

Ideas
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for
Helping Children Learn
(even in rough times)

Bread and Roses
Writing Program

Family Literacy
Day



When it comes to learning over again as adults, many of us find it hard to keep going. When our own troubles get to be too much, it can feel even harder. If we have children, it raises the stakes.

It can be painful to watch our children go down the same paths we did. We divide our fears between our own learning success and theirs. We worry about them and hope they will stay in school. We want them to do better than us and to keep out of trouble. Even though we want to help them, we might not know how. We may work too many hours or live in an unsafe situation. It may be too hard to keep it all together and help our children to learn. Some of us have mixed feelings about our own learning and our children's. It is clear that we all feel anxious, if our children don't do well. Less clear is that we might also feel anxious if they do really well. If our children know more than we do, maybe they will think we are stupid. Learning at the same time as our children learn can feel tricky.

It's okay. Many people feel this way. We don't have to be perfect parents. We can help our children in those precious moments we have spare time, a clear head and a calm heart.

Idea

Think about learning as the little flame of a candle. We light the fire, tend it, and make sure it doesn't fade away.

In other words, to help, we don't have to know how to teach our children algebra or how to write an essay. We can excite them about learning, support their efforts, and try not to let their interest in learning disappear.



To light their fire, we can excite our children about learning. Together, we explore their lives and the world around them.

Talk

Talk with your children as much as you can. Tell them about your day and ask them about theirs. If you aren't sure how to start, ask about the best and worst parts of their day. Listen to their answers. Try to find out what's going on inside them. Pay attention to what they are feeling as well as what they are saying. Accept their strengths and limits.

Share

Whenever you can, share in your kids' activities. Sit down and watch the shows and movies they enjoy. Listen to the music they like. Ask them for their opinions. Show them how interested you are in what they say. Ask questions about their experience of what happens. Share with them a curiosity about the world around them, especially the world of print and numbers. When you take the bus or subway, look at everything together and talk about what's going on. When they are younger, ask about what they see and when they are older ask about what they like and don't like about something. You can ask what is in a message, such as advertising, as well as what's not in the message or picture.

Play

Laughter makes most tasks easier. Play with your children for as long as they will let you. It's fun to repeat rhymes and silly word games. Sing the songs you remember and tell them stories about your life. Imaginary stories are also a good idea. Play guessing games, where they have to imagine "What would happen if...?" or "What number am I thinking of...?" Try spelling to each other or naming as many countries in the world that you can. Do anything that's fun for both of you.

Sparking your children's learning light comes from the conversations you have with them, the time you spend together and the fun you share.



To tend their fire, we encourage our children to learn, even when they find it hard. Accept mistakes as a natural part of the learning process.

Be on their side

Share with them that you understand how hard school can be. Try to think back to what school felt like for you. This might help you to feel what it is like for them. It's tricky when children are having a hard time. It is hard to know what to do when there are bullies to cope with, racism, or mean teachers. How do parents find the balance between addressing their children's hurt feelings and encouraging them to keep on learning? We care about our kids' feelings, help them to be true to themselves, advocate for them, and continue to value school as a priority. We also remind them not to compare how well or poorly they are doing with how others are doing. Comparing hurts everyone involved.

Stay in the room

Whenever you can, sit with your children while they do their homework. This shows kids that you make homework a priority for you and them. It doesn't mean you have to understand what they are doing or be able to help. If kids ask, it's okay for them to do homework with TV or loud music, unless it becomes a distraction. Talk with your kids about what's best for them and be involved in the final decision.

Cheer them on

Positive words motivate. Tell them when you see them trying hard. You can say, "Great work!" Let them know you love them no matter how well they do.

Tending your children's learning light comes from a shared understanding of what's going on for them, your respect for their input, and a resolve that they will focus on school.



To avoid putting out your children's learning light, show them you are proud of their efforts.

Be gentle

Become aware of when your children feel humiliated or shamed. Stop anyone from putting them on the spot, putting them down, or embarrassing them. Step back and breathe deeply if your children are driving you crazy. Walk away, if you feel you are about to hit them, scream, or say something hurtful. Come back when you are calm. The problem will still be there, but you might feel differently about it.

Be open

Notice if your children are struggling with learning. Reflect on how you feel about it and what the school is saying. Talk with your children about what they think. Figure out what is really best for them, for now and in the future. Don't worry about what anyone says. You don't have to please others. It's up to you to accept or reject offers of help or a label of learning disabled. Find out about all your options and choose the ones that best suit your children.

Respect their choices

Make goals for yourself and your children that are within reach. You don't have to be perfect and neither do they. However, sometimes you or your children might be surprised. You might be better at learning some things than you could ever have imagined. Find out what's right for you and help your children to find out what's right for them. School learning is only one way to learn. It's an important way, but it's not the only way. It's not for everyone. Find out how to give your children as many options as possible and encourage all kinds of learning. Whatever you both choose is okay.

Keeping their learning light going comes from an understanding that all children want to do well. They want to please you and their teachers. This is true in spite of what they say and do or how hard a time they give everyone.



Now that these candles are burning a bit more brightly, it's time to tend to your own learning light as gently as you tended to your children's.



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