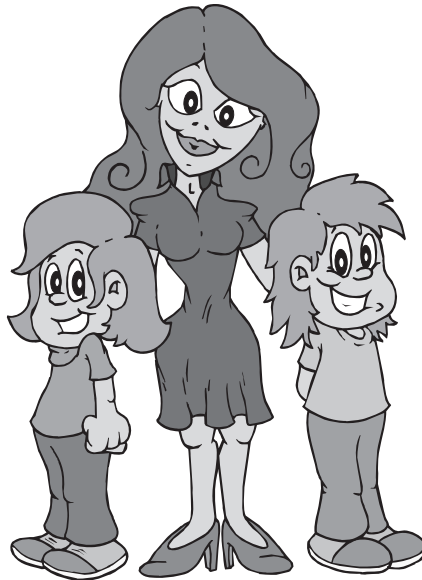
As I read the report, it became evident that the daughter's work had been reworked by her well-meaning mother. Instead of a grade school project, the report read and looked like a finely massaged travel brochure. When confronted, the student's mother hesitantly admitted she had done more than her fair share of the report. "But," she protested, "I only wanted to help my daughter do her best."

Most parents do.

But knowing when to roll up one's sleeves to help a child get the job done and when to step back and let the child work through a challenge can be tricky. To find out how parents can help their children be the best students they can be, here are some comments by Christian educators and church leaders.

Tip #1: Share and Tell

It's been said that education is a journey, not a destination. As children make the journey, educators say, parents should accompany them by serving as guides who encourage, provide,



foster, and love learning. The key to doing that well is cogent communication.

"We are all involved [in the student's education] and we need to communicate effectively," says Pam Anderson, who has been an elementary educator in Springfield, Missouri, for

20 years. "Parents should never wait until parent-teacher conferences to communicate with their children's teachers."

Equally as important is communication between parent and child. As a mother of two children, Anderson has found that talking about the school day with them each night is powerful.

"I ask them to tell me at least one positive thing they experienced at school," says Anderson. Doing so, she says, keeps the educational journey in a positive light, initiates conversation, and helps her gauge how her children are doing on many fronts.

"Parents need to listen to what their children tell them about school," says Marilyn Vaughn, professor of education at Bethany College, an Assemblies of God school in Santa Cruz, California. "Listen, probe, and find out exactly what your child is conveying. It comes down to asking good questions and being a really good listener. Parents need to establish this type of communication with

their children early on so it will not seem intrusive when their children are older.”

Anderson and Vaughn also recommend that parents teach their children how to respectfully communicate with their

teachers. Doing so, they say, enables students to stand up for their rights, express their concerns, and take ownership of their education. This is especially important for middle school and high school students.

“As parents, we are our children’s advocates,” says Anderson, “but part of the learning and maturing process is teaching them to respectfully stick up for themselves.”

Questions for Further Study—

1. How do you keep the lines of communication open with your children regarding their education?
2. How has your involvement with your child’s education been a benefit to your child’s learning?
3. List two ways you can teach your child to respectfully communicate with his/her teachers.

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Tip #2: Homework

Doug and Julie Titus of Aptos, California, homeschool their four children. The Titus home is small and they do not have a designated homeschool room where the children study. Instead, the children gather around the family's kitchen table to learn. Though it may not seem an ideal place to learn, the Tituses have taken the necessary steps to make the space conducive for learning by setting specific times when learning and studying take place, having resources and materials ready and nearby, eliminating distractions, and by making the space well-lit and comfortable.

"It's not a perfect situation, but it works for us," says Julie. "Plus our older children are able to help the younger children learn."

Such elements, say educators, are the cornerstones for studying at home whether a child is homeschooled or simply doing homework.

In Blaine, Minnesota, students in Lori Haldorson's high school trigonometry class expect

homework—for most students, mastering trigonometry takes practice in class and at home. To make the most out of their homework time, Haldorson tells her students to:

- ▼ Use class time to do homework when it is given.
- ▼ When at home, take frequent breaks as rewards.



- ▼ Find the time that they work best.
- ▼ Take a break from, and then come back to, tough problems so as not to become frustrated.
- ▼ Keep work neat and clean.

