

# Practical Tips to Help Your Child to Learn Better and to Value Education

By: Edward M. Hallowell, MD (2000)

I offer these tips in the spirit of creating a home and family environment that supports, encourages, and nourishes the pursuit of learning and the value of education. My experience has shown me that the philosophy and attitude that your child experiences at home is often the most powerful determinant of educational success. Kids can learn to love learning at home.

Here then are my tips to ponder and perhaps to put into place. The tips are not listed in order of importance.

1. **Unlink fear and learning.** The most common learning disability is also the most preventable: fear. Many of us parents grew up in an educational system that used fear, shame, and humiliation as pedagogical tools. While fear may promote learning in the short term, in the long term it turns children off to the whole process of education. Instead of instilling fear, use other tools, such as humor, praise, and structure. Create an atmosphere of learning at home, in which there is pleasure in the work.
2. **Applaud questions.** Emphasize that the only stupid question is the one you don't ask.
3. **Praise your child's efforts to learn, and give lots of reassurance.** Remember, learning is hard. You should shower the learner with praise and reassurance. This is not "empty praise." Some parents feel that they should praise a child only when he has done something marvelous to "deserve" it. While understandable, this point of view is counterproductive. It is like adding oil to your car's engine only when it "deserves" it. A child needs praise all the time, just as an engine needs oil all the time. Learning generates heat and friction in the brain; praise and reassurance lubricate and smooth the process. Never withhold praise and reassurance. Your child will know when he or she has done something marvelous; you do not need to hold back your praise for only those special moments. In fact, frequent praise and reassurance will make those special moments come more often.
4. **Value learning.** Talk about the importance of learning. Tell your child why learning matters. Ask your child over dinner, "What did you learn today?"
5. **Read aloud to your child.** Reading aloud helps develop the imagination, because it allows the listener to form his own picture in his mind. It also helps develop a sense of the music and timing of language. Jim Trelease's Read Aloud Handbook is an excellent resource.
6. **Make sure your child knows that it is safe to fail.** No one learns without failing first. The only way you can develop a new skill is by passing through a period of doing poorly, then gradually improving. If your child is afraid to fall because she fears ridicule or disapproval, she will learn much less than the child who is bold and brave enough to learn new skills.
7. **If your child is "fighting with his brain," pounding his head, and saying, "I'm dumb!" as he does his homework, give him reassurance and then stay with him for awhile.** Help him bear the tension of learning. Tell him that the pain and frustration he feels are okay, a normal part of the learning process. Ask him whether he needs some help, or whether there is another approach to the problem that he might try.
8. **Have music in your house.** Anecdotal studies have suggested that workers do better when Mozart is playing, and children learn more. Many children study better when listening to music of the right kind.

Mind Matters is the newsletter of information and opinion about psychology and the brain from the Hallowell Center. Edward Hallowell, M.D., author of *Driven to Distraction* and *When You Worry About The Child You Love*, is Editor in Chief. For subscription information contact the Hallowell Center, 747 Main St., Ste 108, Concord, MA 01742-9807 or phone (978) 287-0810.

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