



by Karen Stephens

# Tips for Sending Kids to Early Childhood Programs and School Ready to Learn

Most teachers I know put in tremendous amount of time and energy into teaching our kids. But if children don't arrive at child care or school ready to learn, no matter how talented a teacher is, not much progress is made.

Whether trying to master social skills or language arts, children need a consistent supply of physical and mental energy. With those personal resources, children can learn to the best of their abilities.

Following are ways parents can help children benefit from learning experiences, whether at an early childhood program or school.

- Good nutrition is a must; three meals and at least 2 snacks a day. Nutrition helps avoid illness that interferes with a child's ability to pay attention and focus. Breakfast isn't a luxury for kids; it's an absolute necessity so their growing brains can work efficiently.
- Adequate daily sleep gives the brain time to repair and re-group, and also leaves children better able to cope with the emotional and mental demands of learning. Preschoolers need about 11 hours per day of sleep (including nap-time) and school-agers need *at least* 9 hours daily.
- Appropriate daily physical play and exercise is important for kids. Research continues to show there is a strong "mind-body" connection to emotional well-being as well as learning ability.
- Treat the first signs of illness by following good routines at home and seeking medical advice before it becomes chronic or severe. Ongoing illness saps children's energy. Give children enough time to fully recuperate from illness to avoid lingering effects or recurrence. Teach good hygiene and healthy practices to help limit spread of contagious illnesses in group settings.
- When children are well, ensure their regular attendance. Consistent participation is important so children don't miss out on academic content that builds upon itself gradually from day to day.
- From their first day of birth, talk with and listen to your kids daily. Explain how you go about life and why. Use a rich vocabulary to engage interest.
- Daily enjoy enriching experiences together. Read with your kids and visit the library together. Illustrate that "learning" isn't just for child care or school, but for all facets of life.
- Teach age-appropriate self-help skills so children can handle themselves more independently and confidently in a group setting.
- Avoid exposing children to debilitating stress, whether physical or emotional. Hungry kids are stressed, as are children exposed to recurrent and explosive family fights. Chronic stress impedes children's ability to relax, focus and concentrate — all necessary ingredients in the learning process.

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- With your word and deed, place value on education and learning. Ask about your child's experiences at child care or school. Participate in the classroom and share your personal knowledge or skills. Get to know your child's teacher and become partners so children know learning is important. Attend parent-teacher conferences prepared to listen as well as ask questions.
- Expect children to learn, but don't pressure for perfection. Help children enjoy the intrinsic rewards of learning, rather than focusing only on grades. If children enjoy the process of learning, they will apply themselves more enthusiastically.

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- Encourage and praise children's learning as they gradually master a new skill or concept; don't expect immediate success. Remind children that skills develop over time through practice, patience, and persistence. Success doesn't "just happen"; one works at it.
- Nurture a positive attitude. Avoid equating mistakes with failure. Successful learners are NOT those who never make mistakes. They are the ones who try their best and learn *from* their mistakes.
- When a school-ager is assigned homework, ask about it daily. Make it a priority to accomplish and offer to review your child's work.
- Help children develop a respect for the process of learning, rather than just being concerned about finding one "right" answer. Most of education is not arriving at "one" answer; but instead focuses on teaching children how to discover or gather knowledge and make informed decisions. Regardless of a child's age, the "process" of learning includes identifying options and weighing the pros and cons of possible solutions. That learning process applies whether a toddler is learning to behave in socially acceptable ways or a teen is learning how to debate issues.
- Limit and carefully screen television and other media play that steal time away from active learning. An hour of television a day is more than enough. Technology is amazing, but human interactions are still the taproot of learning.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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