

CLASSROOM connections

2009–2010

A free, annual publication for families by the Wisconsin Education Association Council

HOMEWORK

IT TAKES TEAMWORK

INTERNET SAFETY

RAISING CHILDREN IN A CYBER WORLD

BEYOND K-12

WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP?

CELEBRATE LEARNING

HOW TO MOTIVATE YOUR KIDS

Helpful Hints for Classroom Success



an NEA affiliate

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DOWNLOAD THE FREE,
HELPFUL SCHOOL DIRECTORY
AT WEAC.ORG



dear families,



Our kids are our top priority, and we'd do anything to help them succeed. People in Wisconsin believe in your child's future and in great schools, even apart from the tangible benefits our schools bring to students, economies and communities. Every great school is the result of successful teamwork that includes parents, education staff and community members who invest in our schools to create a brighter future.

We know that even with such a dedicated team supporting your children, staying on top of everything that affects their education can be a challenge. That's why we've asked some of our best and brightest educators to help us provide you with this reference for handling the hot topics in schools today.

In this issue of *Classroom Connections*, we've shared some useful tips such as six steps to reading success and how to help your children with their homework. We've included the top questions to ask to make parent-teacher relationships meaningful and some discussion starters on Internet safety, substance abuse and more.

Let us know your thoughts, your story ideas and any sage parental advice you'd like to share by going to www.weac.org and clicking "Parents and Community." Together we can help your children benefit from Wisconsin's great schools.

Yours in education,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Mary Bell".

Mary Bell

WEAC President
weac.org

WHAT IS WEAC?

The Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) is a strong voice for the 865,000 children in Wisconsin's public schools and its 98,000 members who work in your schools—including teachers, counselors, library media specialists, secretaries, teacher aides, bus drivers and custodians. These WEAC members believe great schools benefit everyone, strengthen our communities and improve the quality of life for all citizens. To help continue Wisconsin's tradition of great schools, WEAC members advocate for small class size programs (SAGE), programs that improve school safety and measures to enable parents to be more involved in their children's education.

About This Publication *Classroom Connections* is WEAC's brand new yearly publication to help keep parents and schools connected. Our members, your children's teachers and education support professionals helped us decide what topics to include to make sure we provide you with the most relevant information for helping your children. Every single photo in this publication is of a Wisconsin student, teacher, education support professional, parent or grandparent so be sure to keep an eye out for people you know as you flip through.

Set Up FOR Success

Tips to Help Your Child Get a Great Education

By Bama Brown-Grice, Attitude Adjustment Parent Advocate with Milwaukee Public Schools

Staying actively involved in your children's schooling is key to their success, but what does that really mean and how can you help them make the most of their education? Use these tried-and-true tips to set the stage for your child to have a great educational experience.



SUPPORT YOUR STUDENT

- Maintain a positive environment. Children learn better in positive surroundings. Put a little smile into their days. It doesn't cost anything and it means so much.
- To help your child stay motivated, find opportunities that show how the skills learned in school are useful throughout life. Try to read daily, point out when you have to use math to solve a problem and ask their opinions on current events.
- Give your time and seek out additional support. It means a lot to your kids when you attend open houses and school concerts. It will help keep them involved in positive activities and open more opportunities for them. Take advantage of support that advances education—people in your neighborhood, the soccer coach, librarian, etc.

WORK THE PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

- A great education can only happen when there's two-way communication, and questions help spark the conversation—so don't be afraid to ask (even if it's not during parent-teacher conferences). Some good starters include: "What would you like to accomplish this school year?," "How can we make it happen?" and "What can we do to help?"
- Teachers respect your active interest in your child's education and it gives them a better understanding of how they can help your children succeed. Let teachers know if they've planned something that's put an undue burden on you—like if they give you one day to put together a perfect '70s outfit for a talent show or schedule a field trip that's just too expensive.

Keep your school resources handy with the downloadable directory on weac.org.



