

How to help your child learn better, faster, easier

Adapted from Brilliant Parent by Emma Sargent

Brilliant parents understand how to encourage their children to learn, help them to get the best out of school, and continue to learn throughout their lives.

Given that we are role models whether we like it or not, *our* attitude to learning and the beliefs that *we* hold about learning will have an enormous impact on *our children's* attitude to learning and therefore their ability to learn new things.

Brilliant Tip

If you want to help your child get the most out of their time at school, and indeed their life, you can encourage them to think *this* way about learning:

- you can always learn something from any situation, however familiar
- if someone can learn something then you can learn it too
- giving something a go is more important than getting it right
- learn from your mistakes instead of thinking that you have failed
- you are always capable of more

Helping your children to learn

We, as parents, have a responsibility to support the work of our child's school through helping them to learn at home too. We also need to notice when things aren't working as well as they could, and to be able to have constructive conversations with teachers and other people who spend a lot of time with our children.

Our children's education is a joint effort between parents and teachers, so we need to understand how learning works so that we can play an active, supporting role.

Here's what we need to know about learning:

In order to learn anything effectively your child needs to:

- Be motivated to learn it
- Be in a positive state when you learn it
- Be able to connect the new learning to something you already know and to real life

Keeping our children motivated to learn

Think about the last time you chose to learn something new. What was it that got you to start learning?

Were you just interested in the topic? Were you inspired by someone? What relevance did it have to your life? What were the positive consequences of learning it? Perhaps you just thought it would be fun.

Being motivated to learn something is vital. If a child, or an adult for that matter, is bored or de-motivated in some way, they will not learn. We can support our children's motivation to learn in a few simple but important ways.

Brilliant Tips for motivation

- Talk to them about what interests them
- Be enthusiastic about their interests (even if it bores the pants off you!)
- Be enthusiastic and interested in learning – it's catching.
- Notice and reinforce the things they respond positively to
- Really notice what lights up their face when they talk about it
- Encourage them to try new things
- Make them aware of the positive consequences of learning something

I met a woman, Ann on a workshop I was running in San Francisco.

She told me this story of how she managed her daughter's negative experience with her new Second Grade teacher. This teacher, Mrs. Johnson is a teacher who teaches using negative reinforcement rather than positive. I must say that I was quite surprised by this – we are talking about California! Anyway she did. Ann's daughter, 8, responds badly to negative reinforcement because it is important to her that the teacher likes her and likes her work. She is motivated to try harder when she is encouraged and her work appreciated.

When she only gets negative reinforcement, she reacts by not trying at all because “nothing I do is going to make her pleased so I'm not going to try.” As a result, she was very soon miserable about going to school.

Ann handled the situation brilliantly. She asked her daughter, “What are the three things that are important to Mrs. Johnson?”

“A tidy desk, not speaking in class without putting your hand up first and neat writing,” came the reply.

Ann asked her to just concentrate on doing those three things for a week and then they would talk about it again. Sure enough, at the end of the week, her daughter was much happier. Mrs. Johnson had not had cause to make any negative comments to her and in fact had given the odd hint of praise.

Ann then went to see Mrs. Johnson for a parents' evening. She made no comment about her daughter's unhappiness. However, at the end of the meeting, Ann lent towards her and said, “Just so you know, if you want my daughter to do her very best for you and go the extra mile, she responds very well to praise. She really works hard when she knows she is appreciated; just so you know,” she repeated.

Sure enough, Mrs. Johnson started to write little positive comments in her homework book.

Very soon, Ann's daughter became much happier and now Mrs. Johnson is "the best teacher she has ever had"!

What a fantastic intervention from Ann. There was no criticism directed towards anyone. All she did was work out how her daughter and Mrs. Johnson could get the best out of each other and guide them as to how to do it. Brilliant.

Floyd's story

My husband, Tim, used to run an organisation dedicated to helping young people with significant learning difficulties to find employment. This involved teaching them the necessary social and technical skills required for a whole range of trades. Floyd was one of these young people. He was a small and slight sixteen year old who had managed to find his way through the education system without it apparently having had any impact whatsoever. He was largely illiterate and innumerate and suffered, as a result of being bullied, from an extra-ordinary degree of defensive behaviour, to the extent that he was hardly able to communicate verbally with anyone other than his peers. One day, Floyd was taken ill and his supervisor, Ken, drove him home. Floyd was so grateful to him that he, amazingly, invited him into his house and asked if he would like to see his room. Ken could hardly help but notice that the walls were covered from floor to ceiling in posters of motorbikes and on the floor were piles of motorcycle magazines.

At that moment he realised the key to Floyd's motivation. He asked him to bring in his magazines, which he currently couldn't read, and designed a programme of literacy and numeracy based around motorbikes.

