

The most important ways parents can prepare children for school

September 19 2017, by Allyssa Mccabe



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With school starting, parents wonder what they can do to help their children succeed. Almost everyone knows that reading books with young children is important, and it is. But even more important is that we talk

with our children. A lot. The more talk children engage in with adults, the bigger their vocabularies will become. The [bigger their vocabularies when they enter kindergarten](#), the better they do with reading comprehension tasks – even 11 years later.

Not all kinds of [talk with children](#) are equally beneficial. Reprimanding a child is not a good opportunity to learn language. Commanding children to buckle their seat belts or brush their teeth may be necessary, but is also not optimal for helping them to acquire language. Children may be upset if scolded or, at best, uninterested when commanded, both conditions that interfere with learning.

I have taught university-level developmental psychology for many years and have done extensive research on many aspects of language development, especially as those relate to literacy skills. I have seen how specific actions [parents](#) take to improve children's [language skills](#) prepare them to succeed at reading and writing.

How to be a kid conversationalist

Talking with your child about objects and events of interest to them is most optimal for [language acquisition](#). It does not matter whether you talk about types of rocks or cars. What counts is that both parent and child are in a good mood and that the child is very interested in whatever you are talking about. Here are some ways to help start those conversations.

1. Some of the most beneficial kinds of talk can happen when parent and child are doing something together. A walk in the park or a visit to a museum is a great time to talk to your child. Do not use a cellphone or even a museum recording. Notice what your child looks at and talk about that object. Ask your child questions about it.

2. Use time that you are waiting for something – a bus, a doctor's appointment – to rhyme words with your child or tell a story you make up about a fantastic creature or a rude duck. Time will pass quickly, and your children will be having so much fun they will forget to misbehave while they are improving their language skills.
3. Don't simply read a book to a child straight through and require that a child listen quietly. Engage your child while you are reading aloud. Ask your child questions about how a character in the story feels. Ask your child what she thinks will happen next before you turn the page.
4. Eat dinner as a family as often as possible. At the table, ask your child what happened during the day. Don't accept "nothing" as an answer. Ask your children to elaborate on whatever they tell you. Some families report a fun practice of each member of the family telling the best and worst things that happened to them each day.
5. Make sure the television is off and that hand-held devices are nowhere to be seen or heard.
6. Tell your child things that happened to you when you were a child. The best way to get a story is to tell a story. Tell you children about your first week at school, your first (or second or third...) grade teacher. Tell them about the time you forgot your lunch bag or you lost your homework.

Special concerns

Parents for whom English is not a [native language](#) may hear from uninformed professionals that they should speak to their children only in English or the child will become confused, especially if that child has special needs. This is bad advice. Talking to children in a language in which parents are not fluent and comfortable is not optimal for either parents or children. Extensive research supports the recommendation

that [parents use their native language](#) in communicating with children.

Many parents have discovered that if they want their child to behave, all they need to do is hand over an iPhone to play games on or let the [child](#) watch a favorite movie. Unfortunately, the talk children hear on television, movies or hand-held devices is not optimal. In fact, in a recent study of almost 900 children, researchers found that the more time parents reported their [children using hand-held devices](#), the more likely it was that the children exhibited expressive language delay, measurable even at 18 months. This phenomenon has been widely observed by speech-[language](#) pathologists, and their national organization, ASHA, has been outspoken about the dangers of this modern parenting strategy.

Talking with children requires no expensive equipment. Talking with children costs nothing, in fact. But talking with children makes them smarter and more connected with whomever they are talking. Apart from feeding children, loving [children](#) and keeping them safe, nothing is more important than talking with them as much as possible.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The most important ways parents can prepare children for school (2017, September 19) retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-important-ways-parents-children-school.html>

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