Celebrate Your Schools, Staff and Community

It's never too early to start planning activities to celebrate your schools, students and staff.



The Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) and the National Education Association (NEA) Web sites will feature resources to help you prepare for a variety of celebrations during the 2009–2010 school year. Visit weac.org and nea.org to find out about Wisconsin and nationwide celebrations:

NOVEMBER

The 88th annual American Education Week, held the third week in November, will spotlight different aspects of school life each day.

MARCH

WEAC/NEA's Read Across America is held annually on or near March 2, Dr. Seuss's birthday. The program focuses on motivating children across the country to read.

MAY

Teacher Appreciation Week is celebrated during the first full week in May. Remember to thank a teacher on National Teacher Day on May 4.

A message from Wisconsin PTA president Roxanne Starks:

Every great school is the result of successful teamwork: students, educators, parents and communities working together for a brighter future. The PTA is a network of organizations that present a united front for all children across the state. It's our mission to be a powerful, relevant resource for families and communities, and to be a strong advocate for the education and well-being of every child in Wisconsin.

As parents, we are our children's first educators, and it's our job to plant the seeds of success and help them grow strong. I encourage you to take the time to read *Classroom Connections* because it is a useful tool with many tips for parents of K–12 students.

Look for your favorite educator on these WEAC-sponsored news segments:

- Top Grade Teachers, WTMJ-TV, Milwaukee
- Terrific Teachers, WFRV-TV, Green Bay
- Top Notch Teachers, WKBT-TV, La Crosse
- Top Notch Teachers, WISC-TV, Madison
- Our Community Teachers, WSAW-TV, Wausau

ready, set, read!

POWER UP YOUR STUDENT WITH STORY BOOKS

By **WEAC President Mary Bell**, an English teacher and library media specialist at West Junior High School in Wisconsin Rapids for 26 years



We must work together to inspire all children to read and we as adults need to be reading role models for children. Parents, grandparents, local and state leaders working together can ensure that students become lifelong learners and are prepared for jobs of the 21st century.

Encouraging reading is one of the most important ways to build a strong foundation for achievement—not only in academics, but in life as well. There are a few simple things you can do to help your children get ahead.

If you set aside reading time, you're off to a great start. Just 10 extra minutes a day go a long way. Studies have found that children learn best when they spend quality time with their caregivers. If you make reading aloud together part of your nightly routine, you will give them a better understanding of how books work and of language in general.

To get the most out of reading time, point out that books are written by authors and the drawings are done by illustrators. Show that books open a certain way and the text flows from left to right. Ask your children questions about the book when you read—like predicting what will happen next or why the character

acted a certain way. If you are re-reading a favorite book, ask if your children can recall what happens next in the story.

When you read with your children, make sure you give them enough time to respond to your questions and really listen to their answers. Encourage them to connect what happened in the book to something that has happened in real life.

Keeping a variety of books around will help build your child's reading proficiency and foster a life-long love of reading. Find opportunities to read that will expand your children's vocabulary and demonstrate how useful reading is. Try reading menus, advertisements, directions for a game and maps with your children.

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S TOP 5 CHILDREN'S BOOKS ARE:



- **Charlotte's Web** BY E.B. WHITE
- **Where the Wild Things Are** BY MAURICE SENDAK
- **The Giving Tree** BY SHEL SILVERSTEIN
- **Green Eggs and Ham** BY DR. SEUSS
- **Good Night Moon** BY MARGARET WISE BROWN

CHECK OUT THE REST OF THE TOP 100 IN THE PARENTS AND COMMUNITY SECTION OF WEAC.ORG.

Six Steps to Reading Success

1 Practice the sounds of the language. Short poems and books that rhyme or use repetition are big helpers. You can also play word games like "how many words can you think of that sound like 'cat?'"

