



Get smart

Talk, encourage and nurture: 8 steps to raising more productive students

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Editor

As an elementary school teacher and the mother of a son in kindergarten, Stacie Mandrell is always looking for ways that children can get more out of a day at school. She believes the importance should not be put on a child's intelligence quotient; rather, it should be on maximizing a child's learning potential.

"My understanding of IQ is that you can improve your IQ, but only slightly," Mandrell said.

But through her experience, Mandrell believes children can be taught how to become more productive in class, get more out of their lessons and learn more.

Step one: Talk

According to Mandrell, the first thing parents can do to help their children become better prepared for school and "smarter learners" is to talk to them.

"I think the most important thing is to talk to your kids," she said. "Talk to them about the world around them and all the things they are seeing. I think that is a huge thing. I think a lot of times parents don't communicate with their kids and as a result their kids don't know how to communicate."

Kevin Swick, a professor of early childhood education at the University of South Carolina, said developing a positive relationship with your children is one of the key factors in helping them reach their potential.

"Children invest tremendously in their parents," Swick said. "That's who they know and believe in, so you really want to be careful to develop a really positive relationship."

Swick said he suggests parents simply spend time with their children, paying attention to them and their talents.

Joyce Carter, director of elementary education for Lexington County School District One, said children need to feel comfortable in their environment and communicate ideas to others to help process the information they are collecting.

"More and more partner and small group learning opportunities are occurring in classrooms to give children these opportunities," Carter said.

Step two: Encourage curiosity

Mandrell suggested putting children in settings where their natural curiosities are pushed and honored. She said museums, zoos and outings such as picnics help children become active participants in the learning process rather than passive participants.

"We are so worried about our kids' obesity, because our kids aren't doing anything," Mandrell said. "Their brains aren't doing much of anything either. Our kids are so passive as far as learning goes."

Carter said parents and educators must try to connect math, social studies, language arts and other education disciplines in ways that allow children to see how they are used in everyday life.

Step three: Nurture interests

Swick said parents should try to identify subjects their children take interests in and help nurture and encourage those interests.

“If we just pay attention to a child’s talents as they develop and support them, that’s a big plus, and it really motivates children,” Swick said. “It really helps them to do a better job.”

Step four: Be imaginative

Mandrell said children should be encouraged to use their brains more and encouraged to use their imaginations.

“When you are listening to classical music there are no words,” Mandrell said. “Your brain is putting the words and the action and what’s happening with that music.”

Carter said soft, functional music can help make a setting comfortable and calm for more focused learning.

Mandrell also recommends keeping a box of “stuff” handy.

“If you can have a box full of stuff — crayons and glue and scissors and construction paper — on a rainy day or any day, kids love to get that kind of stuff out and play,” she said. “Have a lot of stuff that kids can use to create.”

Step five: Practice skills

Swick said children need many opportunities to practice their skills and do their work.

“Whether it is homework or another set of activities that you are doing, whether it is academics or athletics, provide them with a lot of opportunities to work at and to learn from,” he said. “Know that the more kids get involved and do certain activities the more they really do well.”

Step six: Develop routines

According to Carter, routines are very important for child development.

“Children who have routines at home tend to develop more effective study habits,” she said.

Swick agreed.

“Parents tell me that their kids work better when there is a set time every afternoon or evening when they are expected to do it (school work) as a habit, just like eating dinner in the evening,” he said. “This is just good old planning and scheduling and really reinforcing the good things you want the child to learn.”

Step seven: Read

Mandrell said she knows other people have emphasized the importance of reading. And she, too, believes reading to children is one of the most important steps parents can take to help children’s brains develop.

“I think one of the most important things you have to do with your kids every day is read,” she said. “That can be anything. Reading anything is always going to enhance your kids’ understanding of the world.”

Step eight: Build relationships

Finally, parents must build relationships with their children, Swick said.

“That sets the tone for everything else,” he said. “That would be my big, big thing — really build your relationships. Have some good times and everything else comes together much easier.”