

Home-School Relations

Your child is off to school! Time to get to know the teachers...DR CLARE McINROY explains.





From the moment your child starts school, a new era in your own life begins. There will be changes to your routine, new friends — as you naturally gravitate towards other parents and there will be the fun of school projects and class trips. However, far more important than any of these changes, will be the constant nagging concern that your child will have difficulty adapting to being away from home for hours at a time.

Up until now, your little one has been living in the happy knowledge that you will be there every time they cry. At school, though, they will have to learn to look elsewhere for support — and you will want to be absolutely certain that the support-system at school is one that you are comfortable with.

So, it is essential that good home-school relations develop. In other words, you need to spend time getting to know the teachers and assistants. If you get on well with the people looking after your child during the day, then you won't feel so anxious leaving them there in the mornings and your anxiousness will then be less likely to be transferred to your child. Opening good lines of communication with teachers and assistants also means that, should there be any problem, they will not hesitate to speak to you about it.

Good working environment.

Once you have asked your child's teacher for some exercises to do at home, then you need to figure out the best working environment. First of all, close the doors to distraction — which means making sure they can't see the television or other children playing outside. This will mean that they are free to concentrate on the task at hand, without being able to see what they are missing out on.

Next, you need to let them know that they have your full attention. The more love and time you can shower on them, the more valued they will feel and the easier it will be to communicate to them the importance of school work. So, don't go off and make lots of noise in the kitchen while they are trying to work out a maths problem! Sit with them, say encouraging things, talk about how you enjoy working with them. Allocate a certain amount of time to spend on the homework. Breathing down their necks until it is all finished is not necessarily constructive. Children do not have exceptionally long attention spans, so trying to work past the amount of time they can concentrate will only be frustrating. Have regular little breaks, and if they get really tired, then just stop. This will help to prevent tantrums and mean that neither of you get too bored and annoyed.

Once they have finished their homework, reward them for their hard work. Say "well done" and "good job" and maybe treat them with an hour's playtime. These positive reactions to completed work will mean they will be happier to sit down and do it next time, which will make life easier for the teachers too!





Expect problems

Unfortunately, a parent's need to involve themselves in school life can sometimes cause problems. A lot of this depends on the way that the parents themselves experienced school life when they were children.

A parent, for example, may have found school tough. They might not have liked their own teachers and might have been overly punished for bad behaviour. Often, it then becomes hard for the parent to separate their own experience from that of their child's — which can mean that they are reluctant to befriend school staff or are too critical of a teacher's processes. Our advice is, remember at all times that yours and your child's experiences are not the same. Give each teacher a fresh start and allow them the benefit of the doubt before being too judgmental. And it is *very* important that you do not let your child hear you say that you did not enjoy learning. They must be encouraged rather than worried.

Another problem can develop when teachers expect too much from parents without proper explanation. You are a parent, not a teacher and, therefore, do not automatically know what exercises are appropriate for your child. If you feel like you don't know what you should be doing at home, then request a meeting with the teacher; explain your worries and get them to take you through a few activities step-by-step. Make sure that the teacher knows that you want to help, so don't go into the meeting with a pessimistic attitude, this won't help anyone, least of all your child.

Many of you will understand if I talk about your own work commitments. It can be extremely difficult for a working mother or father to get involved in school life. And unfortunately for some of you, the feeling of guilt that you don't get to visit the school very often, will actually mean that you stay away all together. Remember, though, that any and every little bit helps. If all you can do is the school-run once a week, then this is better than never visiting at all.

The last thing to worry about is over-involvement. Most of the home-school activities that we have highlighted can only do good things for your child's progress. However, very occasionally, parents try to do too much. You can't be there every second of every day, as this would defeat the point altogether. At some stage, you do need to let the teachers do their job and you need to let your child get used to time without you.

Developing good relations

All the research suggests that when parents get more actively involved in the learning and development, the children are happier and they progress faster. They get, for example, better grades, they tend to stay in education longer and they are more likely to go on to higher education, such as college or university. There are many ways to involve yourself in your child's school. Here are a few of the methods isolated by the Harvard Graduate School of Education:

- Accept some responsibility for your child's progress. In other words, if your child is not doing very well in class, do not just blame the teacher. Take an active approach, help them with homework or ask the teacher for extra exercises that you can do with your child.
- The teacher has a whole class of children that they have to divide their attention between. You can afford to concentrate on one at a time. They may have the expertise, but that doesn't mean they can't guide you about what you should be doing with your child to speed up their development.
- Become a member of a parent-teacher committee — this means that you will feel you get some say in what goes on in the classroom.
- Go to all the school events — fairs, productions, sports days. If your child sees that you are happy in the school environment, talking to teachers and other students, then they are likely to be happier doing the same.
- Become an assistant yourself. If you have time, ask if you can volunteer one day a week. Just sit and read with some of the children or help with displays and projects.
- Help manage school fund-raising activities.

