

The 10 Best Ways to Help Your 5th-Grader Succeed in School - A parent's to-do list.

By Ann E. LaForge

1. Encourage reading in any way you can
2. Treat your child as though he's an author
3. Make math part of her everyday life
4. Teach your child how to listen
5. Support your child's teacher and the school rules
6. Tell the teacher everything
7. Make sure your child is ready for school
8. Spend time in your child's classroom
9. Encourage responsibility and independence
10. Ask your child about school every day

1. Encourage reading in any way you can

There is no way to overestimate the importance of reading. It not only enhances learning in all of the other subject areas, it exposes children to a wealth of information and experiences they might not otherwise enjoy. It stimulates the imagination, nourishes emotional growth, builds verbal skills, and influences analyzing and thinking. In fact, according to every teacher I spoke to, reading *to* or *with* your child every day is the single most important thing you can do — at every grade level.

You shouldn't worry so much about *how well* your child is reading in any particular grade. Different children acquire reading skills at different ages and in different ways. But you can promote a love of reading by giving your child lots of fun experiences with print at whatever level he's in.

- Make sure there are lots of different kinds of reading materials geared to their interests around the house (for instance, a kids sports magazine, or books on the sports or other activities she loves).
- Treat your child like a reading expert, no matter what kinds of books he/she loves to read. If he's/she's a horror story addict, for instance, say: "You've been reading a lot of those horror story books. Which one do you think is best? Why?"
- Make sure your child has some free time every day when he/she can curl up in a chair and read. Read your own books, magazines, or newspapers when your child is reading.
- Keep reading aloud to your child (to strengthen his/her vocabulary, comprehension, and listening skills, as well as his/her enjoyment of reading).

2. Treat your child as though they're an author

He/She doesn't have to be Hemingway or Shakespeare. All he/she has to do is grow up thinking that he/she can put thoughts and words onto paper. And the sooner he/she starts, the better.

By now, your child is probably a confident writer, and isn't afraid to use improper spellings on his/her first drafts. He/She knows he/she can go back and correct spelling mistakes during the revise process. Here's how to support him/her:

- Let your child see you write — and correct your own mistakes; ask him/her their opinion on something you've written (i.e., "Is this note to the teacher clear?").
- Give gifts associated with writing, such as special pencils and pens, a desk lamp, a hard-bound diary, a children's dictionary, or personalized stationery.
- Encourage your child to write using the computer; teach them how to use the spell-checker.
- Show pride in what your child writes by displaying their books and stories for visitors and other family members to enjoy, or having her read them aloud.
- Encourage your child to have a pen pal.
- Invite your child to do crossword puzzles, anagrams, and other word games that build vocabulary and fluency.
- Read together, and talk about the books and authors you both love.

3. Make math part of everyday life

Leave the flashcards, workbooks, and other skill-and-drill stuff to the teacher. At home, the best way to help your child learn to love math is to play with numbers, and to frequently point out the various ways in which math makes our lives easier. By working with tangible objects, and counting, sorting, estimating, measuring, looking for patterns, and solving real-life problems, children learn to think in mathematical terms, without worrying whether or not they're "smart enough" to do math.

Almost anything you do that involves numbers and/or problem solving will build your child's math skills. Here are just a few ideas to get you started:

- Ask your child to help you create a pattern for a quilt square or an abstract picture using markers and paper; construction paper in different colors, cut into square, triangle, and other shapes; or shapes cut out of different fabrics.
- Play board games, dice games, and card games (such as War) with your child. Encourage her to make up her own games.
- Talk about how you use math when: balancing your checkbook, paying cashiers, changing bills for coins, setting your household budget, depositing money in the bank, buying birthday gifts, etc.
- Teach your child to budget his own money — by helping him/her save up for a special toy or activity.
- Involve your child in measuring ingredients for recipes.
- Ask for help with food shopping ("Which is the better deal here?"; "How much does each one cost per pound?"). Let him/her bring a calculator to the grocery store.
- Encourage your child to think of different solutions to problems. For example: "You have \$20 of birthday money to spend. Try to come up with three different ways to spend it."
- Most of all, try to be positive about math — even if it was your worst subject in school. If your child's having trouble in it, or starts complaining that it's too hard or too boring, act as though you know that if he/she keeps on trying, they'll improve. "Everyone learns at different rates and in different ways," you could say. "That's why we have teachers. But I know you can do it if you keep on trying."