Six months later, Floyd could tell you the cost of the petrol required to ride a 600cc Yamaha from London to Newcastle and back; a not-inconsiderable feat of mathematical skill; and six months after that he entered his first full time employment in the warehouse of a vehicle parts supplier.

Floyd's story is a dramatic one but the same thing happens every day in schools to a degree.

A friend of mine brilliantly got her son to read by telling him that if he wanted to build his new Warhammer tank he would have to read the instructions himself. It was a struggle for him, but because he so wanted to build it, he did it and constructed the tank all by himself. His interest in reading has increased as a result of that positive experience.

Keeping your children in a positive state for learning

Emotional state has a huge impact on learning.

It is extremely important for children to be in a positive learning state when they are at school. Negative feelings inhibit learning and positive feelings accelerate it. When I think back to being at school, the lessons I learnt most from were the ones that the teacher made fun, challenging and enjoyable in some way.

Children learn well when they are:

Curious

Open to new ideas

Motivated

Relaxed

Happy

Comfortable

Excited

Engaged

Challenged

Children do not learn well when they are:

Bored

Nervous

Stressed

Anxious

Fearful

Lacking in confidence

In an over-competitive environment

Negative

Anxiety and fear of failure

In my work I often come across adults who do not want to ask questions in a learning environment for fear of looking stupid; I used to be like that myself. And there are many who will not answer a question unless they know they are going to get it right.

Fear of looking or sounding stupid inhibits learning.

Let's be clear; there is no such thing as a stupid question. Any question means that you are trying to make sense of something, which means that you are learning.

Brilliant Tip

All questions are good. Always encourage your children to ask questions.

As parents we must encourage our children to ask questions and always make them feel OK about it. If our children are going to grow up into confident adults, they must get the message that if they don't get an answer right, that's OK, they can just keep searching for the answer.

Giving it a go is more important than getting it right when we are learning. We need to challenge teachers and other adults who do not have this attitude and who make children feel bad for getting things wrong.

Children learn when they feel safe and confident and when they can build on success. Children do not learn when they find a situation threatening. Anxiety inhibits learning, even when a child is motivated to learn.

I have already mentioned how we make ourselves feel anxious; we construct thoughts of things going wrong, or otherwise failing in some way. If we are worried about failing, our attention will be on **not failing**, more than it will be on achieving the task in front of us. The state of anxiety also releases chemicals into our system that inhibit our ability to think, and therefore to learn.

So how can we help our children to access positive states?

Ways to help your child get into a positive state for learning

1 Through asking questions

Eliciting a positive state in someone is easy if you know what questions to ask and if you are in a resourceful state yourself. One friend of mine who has started using these simple techniques with her children after coming to one of our workshops said, "It really is just about using your brain to work out what you want and being a bit more creative in getting it." Exactly.

The quickest way to change someone's state to a more positive one is to ask them what it is like for them to be in that positive state.

The reason this question works is because in order to answer it they have to access the state first. Try it for yourself;

What's it like when you are confident?

What's it like when you are happy?

What's it like when you are.....?

You can't help feeling the emotion, can you?

So whenever you want your child to experience a particular state, ask them this question.

A word of warning! We have found that this question works more effectively than other similarly worded questions such as, "What does it *feel* like when you are confident?" They simply don't work as well, so stick to asking,

What's it like when you are....?

2 Look up!

Notice the body language of your child when they are in a bad mood or other negative state. It is highly likely that they will look down in order to keep themselves in that state, even if they are not aware of it. They may be talking themselves into it too which also involves downward eye movements. They may also have rounded shoulders and general slumped appearance.

Robert's story

Robert is very good at hamming up a bad mood on the way to school. Knowing what you know, you would guess correctly that he looks down at the pavement whilst saying to his mother, "I really don't want to go to school, Mum. I hate school." As his mother knows that this is a bit of an act, she can quickly move to the future state, and elicit one that is useful for Robert to go into school with. So she asks him to look up at the sky.

This, in itself, will break his bad mood as he can't maintain it for long without looking down to refresh it!

When he looks at the sky she starts to ask him to make pictures about things which she knows he is looking forward to. "Robert, can you imagine playing with your friends at break time?" "Oh yes", he says, and immediately looks more positive and quickens his pace toward school!

3 Help them to create new thoughts

In Robert's example, his mother not only got him to look up to change his state, she also asked him to create new thoughts.

Creating new thoughts can be as simple as asking your child to think of an activity that they find fun.

I quite often ask the children to get a picture of themselves really having a fun time when they are in their class learning, or to make a picture of themselves concentrating well, listening well, learning easily etc.. They do it quickly and easily, it takes seconds, and it sets their focus for the day. Not only does it make it extremely likely that they will behave in the way that they have mentally rehearsed, it raises their confidence about learning. This short exercise achieves so many things – it also means that they are constantly getting a message that learning happens easily and naturally.

4 Story telling, guided fantasy, metaphor and meditations

Story telling is an excellent way of eliciting emotions in others.