2 Start matching sounds with letters. For example, point out that "H is for hat" and "C is for cat."

3 Help your children connect words with meanings. Have them draw pictures of characters and write or dictate stories of what is happening in their drawing. You can ask them what they think a new word means and talk about it.

4 Read familiar books. This helps your children get more comfortable practicing reading. It will also help them learn how to read with expression. When they're ready, you can start taking turns reading to each other.

5 Help your children read accurately. If they miss a word while reading aloud, point it out and help them read the sentence correctly.

6 Make sure your children understand what they read. To build reading comprehension, you can talk about what happened in a story or ask about specific characters or places mentioned in the book.



stamp out SUBSTANCE ABUSE together



Thinking or knowing that your child has a substance abuse problem is one of the most frightening challenges you can encounter as a parent. That's why it's so important to know pointers on how to best raise a drug-free child and how and when to get help if your child is turning to drugs.

Today children are less likely to drink, smoke or do drugs than their parents' generation, but adolescent changes can make drug use more appealing. During adolescence, especially middle adolescence around age 14, children's brains change. Children start to try on different identities, to form their own opinions and to start thinking they are immune from consequences.

START THE DISCUSSION

Just talking about drugs with your middle schooler helps. According to "Parents. The Anti-Drug" fact sheet, about 70 percent of teens say the biggest risk in using marijuana is upsetting their parents.

Sometimes parents are apprehensive to have a conversation about saying no to drugs because they don't know how to answer if their children ask, "Have you ever done drugs?" It's OK to be honest, and know that today we have a lot

more research showing the dangers of drugs. Also, some drugs, like marijuana, are more powerful today than they were when you were young.

KNOW YOUR FACTS

Get smart about what drugs kids use today. Prescription and over-the-counter drugs like painkillers, ADHD medication and cough and cold medicine should be on your radar. A recent Office of National Drug Control Policy report states that equally as many new users get high from prescription and over-the-counter drugs as from marijuana.

That same report found signs that teens view these drugs as safer than illegal drugs. Teens also report that they are easy to get—about half of users get them for free from friends and family members. Talking to your middle schooler about the dangers of prescription drug use and keeping tabs on your prescriptions will help you best protect your child.

KEEP THEM BUSY

Kids involved in constructive after-school activities that are supervised by adults are less likely to use drugs than other teens. Extra-curriculars will also help build your children's self-confidence, which is a key tool in helping them think for themselves and not bend to peer pressure. Stay in touch with the supervisors—they're an extra pair of eyes that can help notice any changes in your child.

As adolescents, your children will undoubtedly want to spend plenty of time with their friends. Getting to know each friend and their parents is a great way to stay involved in what's happening in your child's life as well.



I THINK MY CHILD MIGHT BE USING... NOW WHAT?

It can be difficult to tell if your child is using, especially because the warning signs don't always mean drug abuse is the problem. But it's best to check out any hunches you have. Here's a run-down of the possible indicators. A good rule of thumb is if you see three or more, it's time to take action.

- Loss of interest in family activities
- Disrespect for family rules
- Withdrawal from responsibilities
- Verbally or physically abusive behavior
- Sudden change in appetite
- Disappearance of money or valuables
- Not coming home on time
- No accountability for coming and going
- Constant excuses for behavior
- Spending a lot of time alone
- Lying
- Finding cigarette rolling paper, pipes, roach clips, small glass vials, plastic baggies or remnants of drugs

If you suspect a problem, talk to your pediatrician, school counselors and teachers. They all will be able to help support you and your child. You can also check online for resources like TheAntiDrug.com.

GET READY for what's next

By Michelle Frechette, social worker at
Menominee Indian High School



Four years of high school can fly by, and before you know it, it's decision time for your teen. College? Tech school? Enlistment? Start a career? The end of high school is a bevy of choices, and to make sure your children start their post K-12 life on the right foot, a little early planning will go a long way—for whatever path they take.