4. Teach your child how to listen

Teachers who've been around for 15 or more years say they've seen a definite decline in children's attention spans and listening skills since they first started teaching. Many of them attribute it not only to the fast and entertaining pace of television and computer games, but to the fact that many children today don't have a lot of time to just sit around, listening and talking to family members. Between parents' jobs and children's after-school activities, it's hard, sometimes, to get everyone in the same room for a family dinner once a week.

But being able to focus on what other people are saying is an important element in learning. So, whenever possible, try to build your child's listening skills. Here are some strategies that will help:

- Read aloud to your child on a regular basis — even after he/she has learned to read by themselves. Ask questions as you read, to make sure your child is understanding what they hears.
- Limit television, computer, and video game time. While they're all entertaining, and can even be educational, they tend to promote tunnel vision. Make sure the time your child spends in front of a screen is balanced by time spent with other people, talking face to face.
- When you speak to your child, make eye contact and gently touch his/her shoulder or arm, to secure his attention.
- When giving directions, ask your child to repeat back to you what they heard you say — to make sure they really did hear, and do understand what they need to do.
- Model good listening behaviors. When your child wants to talk to you, for example, stop what you're doing and look at him while he's speaking. When finished, say something that indicates you heard him/her, even if you only repeat back what they said: "So, you want to stay up a little later tonight to watch the All-Star Game."
- Play talking and listening games with your child like Charades and Twenty Questions.
- Teach your child that even if an adult is saying something they find boring, they still need to listen, look at the person, and show respect.
- Spend time with your child doing quiet activities that encourage conversation, such as taking a walk together, taking a ride in the car, folding laundry, picking strawberries, etc.

5. Support your child's teacher and the school rules

Even if you don't agree with them. It doesn't do any child any good to hear their parents say that school is "a waste of time," that school rules are "dumb," or that what they're learning is "stupid" or "useless." Your child doesn't have a choice about going to school, so they might as well feel good about where they're spending her time. They'll be more motivated to work hard and succeed if they think *you* think that what they're doing is worthwhile.

So even if a school rule seems silly or unfair to you, or you think your child's teacher is dead wrong about something, don't make a big issue about it *in front of your child*. Instead, take your concerns straight to the source.

The key steps toward resolution

The best way to approach a problem or disagreement involving the school is to:

- **Make an appointment to see or speak to the teacher.** For minor problems and concerns, a telephone conference may be sufficient. But if you feel the issue merits more serious discussion, arrange to meet with the teacher face to face. Don't try to corner her before or after school, when her attention is on the students. Instead, shoot for a time when she can give you her full attention, and is less likely to be stressed or tense.
- **Consider carefully what you want to say before you visit the school.** Write down a list of your concerns, and why they're concerns. Let your list rest for a while, and then go back to it, when you're feeling calm and rational. Try to frame all of your concerns in the most positive light possible, so you won't immediately put the teacher on the defensive. For example, instead of saying, "You're not doing anything to help my child improve in reading," you should shoot for: "I'm really concerned about my child's progress in reading. I wanted to check in with you to see if there's anything else that can be done, at school and at home, to help her move forward."

If necessary, practice your spiel in front of a third party, to make sure you don't sound too threatening. You may feel like blasting the teacher; you may even have good reason to do so. But your child will not benefit in any way if you alienate her teacher. Try to remember that the best school solutions come when teacher and parent act as a team.

- **When you meet with the teacher, voice your concerns in the least threatening, most friendly tone you can muster.** If you lose your temper, you may lose the chance to be taken seriously. Remind yourself that your goal is to help your child, not blow off steam. If possible, bring tangible evidence to back up your side of the story.
- **Prepare to listen to the teacher's side.** There may be mitigating factors of which you're unaware; you may have gotten the wrong information from your child; there may be a miscommunication that's complicating the issue. Try to be — and act — open-minded.
- **If you and the teacher cannot come to a mutually satisfying solution, enlist the principal (or the school's psychologist, or a learning specialist).** "I appreciate what you're saying, but I'm still concerned," you might say. "I'd feel more comfortable if I got another opinion on the matter. I'd like to meet with the principal." Or, if you're afraid the teacher will take her anger at you out on your child (this shouldn't happen, but it could), request an anonymous meeting with the principal. If the second meeting doesn't help, the next step is to contact the superintendent. But only you can decide whether or not that's necessary.

