

Helping Your Child or Grandchild Learn

You have probably noticed (!) that we are dealing with a pandemic and, among other consequences, it has turned the education system upside down. There have been a lot of changes. Many people, not just teachers and parents, but also scientists are worried that the changes brought about by the pandemic have been bad in terms of the effect on children and educational results. Now kids are heading back to school or figuring out some alternative, (virtual learning, home schooling. . .). So what can parents and grandparents do to help learning?

Reading is an essential skill that can be fun for you to focus on with your child. Your local libraries are open and they have wonderful sections for children and teens/young adults. By the way, you can also read online through many local libraries, like the Greater Phoenix Digital Library which accepts library cards from most of the libraries in the area. Fiction is appealing, but kids also enjoy nonfiction about current interests or about something new. One of the issues in education lately is that children may not have the background knowledge to understand what they are reading. Luckily, there is **ReadWorks**, a great free online resource. Your child may already be using it in school. It offers online short texts for grades K through 12 to read (fiction and nonfiction). What is helpful for our purposes is that you can even sign up for ReadWorks so that your kids can read even if they do not have a school issued computer. And you can discuss material you have both read. One option that really helps struggling readers is the ability to hear Readworks read the selection aloud while displaying it on the screen. (Greater Phoenix Digital Library also offers this option for young readers.)

Games to Help Children Improve Their Knowledge and Skills

Play games: 20 Questions, I Went to Aunt Mary's (you can change it to a shopping trip at the grocery store), and then there is the spelling game Hangman which has been modernized as Snowman. Older kids benefit from playing Taboo (available at Target and Walmart as well as Amazon) which builds communication skills. If the children are old enough, you can play Multiplication and Division Bingo (I ordered mine from Amazon and the kids I tutor love it). By the way, division seems to worry kids a lot because it is more complicated than multiplication. This can help diminish some of the worry. Card games like Go Fish, Crazy 8's, Slapjack, Hearts, and War are old favorites and can help develop focus and social skills.

Other ideas

Model attitudes and behaviors that help children succeed in school and in life - **we know that kids pay as much attention to what adults do as to what we say.**

Of course, in conversations, listening carefully and giving supportive responses can be very helpful.

It is so important to encourage curiosity, effort, focus, persistence, and determination. These are attitudes and habits that are essential to learning and are valued by employers.

A couple of specific things I would suggest, based on 30 years of experience helping students:

No matter how proud you are of a child, don't talk about how smart the child is. Research says that is less helpful than praising determination, persistence, curiosity, and paying attention. It turns out that IQ has a lot less to do with success than hanging in there until you get it right.

When a child makes a mistake, emphasize that we all make mistakes, which is why we have erasers. In fact, when we realize we have made a mistake, our brain goes into high gear and we actually learn and think better. Mistakes are an important part of learning.

Other Resources

3 wonderful FREE smartphone (android) apps to help with reading and math:

My Reading Words from Pella Workroom helps kids read and pronounce Fry Words (the most frequent words in print, 10 sets of 100 words). Schools teach 100 words a year, usually starting in kindergarten or 1st grade. This app presents 25 words which the child should pronounce and then check the pronunciation by tapping the word. Mistakes are tracked if the child or a monitor indicates by tapping the X and, at the end of the word list, the missed words are played again to let the child correct any errors made earlier.

Math Bingo is a big favorite with my elementary and even middle school students. Students can work on addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division at different levels of difficulty. There are several ways to play the game including Find the Digit and Mack Bingo (which involves clicking on a number that matches the one displayed), Single Player, and With Another Player on the Same Device.

Another handy tool available (and free) on a smartphone, tablet, or computer, is Quizlet. This is great for students, allowing them to create, study, and test their recall of vocabulary. Quizlet also has materials already developed, like English for Kids (great for English language learners) which can be very helpful. I use it regularly to review my Spanish (boy, I am rusty!)

Other Online Resources

One of my favorite free online resources for all ages and all kinds of learning is *Khan Academy*. Parents or kids can sign up on a smartphone, chromebook, tablet, etc. There is even *Khan Academy Kids* for children ages 2-7.