If that path leads to college, there are a lot of things students can do before they get into their senior year to better prepare them for making a clearer choice.

GET YOUR KIDS THINKING ABOUT WHAT THEY LOVE

Students who are best prepared have a clear idea of what they'd like to do by junior year. The earlier you start conversations about what careers they are interested in, the better. Try to point out options that coincide with your teen's interests and academic strengths.

If your teen knows what field he or she would like to pursue, it will be much easier to narrow down the options. He or she will also be better prepared by taking recommended coursework for the intended job choice while still in high school. Just keep in mind that flexibility is important, too—it's common to change majors after getting into college.

SHOW THEM THE POSSIBILITIES

Exposing your teen to different opportunities is a key part of the college selection process. Parents can push their students to think about what kind of features they want in a school. Does your child want to stay in state, or go to school across the country? Does he or she want a larger school or a smaller one? Are athletics, Greek life or being politically active important?

Thinking about what kind of school your child would like to attend helps your teen better prepare for college visits. It provides an idea of what questions to ask the school's representative so your child can make a more informed decision.

HELP YOUR KIDS MAKE A DECISION EARLY

Many students don't decide on what they want to do until senior year, which means they miss out on the opportunity to best prepare themselves. From taking practice versions of standardized tests to loading up on coursework that their college of choice requires, students can do a lot during their junior year.

Having a clear career path in mind also means your student can monitor scholarship options early on. Do you have a teen who is interested in a career in math or science? How about a teen interested in nursing or education? There are many scholarships available.

Guidance Goes Beyond Graduation

At 91 percent overall, Wisconsin schools have some of the highest graduation rates in the country, along with top scores on standardized tests like the ACT college entrance exam. And they don't just prepare your children to succeed in school, they have resources available to help them be successful after graduation.

The guidance department can help your child prepare for his or her future. Counselors are well-versed not only on college options, but career interest surveys, standardized tests and scholarship opportunities as well.

College Planning T-I-M-E-L-I-N-E

FRESHMAN YEAR

- Talk about career interests with your teen.

SOPHOMORE YEAR

- Make sure your child completes a career interest survey like wiscareers.wisc.edu.

JUNIOR YEAR

- Work with your teen to get a career choice in mind.
- Make sure your student signs up for the appropriate standardized tests and practice versions if possible.
- Expose your teen to several college options. *U.S. News & World Report's* Best Colleges is a great resource to start with.
- Go on college visits.

SENIOR YEAR

- Make sure your teen narrows down the list of schools and applies before deadlines pass.
- Have your teen watch out for scholarship opportunities. Fastweb.com and scholarships.com can help.
- Once you complete your taxes, keep your forms and start looking at financial aid. Start with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) at fafsa.ed.gov.
- Keep an eye on acceptance deadlines to make sure you don't miss any.



INTERNET SAFETY CHECKLIST

8 WAYS TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS



Just knowing of potential threats on the Internet is difficult—let alone giving your kids good guidance on how to be safe. All these unknowns make it more important than ever to talk about the Web. We've come up with eight ways you can talk to your children to make sure they use the Internet safely as they go through school.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

1 ■ Start by talking about how the Internet can be helpful and fun, then find entertaining, safe sites together. For younger kids, you may want to always use the Internet together, and as they get older, give them more freedom.

2 ■ Make sure your kids know not to share personal information like their name, phone number and address. Reinforce that talking to people you don't know online is like talking to strangers.

3 ■ Guide your children on what to do when they come across content that makes them uncomfortable—like a mature Web site or a message asking for personal information.

PARENT TOOLBOX | ELEMENTARY

There are many kid-friendly search engines and Web activity centers that help you teach your kids how to use the Internet safely like AskKids.com, Seussville.com and PBSKids.org.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

During middle school, the Internet often evolves into a way for your kids to keep up with their friends. This can be a tricky situation for parents who want to make sure their children are making smart decisions online while respecting their privacy.