Sometimes you just have to accept a less-than-perfect teacher or classroom situation. In most cases, it won't do permanent damage to your child, and it may even help him/her develop some healthy coping skills. Also, sometimes things that upset parents about school don't really bother the students. So you may want to talk to your child first, before forging ahead with a complaint, or requesting a transfer for your child. In some cases, moving a child from one classroom to another mid-year would be worse — from the child's point of view — than having him stick it out with a weak teacher.

On the other hand, you shouldn't feel intimidated by school personnel. If you feel you have a legitimate complaint (or if your child's health, safety, or welfare is at stake), and your gut keeps telling you to fight for your child, you should do that. Just try to remember, at every step of the way, that the less hostility you communicate, the more likely people will be to listen carefully to your concerns, and work toward a mutually acceptable solution. Let the power of persistence — rather than the impact of aggression — carry your case.

If the teacher calls you

The steps outlined above should also be followed if the teacher calls *you* to discuss problems your child is causing at school. Even if you think the teacher is wrong, or your child insists that they're innocent, go into the conference with your mind open and your demeanor calm and friendly. Most teachers aren't "out to get" their students; they genuinely want to make the child's school year a success.

6. Tell the teacher everything

That is, everything that's happening at home that might affect how your child behaves in school. That includes positive changes (such as the birth of a baby, a move to a bigger and better house, or even a vacation to Disney World), as well as negative ones (a separation or divorce, a death or illness in the family, a parent who's lost a job).

It's not that teachers are nosy. It's that most children are not terribly skilled at handling excitement or coping with changes or stress. And they all carry their baggage from home into the classroom. Even something little, like a fight with a sibling in the car on the way to school, can affect a child's behavior or performance at school.

You needn't go into all of the gory details of what's happening at home, either. All the teacher expects to hear is, "I just wanted to let you know that we're moving to a new house next week, and Allan is pretty nervous about the whole thing" or "If Sheila seems a little hyper these days it's because her aunt is taking her to her first Broadway play this weekend."

What else do teachers want to know?

- **How your child feels about school:** Is he/she unhappy? Does he/she think it's too hard? Is he/she complaining about it at home? Or does he/she like it? Is there some special activity that he/she really enjoyed? Does he/she talk about the things he/she learns in school? Most teachers would rather hear about problems sooner than later, so they can work on turning things around as quickly as possible. They — like the rest of us — also appreciate a kind or encouraging word now and then. So don't forget to mention the good stuff.
- **How your child feels about school friends:** Is he/she making any? Does he/she feel like a part of the class — or an outcast? Is he/she being teased or harassed? Is he/she too shy to make new friends? Does he/she need to branch out from his/her one best friend and get to know other kids? In elementary school, there is still a lot teachers can do to mold social relationships. But they need to know what the problem is before they can start to solve it.
- **What your child's special passions are:** Sometimes, a child who is a reluctant reader can be drawn to books that speak to a special interest, such as sports, or pirates, or ice skating, or animals. Or, a desire to write may be stimulated by an invitation to describe one of the subjects your child loves. Let the teacher know if there is something that really motivates your child, so she can capitalize on it in the classroom.
- **What your child's special needs are:** That includes anything from allergies to phobias, physical or medical conditions, learning problems or preferences, special talents, emotional concerns, and behavioral patterns. If you think an issue might come up in these or other areas, let the teacher know.

7. Make sure your child is ready for school

All through elementary school, it's the parent's job to make sure a child:

- **Gets to bed at a reasonable hour.** That means around 7:30 to 8 p.m. Children who regularly go to bed later on school nights have a hard time keeping up in school, teachers say. They end up being tired and grouchy, they're more likely to have behavioral problems, and they aren't able to fulfill their academic potential. Even sleep specialists are now beginning to believe that certain behavioral and learning problems among children are the result of undetected sleep deprivation.

The bottom line is that a good night's sleep is the best guarantee of a pleasant and productive day at school.

