

# Helping Children Learn®

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School

Cumberland County Schools



January 2026

## Frequent reading can boost your child's thinking skills—and more

Elementary schoolers' brains are still developing. And research shows that reading for pleasure in these years can affect this development in positive ways. One study found that kids who read often for fun had stronger cognitive skills and better mental health.

To help your child establish a pleasure reading habit:

- **Build reading** into daily routines. At breakfast, encourage your child to read a fun book while you read the news. If your child gets stuck while doing schoolwork, suggest taking a short break to read.
- **Ask relatives, family friends or neighbors** who enjoy reading to recommend books they enjoyed at your child's age. A personal connection can be a powerful motivator.
- **Create a comfy reading nook at home.** Ask your child to help you. Include a basket of books, pillows, stuffed animals and a light.
- **Take reading material everywhere** you go, and read with your child. To add interest, have your child pick a book that relates to your destination. For example, you might read a book about a visit to a dentist while waiting for a dental appointment.

Source: "Reading for pleasure in early childhood linked to better cognitive performance and mental well-being in adolescence," University of Cambridge.



## Delaying makes it worse

If your child puts off doing disliked tasks, recommend doing them first, instead. Explain that putting difficult things off just makes them seem harder. "Until that job is finished, it is just going to weigh on your mind." Then, help your child focus on how great it will feel when the task is completed.



## Provide loving perspective

All kids experience negative feelings from time to time. But sometimes, the feelings aren't really justified. While listening is a vital way to offer support, automatically agreeing isn't. If your child feels wronged:

- **Ask for details.** If your child says a classmate was mean, say, "Tell me what happened." This lets your child feel heard and you can respond to the facts.
- **Offer a challenge.** If your child says a quiz was "unfair," ask "Why wasn't it fair? How did you prepare?" If the truth is that your child didn't study, point that out. Then, brainstorm together about what your child could do differently next time.



## January is a time for making changes

A new calendar year and a return to school after a break make this month a natural time for a fresh start. If your child's school year has not been going as well as you hoped, a reset now can help your student get back on track.

Make this the time to:

- **Swap bad habits** for good ones. Breaking a habit is hard. It's much easier to put a different one in its place. If your child usually plays video games to relax, encourage reading for 20 minutes instead. Let your child choose what to read.
- **Show family support.** If your child needs to give studying more time and effort, make study time quiet work time for the whole family.
- **Focus on organization.** Look for a new 2026 calendar your child would enjoy. Help your student use it to keep track of home and school responsibilities.
- **Celebrate improvements.** Help your child see the link between new habits and results.

## Take charge of screen use

Children's digital media use is skyrocketing. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that families actively monitor and manage their children's recreational screen activities. Here are some steps to take:

- **Designate** device-free times, such as during family meals and in the car.
- **Encourage** screen-free alternatives. Take walks, play board games, do crafts.
- **Set** a digital curfew at least 30 minutes before bedtime.





## How can I help my child break through writer's block?

**Q:** Whenever there is writing to do for school, my child just stares into space and can't get started. What can I do to help?

**A:** Many students balk at the thought of writing—and so do many professional writers! Explain to your child that lots of people feel a little worried when they have to write, but there are things they can do to make it easier. Then, to help your elementary schooler get writing:

- **Suggest writing** for a few minutes about anything that comes to mind, no matter how silly.
- **Encourage your child to brainstorm** about topic ideas for the assignment, and make a list. Discuss them together to help your child think them through.
- **Tell your child to write** without worrying about things like grammar and spelling. After getting thoughts down on paper, your student can go back and edit.
- **Be a gentle reviewer.** Note what you like first. Focus on what your child is trying to say rather than the rules of writing. Make suggestions for improvement, but let your child fix mistakes.
- **Let your child express frustration.** It takes time and practice to become a capable writer.



## Are you prioritizing school attendance?

Academic success starts with regular attendance. Are you reinforcing the importance of school and taking steps to ensure your child doesn't miss out on learning time? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you teach** your child that education matters and school is not to be skipped?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you help** your child develop sleep, exercise and nutrition habits that support health and learning?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you veto** weak excuses for missing school? Not wanting to get out of bed isn't a valid reason to be late.
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you adjust** bedtime and wake time if your child has trouble getting up and ready on time?

- \_\_\_ **5. Do you ask** the school for help finding solutions to attendance obstacles?

### How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are supporting strong attendance. For each no, try that idea.

"Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardour and attended to with diligence."

—Abigail Adams

## Help with math three ways

Put these strategies to use regularly to boost your child's progress and comfort with math:

- 1. Engage with your child's math learning.** Review returned work and talk about it together. Ask the teacher how to help with different concepts.
- 2. Have your child explain** how to solve problems. This helps students clarify their understanding and catch errors.
- 3. Have fun with it.** Play board games and appoint your child scorekeeper or banker. Add math to games like Simon Says. *Simon says add 11 + 12.*

## Hearing can impact reading

You may not think of hearing in connection with reading. But hearing loss can be a factor when children struggle to read. In one study, 25 percent of children who had reading issues showed mild to moderate hearing loss their families were unaware of.

If you notice your child frequently favoring one ear, raising the volume on devices, speaking more loudly than necessary or having difficulties with reading, contact a doctor for a hearing screening.

Source: J. Carroll and H. Breadmore, MD, *Morphological Processing in Children with Phonological Difficulties*, Coventry University and The University of Warwick.

## Stress the value of honesty

Even when children know the difference between honesty and lying, telling the truth isn't always easy for them. To encourage honesty:



- **Discuss it.** Lying destroys trust. No one believes what a liar says—even when it's true.
- **Ask questions** that prompt truth-telling. *Why did you do this?* not *Did you do this?*
- **Praise your child** for telling the truth in difficult situations.

### Helping Children Learn®

Published in English and Spanish, September through May.

Publisher: Doris McLaughlin.

Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Alison McLean.

Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.

Copyright © 2026, The Parent Institute®, a division of PaperClip Media, Inc.

P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

1-800-756-5525 • [www.parent-institute.com](http://www.parent-institute.com)