4 ■ Talk about where your children like to go online and how they communicate with their friends. Ask if they have a social network (like Facebook or MySpace) profile and talk about what kind of information is appropriate to share.

5 ■ Ask your children if they are friends or chat with people they have only met online and what they do if someone they don't know contacts them. Reinforce that people aren't always what they seem online, so it's important to be careful. Make sure they know it is never all right to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they've met online.

6 ■ Take steps against cyberbullying or using a text message, email, instant message or other form of Web communication to harass someone. Let your children know that if they tease someone virtually, the effects are still real, and talk about what to do if they are being cyberbullied.



PARENT TOOLBOX | MIDDLE SCHOOL

Cruise the Web before you talk with your kids. Log on to MySpace and Facebook to see what's out there. You can Google your children's names as well to see what comes up.

Profile Safety Tips

"Anything you put on the Internet, everyone can see," said Ron Brandt, technology coordinator at Kansasville Grade School, who helps teach fifth and sixth graders how to use the Internet safely.

Ron says you should make sure your children leave out information from their profiles that strangers can use to contact them like:

- Last name
- Age
- Where they live (even if it's as broad as your city or town)
- Where they go to school
- Who their teachers are
- What their interests are

HIGH SCHOOL

7 ■ Revisit the middle school checklist. Everything you talked about then is just as applicable now.

8 ■ Talk about what kind of photos and videos your kids post online and who can see them. Many social network users feel like they have control over the information they share, when in reality they have less control than they think. The very nature of social networks makes it easy to spread content.

PARENT TOOLBOX | HIGH SCHOOL

Set up your own Facebook and MySpace accounts to get a feel for the privacy settings. While social network users can't control what their friends share, they can limit the access that strangers have to their profiles.

Celebrate Learning

HOW TO MOTIVATE YOUR KIDS

When you teach your children how to set and reach goals, you won't just help them succeed in school. Motivation and goal-setting build confidence and instill a drive in your kids that will benefit them their entire lives.

You will help your kids stay more interested and involved if you are interested and involved in their school activities. Your approach to challenges and interest in their schoolwork are two of the most influential factors in teaching your kids to be motivated.

TRY TO:

- Focus on the positives and reinforce good effort and determination. Letting your child know you believe in him or her will go a long way.
- Keep on top of what's new and what they're learning at school. Ask your children to show you projects they've created at school and to tell you about what new things they're learning.
- Praise them for their successes.
- Set goals as another way to keep your children motivated. Goals should be a challenge, but within reach. Write them down together and help your children plan how to achieve them.



DID YOU KNOW?

BEING INTERESTED IN YOUR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND HELPING THEM SET GOALS WON'T JUST TEACH MOTIVATION, IT WILL ALSO HELP THEM BECOME MORE POSITIVE THINKERS.



Be a Homework Helper

Are your children getting all the possible benefits from homework? Sadly, most don't, even though it can be a great way to teach your children responsibility, time management and the value of a strong work ethic.

In fact, studies show that children who spend more time on regularly assigned homework do better in school—and in life.

Homework is a good link between you and the classroom, and can be a way to stay in touch with what your child is learning. It is also a way to help you connect more with your child. Giving pointers on math problems, editing essays and being available to listen to speeches not only will improve your child's work, it will also show them how much you care about their success.

You can set your child up to be a homework superstar by creating the best space for learning to take place. When arranging your child's homework area, keep in mind that great study spots have:

✓ **GOOD
LIGHTING**

✓ **COMFORTABLE
SEATING**

✓ **APPROPRIATE
WORK SURFACE**

✓ **STORAGE SPACE
FOR SUPPLIES**

✓ **FEW
DISTRACTIONS**

One good tip for keeping your children in control of homework: remind them to keep their assignment notebooks up-to-date. You can also help them to carve out study time and get into a homework routine.





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and encouragement,
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Everyone!*

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