- **Eats a filling and nutritious breakfast.** Children who skip breakfast may not feel hungry when they first get to school, but according to teachers, they usually hit a slump around mid-morning and can't keep their minds on schoolwork, until sometime after lunch.

If your child doesn't like the traditional foods kids eat for breakfast, let him eat what he does like. There's nothing nutritionally wrong with eating pizza or a peanut butter sandwich in the morning. Or, if all else fails, send him to school with a breakfast bar and a box of juice, so he can get *something* in his belly before the first bell rings.

- **Wears the proper clothes for both the day's activities and the weather.** A kid who goes to school without mittens, a hat, or boots in the winter may have to sit inside for recess while her classmates spend their excess energy on the playground. A child who doesn't have shorts and sneakers on gym day may end up sitting on the sidelines, while everyone else is running around having fun.

Children don't always have the best judgment when it comes to protective clothing. (If it's warm in the house, they assume it's going to be warm outside, for example.) And they don't always remember which days they have gym or other special activities. So it's up to you to tell your child what to expect in terms of weather, and what to wear — or at least *bring* — to school.

- **Labels all belongings.** That includes his backpack, lunch box, books, school supplies, gym clothes, gym bag, art smock — and any other piece of clothing or personal item that might somehow get separated from him during the school day. Even 10-year-olds aren't that reliable when it comes to identifying their own clothing from a heap on the locker room floor.
- **Has a lunch or lunch money.** Most children aren't thinking about lunch when they run out to meet the bus or jump in the car in the morning. It's your job to either make it, take it, or remind your child to remember about lunch.
- **Puts her homework in her backpack, to bring to school.** Fifth graders may be able to do this on their own, but it never hurts to ask, "Got your homework?" before your child slips out the door.
- **Remembers to bring special supplies for special days.** Find a way to help you both stay on top of teacher requests. Hang up a big calendar with important dates circled in red, for instance, or put up post-it notes on the bathroom mirror the night before a special day at school.
- **Knows exactly who will pick him/her up and what will happen when the school day ends.** If you anticipate *any* change in the daily routine, or in the person greeting your child after school, make sure you give plenty of notice.
- **Gets to school on time — every day.** Chronic lateness is not only disruptive to the entire class, it can make a child feel out-of-step all day. Plus, it sends a message that school is not important enough to be on time for.

8. Spend time in your child's classroom

Even if it's only once a year, and you have to take a half-day off from work to do it. All children get a real thrill when they see their parent in their classroom. It sends a powerful message that you care about your child, and about his/her education.

Seeing the classroom firsthand is also the best way for you to get a perspective on what and how the teacher is teaching, what kinds of challenges the teacher is facing, what the class chemistry is, how your child fits in within the group, and how he/she interacts with specific peers. Plus, it will give you a better idea of the kinds of questions you should ask to draw your child out when talking about school.

In most schools, you don't need an excuse to visit the classroom. Just ask the teacher if you can come in and observe. If you want an excuse, volunteer. Teachers are always looking for parents to:

- Share expertise in a particular subject area related to your job or hobbies
- Conduct writing workshops, or help children "publish" their books
- Tutor kids who need extra help, or work with a small group of advanced students in math or other subjects
- Chaperone field trips
- Sew costumes for a school play
- Type up a classroom newsletter or literary magazine

If you have lots of time to give, you might consider:

- Being a "class parent" (the person who acts as a liaison between the teacher and the other parents — rounding up chaperones for school trips, for instance, or finding volunteers to bake for the class bake sales)
- Being a playground monitor
- Joining the school's parent/teacher association
- Joining the principal's school advisory committee (if there is one)
- Running for your local school board

At the very least, you should plan to make time to attend:

- Special events to which parents are invited (a Mother's Day brunch, prepared by the children, for instance; or a Writer's Tea, at which children read their stories aloud to their parents)
- Special school events, such as the annual Holiday Show or Spring Musical
- The school's annual open house
- All of the scheduled parent/teacher conferences

9. Encourage responsibility and independence

Both of these are essential to independent learning. And both will make it easier for your child to adjust to the demands of school, and get along with his teacher and classmates. So, whenever possible, let your child do things for himself/herself — and for others.

