

CARING COUNTS

Supporting a Child on School or Community Projects



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Children of all ages enjoy some of their best learning experiences while participating in school or community club activities. Learning by experience can promote responsibility, creativity, and “how-to” skills. Projects also offer practical uses for reading, writing, and math skills. Adults in the home offer crucial guidance and encouragement. Learning together can be fun and enlightening, but sometimes it can be stressful.

This bulletin offers adults ideas for realistic expectations and rewarding involvement in children’s projects. These ideas will work best with school-age children (7 to 11 years). The strategies suggested are based on some important beliefs about children

and how they relate to their families and communities:

- Children are naturally curious and enthusiastic learners
- Children’s first teachers are adults in the home
- Children learn best when adults show “how-to” and offer encouragement
- Children gain valuable skills and encouragement from other adults in the community that reinforce the efforts of parents and teachers
- Children’s success with projects is best measured by growth toward confident, caring, capable adulthood and by positive family interaction—not by grades or prizes

Attitude and experience quiz

Reflect on your attitudes and experiences as a project coach:

1. True/False We can usually figure out project expectations.
2. True/False Projects assigned/selected usually match my child’s abilities.
3. True/False I often end up doing my child’s project myself.
4. True/False It’s easy to get my ego tied up in my child’s prize or grade.
5. True/False Time demands and project deadlines are really stressful.
6. True/False The best projects explain exactly what to do, detail-by-detail.
7. True/False When I promise I’ll help, I make it a priority to be there.
8. True/False I help most by listening and encouraging.
9. True/False I hate to see my child make a mistake.
10. True/False Adults help more by asking questions than by giving answers.
11. True/False I encourage my child to use the expertise of other adults.
12. True/False Projects are best described as “hassles” or “time-wasters.”

Comments about these questions appear on page 8.

Families teach

- Parents are a child's first and lifelong teachers.
- Family values and practices predict school success.
- Interest in and encouragement for learning outweigh parent expertise in any subject.
- Parent connections with helpful adults strengthen a child's support team.

Supporting the child through realistic expectations

Adults can set the stage for success with school or after-school projects and activities.

Match project demands to age/stage capacities by adjusting for individual abilities, interests, and experiences.

Typical abilities of school-age children are as follows:

- **Mentally:** difficulty with abstract tasks, but generally good memory, practical skills, and simple research and problem-solving abilities
- **Physically:** good body and hand coordination and increasing strength and stamina, as long as food, water, and exercise are plentiful
- **Socially:** pleasure in working with peers and adults, especially if it is an active, hands-on experience

Typical interests of school-age children range from self-care (hygiene, decoration of room or clothing), friendship and teamwork (sports, group cooperation), explor-

ing the world (plant or animal growth, forces of wind and water), mastering adult tasks (caring for pets, fixing machines, building things, horseback riding, skateboarding, musical instruments, computer programs). In terms of experiences, most children enjoy a little of the familiar and a little of the new and challenging.

Take a learning versus winning attitude by seeing mistakes and others' successes as learning and sharing opportunities.

A priority on learning can be communicated in these ways:

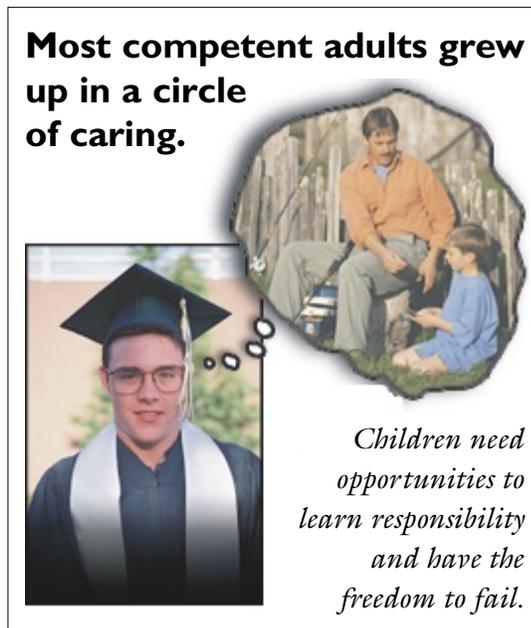
- Focus on fun, discovery, pride, and new abilities, rather than on prizes
- Enjoy togetherness with music, snacks, trips, fun breaks, and photos
- Encourage creativity and personal interests within project requirements
- Relax and affirm in moments of tension (deadline, practice, awards)
- Avoid comparisons and criticisms, but reflect, when tensions are low, on what was learned from one's own and others' projects

Help the child balance time demands by teaching time and stress management.

