

Helping Children Learn®

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



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Stop a slump with strategies that encourage student motivation

The teacher wants your child to learn. You want your child to learn. But it's *your child's* desire to learn that really makes a difference to his success as a student. If his motivation is in a February slump, here are five strategies to revive it:



1. **Tell your child** you believe he can do well in school. If he struggles, work with the teacher to find solutions.
2. **Give your child** age-appropriate freedoms. Let him choose between two places to study, or whether to do assignments before or after dinner.
3. **Correct mistakes** in a positive way. Don't say, "You had difficulty with spelling." Instead, try, "You spelled everything right except these three words. I bet you can learn them with practice."
4. **Offer specific compliments.** Don't just say "Great job! Nice handwriting!" Say, "Your report is written so neatly. I can tell that put careful effort into it."
5. **Add a real-life dimension** to learning. Let school lessons spark your imagination. Visit age-appropriate educational websites with your child. Visit a museum, in person if possible, or online. Do a science experiment or create a savings plan for a family purchase together.



Overcome obstacles to thinking ahead

Parents know that young children can have a very hard time thinking ahead and following through on their plans. Here are three reasons why—and what you can do about each.

Most children:

1. **Lack organizational skills.** Help your child use a calendar to track assignments, test dates and activities. Add a short "tidy time" to your child's study sessions and have her file papers and store materials where she can find them easily when she needs them.
2. **Have a tough time resisting** the temptation to do something

fun instead of something hard. You can give your child a break when the school day is over, but stick to a simple rule: No recreational screen time until assignments are finished.

3. **Have little sense of time.** Your child may really think one day is enough time to finish a big project. Help her break it down into parts to do over several days.

Promote math and science

Research suggests that children's attitudes toward math and science tend to be set in elementary school, and their parents' attitudes play a part in this. To make sure your child stays interested in math and science:

- **Play games together** that involve math and science skills.
- **Help your child see** herself as someone who can learn to master these subjects. Remind her that "Smart is something you *get*, not something you *just are*."
- **Point to diverse role models.** Math and science are for everyone, not just one kind of person.

Source: "Changing the Game in STEM with Family Engagement," Stem Next Opportunity Fund, nswc.com/prostem.

Suggest a holiday letter

Celebrate Presidents Day (Feb. 15) with a writing activity. What would your child like to say to the president? Which issues does your child think are important? What does he think the president should do? Have him put his thoughts in a letter. Be sure to follow the guidelines at www.whitehouse.gov/get-involved.



Breakfast is brain food

What one thing helps children focus during class, understand and remember more, and do better on spelling, reading and math tests? It's breakfast!

Children are less likely to eat breakfast if they feel rushed. Establish a schedule that lets your child have enough time to fuel up for a productive school day.



Source: M. Levin, MPH, "Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning," Food Research & Action Center, nswc.com/breakfast.



How can I help my child take a more positive outlook?

Q: My fifth grader has never been bubbly. But this year she has become so negative. She doesn't like school. She doesn't like her teacher. Last week, I asked her to plan something special for the two of us to do. Later, she said it was "OK, I guess." What else can I do?

A: These are challenging times, and there could be many reasons for your child's outlook. So begin by asking her about things that get her down. If one issue (or person) comes up over and over, you can brainstorm together about ways she can address it.

Here are some other steps to take:

- **Allow your child** to vent. Let her complain about schoolwork for a minute or two. Then redirect her by saying, "Well, you still need to do this before tomorrow." Say that everyone has responsibilities—like them or not.
- **Model the attitude** you'd like your child to have. Talk about ways you handle your own disappointments.
- **Help your child make choices** and take responsibility for improving her life where she can. It's a way of empowering her.
- **Consult with your child's doctor** or school counselor. If you think she may be overanxious or depressed, it's important to take action.



Do you add to your child's vocabulary?

There is a clear connection between a large vocabulary and academic success. Word knowledge improves comprehension and communication skills. Are you helping your child expand his vocabulary? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

1. **Do you talk** with your child about new words and their meanings?
2. **Do you relate** new words to familiar ideas? "Let's organize your room by *categorizing* your toys."
3. **Do you select** a Word of the Day and have each family member try to use it at least three times?
4. **Do you have** your child keep a personal dictionary where he writes new words and their meanings?

5. **Do you play** word games as a family?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are giving your child word power. For each no, try that idea.

"Good words are worth much, and cost little."
—George Herbert

Review your expectations

Research links high parent expectations to high student achievement. But to be effective, expectations also need to be realistic. Make sure your expectations are:

- **Appropriate** for your individual child. Take her age, personality and maturity into account.
- **Clear.** State expectations in simple terms your child can easily understand.
- **Important.** Focus on expectations for behaviors that encourage school success, such as timeliness and effort.

Source: M. Pinquart and M. Ebeling, "Parental Educational Expectations and Academic Achievement in Children and Adolescents—A Meta-analysis," *Educational Psychology Review*, Springer, nswc.com/highexpectations.

Help your child apply past lessons to current projects

If your child is bogged down in big project, help him draw on previous experiences. He may not have had an assignment just like this, but he's done other projects. What has he learned from them about how he works best that might help him now?



Ask questions to encourage thinking about reading

To deepen your child's comprehension of material she's reading, ask questions that encourage her to:

1. **Consider cause and effect.** How were the characters affected by one another's actions?
2. **Explain the message.** Did the author have a clear opinion or point to make? What was it? Does your child agree?
3. **Make connections** to real-life. If the story is about a mouse, for example, what does she know about mice that matches or differs from the details in the story?

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