A good online resource for young readers is Growing Book by Book - great ideas for books by grade level, holidays, etc. I access it on Facebook or you can visit their website: <https://growingbookbybook.com>.

For teen readers, the YALSA booklist is available at the American Library Association at <http://www.ala.org>.

You Tube Kids can help with reading and has all sorts of interesting presentations.

Math help is available online through Khan Academy, Khan Academy for Kids, YouTube, and Prodigy (math games).

More Good Resources

Local libraries are doing all sorts of things to help kids continue to enjoy learning. I am really impressed with the Mesa Library's variety and creativity. I follow them on Facebook, but you can also keep up with their offerings through a newsletter emailed to cardholders, or by going to their website (mesalibrary.org).

On TV: PBS has so many excellent resources! PBS Kids 24/7 for kids ages 2-8 -*Molly of Denali* (ages 3-8) is highly recommended. Cox channel 81 WORLD channel At-Home Learning Service (grades 5-12) - Cox did not have it available, when I called to check on this. It is supposed to be generally available through cable, satellite, and free over-the-air using a digital antenna .You can make the most of their programs by discussing the educational tv show you both watched.

For grandparents: There are some interesting ideas for games grandparents can play with a grandchild online at Camp.com: 14 Online Game Ideas for Grandparents and Grandchildren to play together

Practical Stuff

I think for many kids, some helpful tools might include a calendar, a folder to keep loose papers from flying all over the house and ending up in the trash, a notebook for class notes and assignments, paper clips, erasers (in AZ the regular ones at the end of the pencil may get dried out and useless so I use Hi-Polymer or art erasers (those ugly brown ones) which continue to work in the desert! My younger students really love whiteboards and there are inexpensive small ones that take up little space. Bookmarks are handy, as are flashcard materials, a pencil sharpener, and maybe even headphones to shut out noise. *Kids should not listen to music with words while they are studying or in class, because it is distracting!* Breaks involving physical activity are very important. Music is great for that - dancing, marching, exercising.

Reading Challenges

A stumbling block for some kids is phonics. English is a bit of a stinker when it comes to the relationship between spelling and pronunciation. (Spanish is so much easier.) So a child may be familiar with the spoken word that sounds something like “sir ten” or “sir ton” but the spelling (certain) can confuse them. Many kids may just need help making the connection between sound and letters of the alphabet. Phonics is something that may not get enough attention in school for this particular child, so some help is needed. It is important to expose the child to the connection between letters and sounds, and reading aloud together is one fun way to do that. Another challenge in reading is vocabulary. There are actually 3 groups of vocabulary words that are supposed to be covered in schools. Fry words (sight words) are the words most commonly seen in printed material. Somebody actually must have had a lot of fun counting them! They are grouped by grade level. Usually 100 Fry words are taught in a school year. The other group of words (Tier 3) likely to be covered are words related to particular classes (math, science, English, social studies). Less likely to get as much attention are Tier 2 vocabulary words like *arrange, benefit, category, conclusion, purpose, and solution*. These words will help children understand what they hear and read and will enable the kids to communicate better, whether speaking or writing. There are several sources for these sorts of words online, by grade. There is not just one universal list, by the way.

Math

Math anxiety is a problem for many children and adults. Research tells us it is often the result of bad experiences in math classes and **mistaken** beliefs about math. Here is some updated information about math to correct such harmful beliefs:

Girls can be just as good at math as boys. People who are good at word-based courses (English, social studies, etc.) may also be, and frequently are, good at math. One of the ways to use verbal skills to master math is to be sure to understand and remember math vocabulary. Another way is to keep a good math notebook, full of class notes, vocabulary, examples, and questions to pursue in class.

Speed is not a legitimate goal in doing math.

Math is full of patterns which make sense and are helpful. It is often helpful to use visuals to understand math. Doodling in math class can actually help if the doodles are focused on the topic being covered.

A wonderful new approach in teaching math focuses on “number sense” and students talking with each other about math. It helps kids see the relationships and patterns in math and enables them to figure out more than one way to get to an answer. This “new math” makes a lot of sense and has produced more successful and happier students and teachers. (This new approach is exciting, and my students like it.)