Techniques for maintaining this balance involve the following:

- Plan and work in stages (select and outline topic, research facts and strategies, experiment or organize information, prepare rough report or demonstration, practice and finalize presentation, submit on time)

- Put the child in charge of project work and other activities (chores, recreation, friendships, family events), and act as coach (reminding, encouraging, teaching, calling “time out” when necessary)
- Recognize high energy and low energy activities and times and help the child balance needs for rest, food, and exercise
- For group projects, involve all children and parents in planning stages and contributions, monitor meeting times, and ask teacher/leader for resources and help with motivating children who do not contribute equally



4 **Adapt to a child’s unique intelligence and learning style.**

Research on child intelligence reveals eight kinds of abilities. Typical classroom assignments and tests focus on two or three (word, math, and logic skills), but self-directed projects can nurture all abilities. Adults in the home can use knowledge of and relationship to a child to encourage unique abilities and strengthen skills in all ability areas. Activities related to each area might include the following:

- **Language:** library research, report writing, and speaking skills
- **Music:** instrumental and vocal skills, as part of performance or as background for project
- **Math and logic:** planning, experimenting, calculating, analyzing, and using technical skills
- **Spatial:** designing models, presentation boards, or 3-D computer simulations

- **Physical:** physical training as focus or means for demonstrating ideas
- **Self-awareness:** reflecting on abilities, goals, and values as the project progresses
- **Cooperation:** group work, talking with experts or project users
- **Natural:** ecology as a topic or outdoors as a place to plan and research

5 **Cooperate with other adults.**

Communication and cooperation among adults involved with a project is a crucial but often overlooked element of supporting the child’s learning. Differences in goals or methods, time pressures, personality conflicts, and other factors can lead to misunderstandings and hard feelings among well-meaning people. Steps that can help avert or clarify such conflicts include:

- Consistent contact regarding schedules, expectations, and progress
- Openness, avoiding defensiveness, and focusing on problem solving
- Recognition of the roles and limits of teachers or leaders
- Volunteer involvement as an expert, coach, or event/show helper
- Focus on the best experience for the child, regardless of conflicts

Keep promises to support and assist the child's efforts.

Parent role models teach commitment, caring, and high standards. To be a positive role model, remember these key points:

- Don't promise too much—keep expectations for self and child realistic
- Check progress and offer encouragement regularly
- Prioritize involvement—be on time, attentive, and dependable
- Show sensitivity—avoid being too critical or never challenging the child

Before beginning any project or assignment:

- ❖ Ask the child what's really expected
- ❖ Read the project description or check with the teacher/leader
- ❖ Think about your own expectations of the child
- ❖ Make sure all three sets of expectations match

Supporting a child with rewarding involvement

Adults in the home can promote esteem and achievement through the ways in which they help children meet the challenges of school and after-school projects. Following are strategies that help maintain realistic expectations and build rewarding involvement:

Listen actively to feelings, beliefs, and desires, as well as to facts and ideas.

Practical concerns such as plans, procedures, or progress tend to take center focus as a child works on projects. Clearly understanding these facts is important. However, adults build strong, supportive relationships when they pay attention to concerns of the mind and the heart.

- Ideas express a child's insight or imagination, providing pathways to fuller understanding, application, and motivation. For instance, when a child says, "I can explain why I did the experiment on the first part of the poster, how I did it in the middle panel, and what I found on the last side," the explanation shows understanding of the scientific method as well as good organizational skills.
- Beliefs reveal a child's grasp of the topic and confidence in self. A child may remark, "Next year I can teach a cat the tricks my dog did this year." Of course, this statement shows that the child understands dogs well but may overestimate when generalizing that the trait of cooperativeness applies to felines as well. Respecting rather than contesting such statements will encourage a child to try a project that tests beliefs and refines intuition.

- Desires suggest interests within the project or plans for future work. A child who exclaims, “I want to learn about astronauts because I want to be one,” shows an immediate and long-range motivation to learn. Affirming the wish does not discount the difficult learning and action needed to achieve the dream. Explaining that only one child in ten million actually becomes an astronaut discourages learning and confidence in self.

Regardless of what the child may say, the following responses show that parents care:

- Attentive listening, using eye contact, shaking the head, and leaning forward communicates interest and trust in the child’s abilities. Often a parent’s simple “Uh, huh” after the child shares an idea communicates attention, respect for individuality and inspiration, and willingness to encourage rather than give advice.
- Description of sights and sounds rather than “reading into” actions. Sometimes a simple observation, such as “I see your schedule says this is a project night, but you’re headed out the door,” helps the child exercise self-discipline without arguing or nagging.
- Paraphrasing, or repeating ideas and feelings in one’s own words helps to clarify messages.

