

# Even Busy Parents Can Help Kids With School

by Joyce Gall

**What** are the best ways for parents to help their children get through elementary, middle, and high school successfully? A few years ago, I interviewed parents whose children were doing well in school to find out what role parents played in helping their children succeed. I have since conducted many parent workshops in which parents shared both their successes and concerns about assisting in their children's education. The hundreds of examples provided by parents fall into three general categories: nurture, structure and instruction.

**Nurture** involves giving a young person loving attention and encouragement on a consistent basis. Nurturing parents also provide the material resources young people need to learn and grow, like food, shelter, clothing, transportation, study supplies, and fun things.

**Structure** involves providing order, consistency, and accountability in young people's lives. Parents provide structure by monitoring their daughter or son's activities inside and outside the home, and using positive discipline, with clear consequences for appropriate behavior or misbehavior but no harsh physical punishment, criticism, or threats.

**Instruction** involves a personal, caring type of guidance that fits naturally into the parent-child relationship. Parents help their children become more independent and self-sufficient.

Below I give examples of two ways parents nurture their kids—equipping and encouragement—two ways they structure their kids' learning—monitoring and discipline—and three ways they instruct their kids—modeling, enrichment, and coaching.

**Equipping** - Parents of achieving children do more than meet children's basic needs for clothing, shelter, protection, and transportation. They also equip their children for the job of being a student; for example, studies show that students who do not eat a healthy breakfast have trouble remaining mentally alert at school. Several parents mentioned their efforts to make sure their children eat breakfast before going to school, and to provide nutritious food at home for meals and snacks.

These parents also tried to set up the home environment to support their children with the demands of homework. Even in small or crowded homes, they made sure the children had a place to study, equipped with whatever resource materials they could provide.

Many parents also mentioned their efforts to provide a consistent family routine; for example, an hour of "quiet time" every evening during which the TV and radio are turned off and everyone in the family engages in quiet activities such as reading, sewing, or napping.

**Encouragement** - Successful parents encourage and acknowledge the accomplishments of each child. A high school student reported that his parents helped him by never criticizing him when he did poorly in school. They also praised his efforts and improvements rather than comparing him to his higher-achieving sister. Some parents noted that their children responded well to a reward system involving money for each "A" grade, but others put more emphasis on praise and an occasional reward that is in itself educational, such as a good novel or a ticket to a play.

**Monitoring** - Parents of successful students develop the habit of taking time to hear about each child's day and to look over tests and assignments brought home from school. When a father found that his daughter no longer voluntarily shared information, he began to ask questions such as how she planned to choose a paper topic or review for a test. Most successful parents said they read material sent home from school, attended school functions, if possible, and, when a concern arose, talked to their son or daughter. If necessary, they also spoke with a teacher or other member of the school staff.

**Discipline** - Parents use discipline to guide their kids' learning by setting clear, fair expectations for each child, and following up with positive or negative consequences that are also clear and fair. They assign family responsibilities, give praise and recognition when their children do things that please them, wait until they are not angry so they can communicate clearly and respectfully with their children about behaviors they are not happy with, and limit their use of punishment.

**Modeling** - Several mothers who returned to college said that they served as good examples to their children, modeling discipline and achievement, and sharing their strategies to balance study demands with other duties and personal needs. The example of "quiet time" also involves parent modeling. When the children are expected to turn off the TV and do their homework, parents can model studious activity themselves, rather than staying in front of the "tube."

Parents who realize their importance as models work on the challenges in their own lives, thereby serving as good examples. In one case, a parent who noticed her son losing interest in school suspected that he might be reacting to her discouragement about her job situation. When she got job counseling and began training for a better position, his interest returned.

**Enrichment** - Both at home and when they go places together, parents of successful students help their children make connections between school learning and real life. One mother turned grocery shopping into a math and economics lesson, pointing out the relative prices and sizes of items and having her daughter help select the best buys. When planning a vacation, a father said he involves his son and daughter in calculating distances and planning the best routes in order to experience the interesting historical and geographical features of the areas through which they will travel.

**Coaching** - When parents coach, they take on the role of teacher to help their daughter or son learn more about a subject. I found that successful parents coached their children when they had the time, ability, and interest to do a good job. A mother of a high schooler said she scanned his textbook when a test was coming up, wrote questions, and left a few on the table each morning for him to test himself on before leaving for school. A father whose son was having difficulty in science helped him review various study skills that would help improve his understanding, such as taking notes on the teacher's class presentations and making sketches of scientific processes described in the textbook.

All parents have successes and failures to share. Talking to other parents can reveal many ways to help that are not time consuming or difficult, but will contribute a great deal to our children's academic and personal effectiveness.

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