

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



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Educational Service Unit 10

Final projects looming large? Your teen can tackle them in small steps

In May, many students are working on large, end-of-the-year projects. These can seem pretty overwhelming, particularly when they stand between your teen and summer break. But learning how to organize, research and complete long-term assignments now will prepare your teen for tackling them in college and on the job. Here's how to help:



- **Get out the calendar.** Your teen may think she has “plenty of time” when in reality, she doesn't. Mark the due date, then work backwards, crossing out days when your teen won't be able to work on the project. How much time is really left?
- **Don't overreact**—no matter how little time your teen has left to do the project. Offer to help her break the work down into smaller chunks. Create deadlines for each part—research finished by Monday, first draft finished by Friday, etc.
- **Lend support.** Of course you can't—and shouldn't—do her project for her. But you can take her to the store for supplies, proofread her paper or listen to her presentation. Make sure she has a quiet, well-lit place to work.
- **Provide motivation.** You'll be surprised how helpful a simple “How's the project going?” or “I know you'll do a great job!” can be. Place a sticky note on your teen's mirror that says “Almost there!”



Get set for a productive summer

It's time to make a plan with your teen to provide the structure he needs to keep learning and avoid drifting through the summer. Here are some ideas:

- **Set some goals.** When teens' brains go on vacation, achievement slips. Avoid the “summer slide” by helping him set learning goals. Perhaps he'd like to learn an instrument, or read all the books in a favorite series.
- **Set some boundaries, too.** You may be comfortable relaxing some school-year rules, like bedtime, for example. But don't let your teen out of responsibilities. He should still help around the house. And limits on screen time should stay in place.
- **Include physical activity.** Teens often gain weight over the summer. Schedule regular times when your whole family can exercise. Take walks together. Sign up for a class at a recreation center.

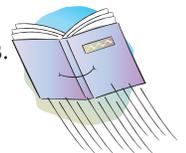
Source: California Library Association, “The Need for Summer Learning and Enrichment Opportunities in California,” www.cla-net.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=201.

Take attendance seriously

Sometimes movies and TV shows make skipping school seem like fun. But your teen misses out on learning when she misses school. Tell her that attendance—in all her classes—still matters. If you find she's been skipping, ask why. If your teen knows you're going to ask how school was—and not take “fine” for an answer—she is more likely to show up and pay attention!

Pleasure reading pays off

Your teen wants to read the latest in a popular sci-fi series. You think he should try a biography. Who's right?



It may be your teen. Teens who read for fun are likely to keep reading, and those who read over the summer are more likely to pursue college and professional careers. Summer pleasure reading:

- **Teaches persistence.** He'll have to finish other tasks to return to his book.
- **Strengthens the imagination.**
- **Reduces learning loss.**

Source: “Reading at 16 linked to better job prospects,” University of Oxford, <http://tinyurl.com/6ce5k7z>.

Is swearing a problem? Try sugar beets!

Swear words show disrespect, at home, at school and in the workplace. If your teen frequently curses, encourage her to stop by:

- **Offering alternative words,** like “sugar beets” or “fuzzle.” If she's angry, the funny words may cheer her up.
- **Trading for tasks.** Write some chores on slips of paper. Each time someone swears, they pick a slip and do the job.
- **Feeding a “swear jar.”** For every curse, the swearer must put in a quarter.





How do I enforce rules for my teen if no one else does?

Q: I am “The Meanest Mom on Earth,” according to my 15-year-old. “Everyone else” has a later curfew—or none at all. “Everyone else” can go to the library or to other students’ houses, whether or not parents are there. How can I stick to my values if “everyone else” lets their teens do more than I do?



A: First, there’s a good chance that your child is exaggerating. Teens always want their parents to think no other students have a curfew or responsibilities—in the hopes their parents will change their minds.

Don’t. If you’ve thought carefully about your rules, you shouldn’t change them just because your teen wants you to. To avoid a big debate:

- **Just say, calmly,** “Sorry. I’m not the parent of those other kids. I can’t change what their parents do. But we still have a curfew.”
- **Explain your values.** Tell your child you want him to do well in school, and that means getting adequate sleep, and focusing on school responsibilities. And you want him to be safe and cared for.
- **At a later time, check** with the parents of your teen’s friends. If you find out that everyone else really can stay out later than your teen, you may decide to relax your rule for next year. But you will have made the change on your schedule, and not because your teen whined.



How can my teen profit from mistakes?

We all make mistakes, but what is important is what comes after we discover them. Are you teaching your child how to learn from her mistakes, and to take responsibility and fix them? Answer *yes* or *no* to the following questions:

1. **Do you try** not to react emotionally when your teen makes a mistake?
2. **Do you help** your teen focus on the lessons she can learn from this mistake, rather than getting angry?
3. **Do you admit** your own mistakes and talk about what you will do to fix them?
4. **Do you discuss** lessons you’ve learned from your past mistakes?
5. **Do you keep** your teen from being hard on herself by

reminding her “that’s how you learn”?

How are you doing?

Each yes means you’re helping your teen turn mistakes into opportunities for learning and growth. For each no, try that idea.

“Don’t live down to expectations. Go out there and do something remarkable.”

—Wendy Wasserstein

Volunteer jobs empower teens to make a difference

Teens often feel that they lack the ability to do anything about the problems they see around them. A summer volunteer job can show your child that when he takes action, he *does* have an impact. Volunteering also:

- **Teaches marketable skills.** If he builds a database for the animal shelter now, he’ll gain real-world experience that will set him apart when he’s job-hunting.
- **Boosts self-confidence.** Knowing he can handle a challenge will give him the confidence to figure out other problems.

Source: W. Sears and M. Sears, *The Successful Child: What Parents Can Do to Help Kids Turn Out Well*, Hachette Books.

Make talking easier—listen

It can be tricky to keep up effective two-way communication with teens. Remember:

- **Don’t just lay down the law.** She will tune out a one-sided conversation.
- **Don’t solve your teen’s problems** for her. Instead, ask questions to help her make her own decisions.
- **Do listen.** Try not to cut her off with advice or a lecture.

Source: “Talking With Teens,” Hennepin County (MN) Medical Center, <http://tinyurl.com/mhd8lcf>.

The right tools build success

Summer is a good time for parents to add to their teens’ “tool box” of life skills. Here are three to concentrate on:



1. **Responsibility.** Give him control over one or two aspects of his life. He could set up a checking account for his finances.
2. **Autonomy.** Be sure he can look after himself. Teach him to do laundry and prepare simple meals.
3. **Focus.** Help him explore a career choice.

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