For example, encourage him to:

- **Play an active role in getting ready for school.** That includes picking out school clothes (preferably the night before), getting up on time (using an alarm clock, if necessary), getting dressed, washing up and brushing his/her teeth, getting his/her own breakfast ready, making up his/her bed, and checking to make sure he/she has everything he/she needs in his/her backpack. If necessary, make him/her a checklist to help him/her remember everything that needs to be done.
- **Develop a homework routine.** While there's no set formula, it will help if your child has a regular time and place to do her homework each day. That way they're less likely to forget to do it, and less likely to fight about doing it "later on."
- **Unpack his own backpack.** Teach him/her that as soon as he/she gets home from school, he/she should unpack his/her backpack, put his/hers homework materials in his/her homework place, and hand you (or put in a special place) any newsletters, notes from the teacher, papers to sign, or special work he's brought home. *Then* he/she can watch TV, or have his/her snack, or do whatever else is planned.

If you make this part of a daily routine, you're less likely to be hit during the morning rush with, "Oh, no! I'm supposed to bring in cupcakes for the party today" or "Today's the day you're supposed to come to school for our science fair."

- **Pick up her own mess.** That includes toys scattered on the living room floor, bikes, and roller skates left out on the driveway, and wet towels left cold and lonely on the bathroom floor. It may take longer and require more effort for you to insist that your child pick things up themselves, but in the long run it's better for him/her than having you always do it. In school, he/she won't have a choice.
- **Get involved in family meals.** Fifth graders can often fix their own breakfast, make their own lunch, and help plan meals and shop for food.
- **Perform regular chores that benefit the entire family.** Even little things like taking out the trash regularly will help your child see themselves as part of a larger family team. It will also build his/her sense of competence and confidence.
- **Hold your child accountable for his actions.** If the teacher calls up and says he/she caught your child cheating, he/she hasn't seen homework from your child in two weeks, or your child hasn't passed in a major project yet, don't jump to your child's defense with excuses. Instead, schedule a meeting with your child and the teacher to find out why he's/she's slacking off or misbehaving, and establish a mutually satisfactory consequence. Make it clear

that your child has to take responsibility for his own actions, even if it means getting a poor grade or being grounded.

10. Ask your child about school every day

It isn't always easy to get the scoop on school from your own child. If you ask a perfectly normal, sincere question like, "What did you do at school today?", you're likely to get the classic response: "Nothing."

One reason is that so many things happen in the classroom that it's hard for the average child to answer a question like that. He/She can't remember everything they did, and even if they could, they wouldn't know where to start. It doesn't help to ask, "What did you learn at school today?" or "How was school today?" either. Both will elicit one-word answers ("Nothing" or "Fine"), because they're too broad and too vague for most children to process.

But it's still important to ask about school, because it teaches your child that school is important, and that you really are interested in their life. So how can you get your child to open up? Here's what other parents say really works:

- **Don't ask too soon.** "When my son gets off the bus, the last thing he wants to do is talk about school," says parent Mary Mitchell. "He's too busy thinking about playing with his toys or visiting his friends. So I've learned to let him chill out and play awhile before asking any questions."
- **Develop a ritual.** "For my son, the magic moment is bedtime," says parent Charles James. "He's probably just trying to stall me, so he can stay up later. But when he's all tucked in and the lights are off, I hear the most detailed descriptions about school."
- **Ask specific questions.** "I get the best responses when I ask my son about something I'm pretty sure he did at school that day," says parent Julie Ritzer Ross. For instance: "Who sat next to you at lunch? How did you do on your spelling test?" The more specific you can be, the better.
- **Read everything the teacher sends home.** "The notes and newsletters that come home in my son's backpack are really the most reliable sources of information," says Charles James. "I find out what my son is learning about, what's coming up in terms of special events or field trips, what kind of help the teacher could use in the classroom, and what I can do at home to reinforce what my son is learning in school. It's not always easy to find time to read them, but it's worth the effort because it helps me fill in the blanks from conversations with my son."
- **Give your child space.** Some children like to think of school as their own private world, where their parents and siblings can't intrude. If your child is like that, don't push. Let him/her know you're interested in his/her school day, and let him/her approach you if he/she has anything really important to share. Then stay in touch behind the scenes with the teacher, to make sure everything's going okay.