



Advice for Parents

Helping your child succeed
in school – and life

WORKSHOP HANDOUT

A note to parents

For more than ten years, What Kids Can Do (WKCD) has gathered the voices and stories of middle and high school age students nationwide. These youth have told us about their desire to do well in school, go to college, improve their community. They want to raise a loving family, right the wrongs they see around them, and much more.

When asked what gives them hope, so many of these youth point to a parent (and to mothers most of all) as their rock and inspiration.

“Everybody needs one person in their life who thinks they’re great, no matter what,” Alice, then 16, told us years ago.

We have confidence that you care deeply about your child’s success, in school and beyond. We’re sure that your life is a workout, often exhausting. We know that you have little time to read a booklet like this, let alone put the ideas into practice. We realize that the suggestions we offer are not simple.

Still, we hope you’ll give these tips a good look. We believe you’ll find it worth the investment.

Thank you!

P.S. We use the word “parent” loosely. You could be a guardian, a grandparent, an aunt or uncle—we’re speaking to all adults who care for children with all they’ve got.

Topics covered here

HOMEWORK

MANAGING STRESS

SELF-CONTROL

MOTIVATION AND CHALLENGE

KEEPING AT IT

CURIOSITY AND RESOURCEFULNESS

SELF-CONFIDENCE

Introduction

Parents are a child's first teachers. The habits that we help our children form will last a lifetime, shaping their success in school, at work, and in the community.

But which are the most important of the many skills they will need? And how can families help children practice those things, with everything else they have to do?

This handout, we believe, has some answers.

We begin with some basics.

- Abilities are **not** fixed at birth.
We can develop them through practice.
- Habits, like self-control and working hard, are also built through practice.
- You can help your child develop both: strong abilities and lasting habits.
- The more your children achieve, the more they will want to achieve. You are setting up a circle: when your children work hard and get good results, they'll want to work harder still.

"It's hard to believe in yourself without a parent behind you. It's not impossible, of course, but harder. All the positive little things they do and say, it adds up." – **Grace**



**The habits that start in childhood last a lifetime—
from academic smarts to persistence.**

Homework Tips

YOUR GOAL: To help your child develop good homework habits.

To get the most out of homework, kids need practice communicating with their teacher. You can help them learn to

- Let the teacher know they want to do well
- Ask questions if the assignment is unclear
- Tell the teacher how long a homework task took
- Tell the teacher what was difficult about a homework task
- Tell the teacher when personal circumstances affect homework completion

Homework takes organization. You can help your child learn to

- Keep a “homework notebook” with all assignments and deadlines
- Make a quiet space and time for homework
- Gather materials needed for the homework task
- Get completed homework back to school

Homework also requires focus and persistence. You can help your child

- Commit to getting the homework done
- Give up distractions during homework time
- Problem-solve what gets in the way
- Do first the homework
- Get up and take a short break when frustrated

Homework demands time management. You can help your child learn to

- Prioritize homework tasks by importance and deadline
- Set reasonable time limits for homework
- Balance homework with chores, athletics, and family commitments

NOTES TO YOURSELF:

Your child can do well in school—and practice helps.
Homework gives kids that practice, along with confidence.

Managing stress

(These checklists are from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry)

YOUR GOALS: To recognize when and why children feel stress and to help your child learn how to manage it.

Stress may be causing a serious problem if a young person . . .

- Has lost interest in things he or she once enjoyed
- Doesn't sleep or eat well
- Wants to be alone and avoids friends and family
- Daydreams and doesn't want to do things
- Experiences a sudden drop off in their grades
- Grieves for an abnormally long time after a death
- Feels guilty or not worth anything
- Shows extreme anger and/or sadness and overreacts to many things
- Worries constantly about appearance and/or physical problems
- Gets frequent headaches and stomachaches
- Cannot make decisions and or concentrate well
- Turns to drugs or alcohol
- Eats (or diets) way too much
- Exercises obsessively
- Takes extreme risks

What raises stress in kids?

- School demands and frustrations
- Negative feelings and thoughts about themselves
- Changes in their bodies
- Problems with friends or peers at school
- Problems in the family or chronic illness
- Financial strains
- Unsafe living environment or neighborhood
- Death of a family member, relative, or close friend
- Moving or changing schools
- Taking on too much or having too high expectations

The same switch that turns on the stress response can also turn it off. As soon as we decide that a situation is no longer threatening, changes occur in our minds and bodies to help us calm down.

Chronic stress harms our ability to think clearly and manage our emotions. It sets kids up for failure.

