

5 Key Academic Skills: What Kids Need for School Success

Talk to your child. To find out which of these skills your child has and which he can develop further, start a simple conversation that centers on his goals. Ask him about his favorite subjects, classes he dreads, and whether he's satisfied with his latest progress report.

It's never too early--or too late--to help your child develop the key skills he needs for academic success: organization, time management, prioritization, concentration, and motivation. Use this guide to help your child build these skills and stay on track throughout the year.

Listen for clues. Incorporate your own observations to balance your child's self-assessment. Is your child overwhelmed by assignments? He may have trouble organizing his time. Does your child have difficulty completing his work? He may get distracted too easily. Is your child simply not interested in school? He may need help getting motivated.

Identify problem areas. Start here to help your child identify which of the five skill areas are trouble spots.

1. Organization: Whether it's keeping track of research materials or remembering to bring a lunch box home, children of all ages need to be organized to succeed in school. For many students, academic challenges are related more to a lack of organization than to a lack of intellectual ability.

Tips to help your child get organized:

- Make a checklist of things your child needs to bring to and from school every day.
- Find out how your child keeps track of his homework and how he organizes his notebooks, then work together to develop a system he will want to use.
Put a copy by the door at home and one in his backpack. Try to check with him each day to see how well he remembers the items on the list.
- Shop with your child for tools that will help him stay organized, such as binders, folders, or an assignment book.

2. Time management: Time is a hard concept for young students to grasp. Even when students have a week to do a project, many won't start until the night before it's due. Learning to organize time into productive blocks is like learning to ride a bicycle; it just takes practice.

Tips to help your child manage time:

- Track assignments on a monthly calendar. Work backward from the due date of larger assignments and break them into nightly tasks.
- Help your child record how much time he spends on homework each week so he can figure out how to divide this time into manageable chunks.
- Together, designate a time for nightly homework and help your child stick to this schedule.
- If evenings aren't enough, help your child find other times for schoolwork, such as mornings, study halls, or weekends.

3. Prioritization: Sometimes children fall behind in school and fail to hand in assignments because they simply don't know where to begin. Prioritizing tasks is a skill your child will need throughout life, so it's never too soon to get started.

Tips to help your child prioritize:

- Ask your child to brainstorm about all the things he needs to do, including nonschool-related activities.
- Ask him to label each task from 1 to 3, with the 1 tasks being most important.
- Ask about each task so you understand your child's priorities. If he labels all his social activities as 1 then you know where his attention is going.
- Help your child change some of the labels to better prioritize for academic success, then suggest he rewrite the list so all the 1's are at the top.
- Check in weekly to see how the list is evolving and how your child is prioritizing new tasks.

4. Concentration: Whether your child is practicing his second-grade spelling words or studying for a trigonometry test, it's important that he works on schoolwork in an area with limited distractions and interruptions.

Tips to help your child concentrate:

- Turn off access to e-mail and games when your child works on the computer.
- Declare the phone and TV off-limits during homework time.
- Find space that fits the assignment. If your child is working on a science project, he may need lots of space; if he's studying for a Spanish test, he may need a well-lit desk.
- Help your child concentrate during homework time by keeping brothers and sisters away.

5. Motivation: When asked, most children say they want to do well in school, yet many still fail to complete the level of work necessary to succeed academically. The reason is often motivation. Tapping into your child's interests is a great way to get him revved up to do well in school.

Tips to help motivate your child:

- Link school lessons to your child's life. If he's learning percentages, ask him to figure out the price of a discounted item next time you shop.
- Link your child's interests to academics. If he's a music nut, give him books about musicians and show how music and foreign languages are connected.
- Give your child control and choices. With guidance, let him determine his study hours, organizing system, or school project topics.
- Encourage your child to share his expertise. Regularly ask him about what he's learning in school.
- Congratulate your child, encourage him, and celebrate all his successes.

Often what holds children back from trying is the fear of failure or the memory of a time they didn't do well. You can help break this cycle by celebrating your child's successes, no matter how small, and by giving him opportunities to succeed academically. And there's no better time to start than now.