Rather than taking over with a statement like, “Here, let me show you,” a parent can help him or her solve problems with words like, “You think you know how the parts go together, but now you’re not sure because one part is missing.”



Good communication requires hard work

- ❖ Schedule time to listen.
- ❖ Notice and discuss your child’s interests and feelings.
- ❖ Consider what recreation and leisure events you can share.
- ❖ Reflect on what your child would say about your expectations, acceptance, or assertiveness.

- Praise that is focused on behavior rather than on approval of the child helps him or her appreciate accomplishments. A parent who observes, “You must be a good teacher, because Spot is a well-trained dog,” supplies evidence of success rather than a judgment of the child’s basic worth.

2 Provide a positive learning climate.

Children can organize and sustain their work in supportive surroundings:

- A desk, shelf, or room in which to work and store and organize materials
- Available and organized resource materials (pencils, dictionary, etc.)
- An overall project schedule and “to-do” list for each day
- Ground rules at home for quiet hours, private time, and homework breaks
- Music and décor that aid concentration (some children thrive on quiet and some on background noise, but few thrive on loud noise or distracting decorations and trinkets)

3. Teach your child to think by asking questions and helping him or her adopt a questioning or inquiring strategy for learning.

Adult helpers can better understand the project by encouraging a child to gather simple facts using the questions who, what, when, where, why, and how. To pursue critical or creative thinking, a child might explore the following aspects of his or her project:

- **Details:** What are the parts? Define, describe, and find examples.
- **Order:** What happened first, next, and last?
- **Comparison:** How are objects, ideas, events, or creatures alike or different? Why is this interesting or useful?
- **Hypothesis/conclusion:** What do I expect? Why did these results occur?



- **Creative connections:** “What if...?” or “Why not...?”

4. Introduce a “how-to-do-it” problem-solving process that the child can use and adapt to a variety of projects and activities.

These problem-solving steps can be used with each phase of a project (planning, data gathering, organizing, preparing presentation, presenting):

- **Focus:** clarify purpose, objectives, deadlines, materials, and methods
- **Explore options:** use imagination and research skills to sort facts about a topic, ways of learning about it, or strategies for presenting
- **Create a solution:** select a topic, decide on what and how to investigate, design a presentation
- **Implement:** follow the plan, adjusting and adding details and schedules
- **Evaluate:** identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as joys and frustrations, to apply in the future

5. Help a child connect with credible resources outside the home.

Ideas, encouragement, and a broader view of the world can come from a variety of sources. Resource people and places include:

- Teachers, librarians, and club leaders
- Hobbyists or others with special talents and expertise
- Advocacy groups and community decision-makers

- Professionals, business people, and trades people
- Family members and neighbors
- Experts on the Internet

Note: A child is most safe when consulting others in public settings or when consulting with adults who have child abuse clearance.

Appreciate time together and celebrate learning more than prizes.

- Schedule fun and relaxation with breaks and after-work recreation
- Keep the child, not the project or prize, as the center of learning
- Create and reinforce esteem and achievement as often as possible

Supporting a child on school or after-school projects

Adults at home are a child's first teachers. Their efforts to support children with school and after-school projects include the following tasks:

- Maintaining realistic expectations of a child's age-related abilities, learning goals, time management, style-related abilities, and personal commitments of time and effort
- Sustaining rewarding involvement through listening skills, motivation, questioning skills, problem-solving strategies, help with locating resource experts, and celebration of time together and achievements

Seeing through the child's eyes

- ❖ How does the task fit the child's interests?
- ❖ What learning experiences can help the child meet this challenge?
- ❖ What aspects of this project will be most or least exciting to the child?
- ❖ What kind of help would the child appreciate from you?

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Comments from quiz items on page 1:

1. Checking formal requirements or setting personal goals is a critical first step.
2. A guide or expert, together with child stress/comfort level, offers clues to age-appropriateness.
3. Children learn little of value when parents complete their projects.
4. The quality of support, not the size of the prize, makes adults winners.
5. Scheduling and monitoring by kids and adults reduces deadline stress.
6. Children learn more and grow by expressing abilities rather than by imitation.
7. Faith in adults, self-esteem, and practical aid come with involvement.
8. Listening and encouraging allow the child to direct learning.
9. Most of us learn more through mistakes than through perfect performance.
10. Questions encourage and often guide children's exploration.
11. Projects help kids relate to another adult who can offer new ideas, encouragement, and viewpoints.
12. The value of any project is largely what the child (with help from adults) makes of it. Understanding the purpose and organizing the steps of a project help reduce frustrations which lead to negative interpretations of it.