You can help your children in these ways

- ✓ Monitor, as best you can, their health, behavior, thoughts, or feelings
- ✓ Watch for overloading. Ask how they're doing (don't lecture) and listen hard to what they say
- ✓ Learn and model stress management skills yourself.
- ✓ Point your child—in reasonable amounts—to mood-boosting activities like sports, music and art, volunteer opportunities

These strategies help kids reduce their stress

- ✓ Exercise and eat regularly
- ✓ Avoid excess caffeine (and soda with caffeine), illegal drugs, alcohol, tobacco
- ✓ Learn relaxation exercises (such as abdominal breathing)
- ✓ Build a circle of friends who can provide positive support
- ✓ Rehearse situations that cause stress and practice positive responses
- ✓ Break a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks
- ✓ Turn negative "self-talk" into positive. Negative: "I can't do this." Positive: "I'll do the best I can."
- ✓ Learn to feel okay about doing a "good enough" job—don't insist on perfection, from yourself or others
- ✓ Take a stress break! Listen to music, talk to a friend, read, stretch

ABDOMINAL BREATHING

Step 1: Straighten the front of the body. You may sit up, or lie down facing up. Relax any tension that you may feel at the moment: belly, shoulders, jaw, and face.

Step 2: Bring the awareness to your breath and notice if you are naturally breathing into your belly, or your chest, or both. Don't control it. Just observe.

Step 3: Deliberately draw the air into the bottom of your lungs on the inhale. Let the abdomen expand and extend out. Then, on the exhale, let the abdominal pressure release and, with minimal effort, **slowly** pull the belly in. The chest remains still the whole time. You may place your hand on the belly to feel the rhythmic movement of the abdomen.

Practice the abdominal breath as often as you like, whenever and wherever you like. Try it in a stressful situation. In just a few abdominal breaths, you'll feel a significant difference.

NOTES TO YOURSELF:

Self-control

YOUR GOAL: Helping your child learn to think long-term, control anger, and become more self-aware.

Help your child think long-term

The experts call this “delayed gratification”: the ability to put off an immediate reward in order to gain a better reward later. Help your child see what’s gained by waiting or working hard for the better reward.

Lay out expectations

Some kids react poorly when they don’t know what to expect in a situation—or what will be expected of them. Fill them in ahead of time: “This Sunday I need you to watch your sister until one o’clock. After that, you’re free.”

The 4 WHATS

When something goes wrong and negative emotions fill your child, try this exercise. Ask: “What did you do?” “What happened when you did that?” “What could you have done instead?” “What would have happened if you had done that?” Listen closely, show you understand, and hold back judgment.

Model self-control

This demands real commitment from a parent, but it’s worth it. If your children see you exercising self-control, they are more likely to do it themselves. Can’t find your wallet and now you’re late? Take a breath and ask out loud where you left it last.

Take a break

When children seem out of control, encourage them to take a break. A snack, a walk around the block, shooting hoops, closing one’s eyes and breathing deeply—changing the scene like this can work wonders. Sometimes all it takes is a brief distraction.

Reinforce the positive

Let your children know when you see them demonstrate self-control (for example, turning down loud music when you ask). Help them think of themselves as people who can successfully control their behavior. You might say: “I know you wanted to go out. But look, you finished practicing and found a way to see your friends tomorrow.”

NOTES TO YOURSELF

One of the best ways to teach your child self-control is to model it yourself.

Motivation and challenge

YOUR GOAL: To help your child develop interests and take on the right amount of challenge.

An Exercise

Ask your child to pick something he or she enjoys doing and wants to get better at. What got them interested? Talk together about the answers.

It looked like fun

- It seemed like something you could probably do
- It involved people you wanted to be with
- Success didn't all depend on you
- No one would be judging you, so the stakes were low

Someone supported and encouraged you from the start

- They broke it down into steps
- They did it with you
- They praised your small successes
- They showed you how to do better

The activity had an audience that mattered to you

- At work or school
- Among friends or family
- In a public place

You had a personal interest in getting good at it

- To express yourself
- To grow into who you want to be
- To feel the pleasure of mastering new challenges

How would you rate your confidence that if you practice hard, you'll succeed at the activity you named? Pick a number from 1 to 5, with 1 "not at all confident" and 5 "fully confident."

We feel motivated when we value what we're trying to learn . . . and when we believe we can succeed if we try.

Keeping at it

YOUR GOAL: To help your child keep on and stay focused, even when quitting seems easier.

Praise more, correct less

Praise your children when they tackle something difficult! But remember to praise their *effort*, not their *talent*. Focusing on talent actually makes kids less likely to persist when challenged. But praising children for effort makes them want to work harder.

Point out that it's worth the trouble

Help your children notice the positives that are coming from their learning. When they accomplish a next step, ask them how it makes them feel. Imagine, together, what it would be like if they didn't persist, if they gave up.

