



How Parents Can Improve Study Skills at Home

Many children experience difficulty in school because they have weak study skills. This handout suggests various strategies which promote efficient study habits and thereby enhance a child's chance for academic success.

When you have decided which strategies might be beneficial, introduce one at a time as a helpful hint or in a game format. Some of these activities will be used on a trial and error basis. Be flexible in following each strategy. If it works, that's great! If not, abandon it.

It is important to keep in mind that not every strategy will work with every child. Success will depend upon the child's individual learning style and needs, motivation, and willingness to accept parental guidance. At all times, your relationship with your child is of primary importance. It should be relaxed and stress free. Offer praise and encouragement frequently. If implementation of any of these strategies creates anxiety or resentment (on the part of either parent or child), it is advisable to discontinue.

Although many of the following suggestions may be applicable, this handout is not intended as a solution for children who have severe learning problems.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR PLACE

If your child loses his place, skips lines or mixes up words in successive lines, use a place marker. If a pencil or fingertip doesn't do the trick, try using a blank unlined index card as a marker. The index card can also be effectively used on a page of questions to expose one question at a time. By doing this, the child can focus on each question without becoming confused or overwhelmed by all the writing on the page.

USE A BOOKSTAND

Using a bookstand is helpful to many children when reading or copying from a textbook. The diagonal position the bookstand provides makes it easier to read the material because the viewing angle is better. Positioning the bookstand directly above the paper also makes for easier copying. Since children can raise and lower their eyes without moving their head sideways, it becomes simpler to shift from the book to the writing paper and back again.

A SPECIAL WAY TO READ TEXTBOOKS

Just think of all the information one gets from watching a movie or television preview. Similarly, a student can gather much information by previewing and surveying textbook material. It is advisable to do this in order to know when to cue into important content as one goes along.

Strange as it may seem, do not have the student start at the beginning and read through to the end of the chapter. First, survey the chapter by looking at the title and paragraph headings in bold print. Suggest that the student think of these as "road signs" to help find the way through the chapter. Also look at graphic material (pictures, charts, maps) and read captions.

Next, read the summary and the questions at the end of the chapter. That's the PREVIEW! By now, the student should have some idea of what the chapter will be about and what information he/she should look for.

RESTATE THE MAIN IDEA

This strategy is particularly effective when reading content area material. (Social Studies, Science etc.) After the child has read a paragraph, ask him/her to think about what was read and tell you the most important idea or facts in his/her own words. It may be necessary for the child to reread the paragraph. If difficulty persists, you may have to discuss several paragraphs and provide appropriate responses for each of them until the child is able to do so independently.

Be sure to stress that the overall main idea must be followed from paragraph to paragraph. For the student in the upper grades who finds this strategy helpful, he/she may wish to write down the main ideas or tape them. This will provide an excellent review format for tests.

CORROBORATE ANSWERS

If your child works quickly and/or carelessly and makes errors when answering comprehension questions, try this strategy. Encourage the child to "prove" his/her answers by locating supporting information in the text. When demonstrating, point out that the words in dark print will help find the section that is most likely to contain the information.

(Again, think of the words in dark print as road signs to help you find the way.)

This strategy discourages "guessing" and promotes accuracy in locating information. The next time a similar assignment is given, remind your youngster that you expect him/her to be able to "prove" the answers.

DEVELOP MEMORY USING WORD STRATEGIES

Mnemonic strategies (memory aids) can be effectively used to help individuals recall information. Letters and words can be arranged in a variety of ways to enhance memory.

1) First letter of each item to be remembered forms a word.

Example: To recall the names of the Great Lakes, think of the word HOMES

Huron Ontario Michigan Erie Superior

2) Group items by first letters.

Example: 7 CONTINENTS : six begin with the letter A and one begins with the letter E. (Asia, Australia, Antarctica, Africa, N. America, S. America, Europe)

3) Words used in a sentence

Example: "Spring forward and fall back." (to recall time changes)

Remembering the key word or clue will help organize the material to be retrieved. Gradually, encourage the child to make up his/her own clues.

USE GAMES TO ENHANCE LEARNING

When a child has to learn new vocabulary and factual information, the use of game formats can take the chore out of study...and may actually be fun. The games are easy to make and to individualize for specific tasks.

Write new vocabulary words on a set of 3 x 5 index cards and the corresponding definitions on another set of cards. Your child can help create the games.

1) MATCHING--Mix up each set of cards. Place both sets of cards on the table (writing side up). See if your child can match the words to the correct definitions. Then review any words the child is unsure of. When the child can match all the pairs correctly, he/she is ready to proceed to the next game.

2) CONCENTRATION--Turn about 6 or 7 pairs of cards face down on the table. (The number of cards used can be adjusted to suit the child's capabilities.) Player 1 turns over any two cards, reading them aloud. If they match, he/she keeps the pair and takes another turn. If not, the cards are replaced, face down, in the same position and player 2 takes a turn.

The game proceeds until all the cards have been matched. The player with the most pairs wins.

3) PASSWORD--Place the set of vocabulary words face down. Player 1 picks the top card, reads the word to himself, and then gives clues to the other player. Player 2 must guess the word from the clue. (Both players must be familiar with the definitions in order to play.)

An advanced form of this game involves selecting a card and writing the definition with points awarded for correct answers and bonus points for correct spelling.

The games are not limited to vocabulary. They can be used to study different kinds of information. (i.e. explorers/places of exploration, famous men/women discoveries, states/capitals etc.) The game formats and rules can be varied to meet each child's functional and motivational needs.

RESEARCH

If research is assigned on a topic that is totally unfamiliar to your child and/or if reading skills are weak, ask the librarian to suggest simple books that deal with the topic. Explain to your youngster that if you, as an adult, were taking a first course in something you had never studied before (chemistry, physics etc.), a good place to start might be in a middle school or high school book...just to get some really basic information in simpler language, in order to build a foundation for understanding the harder material.

REPEAT INFORMATION ALOUD

For many children, just reading material is often an ineffective method of study. Verbalizing or repeating information aloud is an important aid to retention. Encourage your youngster to read a small segment (verbalizing softly). Then cover the material and quietly say to him or repeat aloud what he/she wishes to remember. This kind of "verbal rehearsal" is a beneficial strategy for many youngsters.

HOMEWORK HINTS

It is helpful for a child to have a set place and time for doing schoolwork. The place the child works in should have adequate lighting and be quiet enough for concentration. Materials (paper, pencils etc.) should be organized and easily available. School papers should be secure from younger siblings and pets. But remember, needs vary. Your child may not wish to be isolated or may rely on some adult support while completing tasks.

When the child participates in determining his/her daily homework schedule, he/she is more likely to adhere to it. It should be flexible, allowing for changes due to special events. You may wish to vary it with the seasons to allow for outdoor play in good weather. Consideration might also be given as to whether one lengthy session or two or three shorter sessions are more suitable to the child's work style and attention span.

It should be agreed that during the planned time there will be no interruptions (telephone, television etc.)

If your child spends an excessive amount of time doing homework, making up classwork or struggling with assignments, consider scheduling a conference with your child's teacher to discuss the matter.

Please keep in mind that your patience, praise and support are integral components of all the suggestions herein.

For more information visit The National Association of Parents with Children in Special Education (www.napcse.org)