

BACK TO SCHOOL: POSITIVE ROLES YOU CAN PLAY IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOLING

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It's the start of the year again and to most children, that signals the end of the holidays and the start of school again. To some children, this may not be something to look forward to. School can sometimes become a place associated with boring, tiresome imprisonment rather than exciting, fun discovery.

Many parents are at their wits end to figure ways to get their children more engaged and excited about going to school. We all want our children to enjoy their schooling and to learn from their experiences there.

The good news is that there is a lot that parents can do to help their children develop a more positive attitude towards their schooling and their learning. Here are some do's and don'ts.

1. **Do get them to talk about school. Do not brush off their experiences as being insignificant**

Children when they first begin kindergarten or school, will have stories to tell when they come home. Some days they will come home excited about something that happened that day and will be eager to share this with you. It could be something the teacher taught them, or a game they played with friends during recess, or something funny someone said in class.

Our role here will be to listen. It is not easy, after a long hard day of work to garner up the energy to pay attention to a story that may strike you as boring or repetitive. However, it is important that we do not send the signal to them that what they have experienced in school is insignificant and unimportant. Children can sense when we are really listening or not.

For example, when a child is sharing something with us, we should not be watching TV or reading the newspaper, or finish off work on our computers. It may just take 4 to 5 minutes of our day, but when we listen to our child talk about school, we send the message that their school experiences are interesting and significant.

2. **Do empathize with them when they have difficulties in school. Do not be overly harsh or judgmental**

All children will face some difficulties throughout their schooling years. At the start, it may be separation anxiety, fear of teachers and the lack of friends. Later on it may be issues like examination stress, bullying and conflict with friends or teacher.

We must realize that many children will not share freely with us these problems they are facing. Many are embarrassed by them and may believe that they are abnormal, or in some way to blame for these problems. When children do open up and share with us, it is important that we give them encouragement rather than make them feel worse than they already do.

Statements like; “Oh, that’s only a small problem” “You should not feel like that” “It must have been your fault, who asked you to do that in class” ; merely discourage the child from telling you their problems the next time.

The key is to empathize with them, to make an effort to understand how they are feeling and to communicate to them that we feel for them.

Mr and Mrs. Koay’s 7 year old son was experiencing anxiety at school because he had no friends and was faced with a language barrier because he did not speak Mandarin. “He used to come home miserable and crying each day after school,” relates Mrs. Koay, “at first we didn’t know what to do. We tried telling him that school should be fun, but that had no effect. Finally we were advised by a counselor to just listen to him, hold him and let him cry when he wanted to. After 3 months, he started making friends and things are much better now.”

Letting our children express their emotions through words or through tears will help them cope with their difficulties. Sometimes we need to let them take their own time to adjust to challenged at school. Our role may not be to solve their problems but to remind them that they are not alone in facing their challenges.

3. Do let them learn whatever interest them. Do not limit learning to what they need for their school work.

We must remember that the goal of education is to encourage the child’s love for learning. All children have a natural curiosity for the world around them. Children from birth to about age 4 to 5 years demonstrate their love for learning new things by playing and exploring their environment. However, many children lose this natural sense of intellectual curiosity when they begin school. Perhaps it is because learning is less exciting and fun when they are told ‘what to learn’, ‘when to learn’ and ‘how to learn’..

New theories in education encourage a child-centered style of education, where children are allowed some freedom and choice over what they learn, and the style of learning. The truth is, that each child is unique.

Some parents, concerned about the child’s performance in school-based tests and examinations, may force the child to only study what is in the school curriculum. But a child’s learning potential should not be limited or regulated by the school curriculum. Children, especially at a young age should be allowed to study whatever they are interested in.

Mrs. Tan relates her experience; “When my boy started standard 1, I was very conscious of how he was performing at school. I did not encourage him to pursue other interests because I was worried that he would not have time to complete his homework. Only later did I realize that I was limiting his interest so I started to become more flexible.”

Steven and Irene, parents of two sons agree. “Our motto in the house was, whatever the children were interested in learning about, we encouraged. When our eldest boy

was into animals, we let him spend as much time as he wanted reading books on animals and watching animal documentaries on TV. When our younger boy got interested in planes, we took him to LIMA in Langkawi and bought him books on planes and airports. It's not all the time that children are interested in learning, but when the opportunity comes, we have to take it."

4. ***This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010***