Lay down the law, selectively

"I like when my mother gets in my business when it comes to college, because I'm a slacker," Carmen told us. "There's certain deadlines that need to be met, and so she stays on top of that. The other stuff, it's my business, but the college stuff, she's good."

FORMING THE PERSISTENCE HABIT

Building persistence is like building endurance for a race, slowly training yourself to work harder for longer periods of time. Here are some tips:

- **Measure yourself.** Figure out how long you can work effectively. Measure how long it takes before you slow down or give up.
- **Do an extra 20 percent.** When you feel like quitting, go an extra 20 percent. If you've been working hard for an hour and a half and want to stop, try another 30 minutes before taking a break.
- **Run a burnout day.** Try working longer for one day, following it with a shorter day. By stretching your focus for longer periods once in a while, you can boost your persistence for normal days.

FORMING THE FOCUS HABIT

Even more critical than persistence is focus—giving something your full concentration. Here are some tips:

- **Timebox.** Give yourself 60 minutes to work on a particular task, without resting or engaging in any distractions.
- **Accelerate.** It can take anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes to build up a concentrated focus. Give yourself time to accelerate into a focused state.
- **Cut distractions.** Practice the habit of turning off all outside noise: phones, television, chatting with family or friends.

FORMING THE 'DO IT NOW' HABIT

Don't let yourself procrastinate. Having a strong work ethic means having the phrase "do it now" as a constant hum in the background.

- **Do it now for 30 days.** For the next 30 days, define periods of your day you want to devote to work or personal projects. During those times, remind yourself to "do it now" whenever you feel the urge to

Part of "keeping at it" is learning from mistakes—figuring out what you'll do differently next time.

Curiosity and resourcefulness

YOUR GOAL: To help your child develop an open mind and become more self-reliant.

Tips for developing curiosity—in yourself and your child

Keep an open mind

Be open to learning, unlearning, and relearning. Don't take things for granted.

Ask lots of questions

What, why, when, who, where, and how? Curious people use these words all the time.

Forget “boring”

When you label something “boring,” you close the door on learning more about it.

See learning as fun

If you think of learning as something fun, you will naturally want to dig deeper.

Dip your toe in other worlds

Head to a neighborhood where the people, food, and street life are different. Read a book about growing up in another country. Watch television programs like National Geographic.

Tips for developing resourcefulness

Teach everyday skills

For kids who often take a parent's place, knowing everyday skills comes with the territory. But for families that don't count so much on their children's contributions, household tasks (like doing laundry or grocery shopping) make ideal ways to teach how to be self-reliant and resourceful.

Help your child practice gathering information

Many children are experts in Facebook and YouTube, but far fewer know which Internet sources to trust for reliable information. If your child's school hasn't taught these skills, make it your assignment. Begin by going online and entering, “best Internet search tips.”

Encourage problem-solving

- ✓ Is there another way to get what I want?
- ✓ Is the desired result really the best result?
- ✓ Who has information that might help me?
- ✓ What is one more thing I can try?

Encourage your child to explore the world, ask questions, and think, “What if . . . ?”

Self-confidence

YOUR GOAL: To show that you believe in your child—by praising effort, every time.

Attend your child's events

"I can hear my mama no matter what race I'm doing—if it's a 400 or an 800 [meter], she yells the whole time. And I can hear her, and only her, the whole time—she's literally the loudest person in the whole place. It really helps out." – **Carmela**

Spend time with your child

"For every birthday or special occasion that came up, my mom would take me to a play. Like we saw 'Phantom of the Opera,' 'Rent,' 'Beauty and the Beast,' and a whole bunch of stuff like that. And that's just our time that we spend with each other. When she's away from my father and my brother, she's like a whole different person, so it's easier to get along with her." – **Patricia**

Make small gestures that show you care

"I like it when they cook a full meal after a long day at school. See, I like to eat, I'm a growing girl!" – **Andrea**

"It's not always the material things that teenagers want, it's the affection." – **Shannon**

Be generous with your praise

"I miss that praise I used to get: 'Oh my gosh, you can tie your shoe!'" – **Liliana**

"Parents can't keep us from making mistakes. But when we don't make a mistake or we do something well, give us a little pat on the back." – **Justine**

Let kids know you're a permanent part of their lives

"I know if I was ever in trouble they would always be there for me. I know they will eventually forgive me. They can't hate me for the rest of my life!" – **Shannon**

"My mom always says, 'I'm going to be your parent forever. You're stuck with me.'" – **Justine**

"When they tell me that they love me—when they actually tell me that, you know—it's so reassuring to me. When they defend me and are willing to literally give their life for me. If someone were going to shoot me, my dad is willing to get in front of them. He told me that once, and it made me glad." –

Moses

Be your child's biggest and steadiest fan!