- ▼ Enlist homework buddies who can be called for help with problems.

Educators also recommend that parents show interest in their child's homework and be available to assist the child in doing his homework, but do not do it for him.

"Parents only hinder their children when they do the work for them," says Chuck Hepola, a middle school educator for 12 years and an Evangel University graduate who lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. "Children learn responsibility in school. Parents reinforce that by showing their children how to figure something out, but not by doing the work for them."

Tip #3: God First, Everything Else Second

Children, especially teenagers, seem to be busier than ever. They divide their time between school, part-time jobs, friends, church, and extracurricular activities such as the drama club, band, and sports. But educators warn that too much of a good

thing is not always good.

“Students need to be realistic about what they can and cannot do,” says Haldorson, who serves as a youth sponsor at her church. “They need to know that they can back off on some things and make other things a priority.”

The decision is not always easy.

“Church is priority,” says Vaughn. “If football and basketball or anything else interferes to the point that a student cannot participate in the aspects of church that are foundational [such as the youth group], the student will have to make a choice to give something up—and it shouldn’t be the church.”

Hepola, who also has

coached football and basketball for most of his teaching career, agrees.

“God is first,” he says flatly. “I haven’t found anywhere in the Bible where it says a person has to train to be a musician or athlete or have a college degree to get into heaven. When a student puts Christ first, he or she will be able to get done what he or she needs to get done.”

But what if a sport or activity keeps a student from attending a church meeting every now and then?

“If there is an occasional conflict, families need to talk about it,” says Vaughn. “They need to ask themselves, ‘How is it going to impact our values and our overall pattern of put-

ting God first in our lives?’”

David Boyd, National Children’s Ministries Agency director for the Assemblies of God, says church attendance and participation are imperative. Boyd points to *Transforming Your Children into Spiritual Champions* by George Barna. In the book, Barna says a person’s moral foundation is generally in place by the time he reaches age 9, and his response to the meaning and value of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is usually determined before the age of 18.

“If you don’t become an intentional learner of biblical things as a child,” says Boyd, “it is difficult to become one later in life.”

Questions for Further Study—

1. Out of the six homework tips given, which does your child need improvement on?
2. How have you balanced showing interest in your child’s homework without doing it for him/her?
3. How have you responded when school activities conflict with church?

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Tip #4: Become a Lifelong Learner

Ben Franklin once said, “Genius without education is like silver in the mine.” Formal education is extremely important, but many of life’s greatest lessons will take place outside the classroom. Many home-school students learn much of their curricular program in the field at places such as museums, libraries, and zoos. Even if field trips to such places are not possible, experts say don’t worry, because learning can take place anywhere—even in a family’s backyard. The key, according to educators, is that parents model what it means to be a lifelong learner.

“Have your child plant flowers with you or go on a nature walk; that’s science,” says Anderson. “Have them use a map to figure out where their friends live; that’s math and geography.”

Anderson and others say in order to teach someone to be a lifelong learner, one must be a lifelong learner. “My most successful students are the ones who come from homes that are

pro-learning,” says Anderson. “No matter how many degrees you obtain, you always need to be learning.”



Tip #5: Get Organized

Students who are organized tend to have greater academic success. Help your youngster get organized by:

- ▼ Having separate folders for each subject they are studying.
- ▼ Having a clean, uncluttered, and comfortable spot for your child to do homework.

- ▼ Helping child set short- and long-range goals.
- ▼ Knowing class and school routines and reviewing them with your child.

Tip #6: Read to Succeed

One of the best ways to encourage your children to read is to read to them. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found that 76 percent of children who were read to at least three times a week had already mastered the letter-sound relationship at the beginning of words by the time they entered kindergarten. This compared to 64 percent of children who were read to less than three times a week.

Educators recommend parents:

- ▼ Read to their children on a regular basis.
- ▼ Have their children read to them.
- ▼ Keep in mind that not all reading has to be academic—it can be for entertainment and enjoyment.
- ▼ Encourage children to read everything out loud, from road signs to cereal boxes.