Stories go straight to the most powerful part of our mind, our unconscious mind. As well as using stories to elicit states we can use them for any number of things. While we are consciously paying attention to the story, our unconscious mind is making connections and meanings at a deeper level. That means that stories are a fabulous way of helping children learn and get positive messages about themselves.

5 Music

Playing up beat music in the mornings is a great way to get everyone feeling energetic and ready for the day; or alternatively, calming music for those who are already a bit over-excited in the mornings!

6 Games and physical movement

It has long been known that learning is an active process and we learn more effectively if our whole body is involved. For some children this is crucial. At the extreme, children who have a strong kinaesthetic (feelings and action) preference for learning are sometimes labelled as slow learners or as disruptive because of their need to move around.

Hugo's story

When Hugo started his new school, he came home very excited one day, having written more than anyone else in his class about a story they were reading. His mother was surprised and delighted as his previous school had warned his mother that he had serious comprehension problems. The class had acted out the story so that they all experienced the emotions of the young boy in the story. Hugo was able to truly connect with the story as it came alive for him.

I'm sure that all of us have been in a situation where we felt that we needed to go for a walk to help us feel differently about something. And how often do our best ideas come to us when we are in the shower or bath when we are really relaxed? My best ideas come when I am on the running machine at the gym when I reach a trance-like state – the ideas seem to come from nowhere.

Nancy's story

A dyslexic teacher that we know, Nicola, made the most difference to her 12 year old pupil through working with her state. She noticed, in the first lesson, that when she asked Nancy to read to her, her state changed. Nicola paid attention to her physiology: shoulders going up, generally tight muscles, shallow breathing and flushed skin. In this state, Nancy's attempt to read was not particularly successful. Instead of ignoring her state, Nicola decided to work on changing that in preference to working on her reading skills. She asked Nancy to stop and asked her what happened when she asked her to read to her. Nancy replied that she immediately felt tense and panicky.

Nicola knew that she needed to get Nancy into a state that would be useful for her in the future. She decided that it would really help Nancy if she could get her to feel relaxed and confident.

Nicola asked Nancy "What's it like when you are relaxed?" She kept asking her more questions like "How do you know? Where do you feel it? What are you thinking about?" and kept watching for changes in her body language. She did the same with "confident" when she noticed Nancy relax. Nicola made sure that Nancy was aware of the internal pictures she was making to help her feel that way so that she could suggest to Nancy that she could think of this when she needed to be in that state.

When Nancy was in a really positive state, she asked her to read to her again. Nancy could not believe the difference in her ability to read; she could see the words more clearly on the page and hear her voice more clearly.

The effect of working on Nancy's state snowballed. Reading more fluently to Nicola helped her feel more confident and feeling more confident made her read more fluently. Soon, she surprised her teacher by agreeing to read aloud in class.

If Nicola had not known about the importance of the relationship between emotional state and behaviour, she would not have paid as much attention to it. In her opinion, she would have taken a lot longer to make progress with Nancy.

Thomas and his homework

When Thomas started school, he quickly objected to doing extra reading at the end of a tiring day. Frankly, I didn't blame him; it seemed a bit much to ask a four year old to do homework, even if it was only for five minutes. I began to get concerned when he consistently went into a very negative mood when I suggested reading, as he was beginning to associate reading with the bad mood. I knew that if I allowed that association to continue much longer it would affect his motivation and ability to read potentially for the rest of his life.

He was finding reading difficult and an all round negative experience. Every time I said, "Let's do some reading," his shoulders would slump and he would go into a very bad mood.

What I needed to do was make sure that he got into a positive emotional state when I asked him to read. So I decided to act out the story as he read. The story was one about an alien losing its socks, so it made for some hilarity as Hannah and I put our best efforts into acting it out. Thomas thought it was very funny so we did it again the next afternoon and the next one. By the third afternoon Thomas wanted to do his reading before I asked him to. After that we didn't need to act it out either, thankfully.

His reading improved quickly after that because he was in a positive learning state when he started, instead of a state that blocked his learning and improvement.

Try reading a novel when you feel in a terrible mood. It is very hard to concentrate and to understand what you are reading.

A bit about emotional state and memory

Psychologists know that information learned in a particular state will be most effectively remembered and used in the same state. If you are feeling on top of the world, that feeling will trigger memories of lots of other times when you felt that way. The same thing happens with every other emotion; sadness, joy, understanding, confusion, confidence and so on.

Therefore it is most useful to learn something in the state that you will need to recall it. Students who revise in test conditions, perform better in exams than those who don't.

Creating the atmosphere of an exam or test, be it for ballet, music, spelling, or anything else, gives our children the best possible opportunity for performing well in the test.

We learn to drive a car by driving it, not by being told how to drive it. The sooner we can put new skills to the test, in the situations where we will need them, the better.

Brilliant Tips

Get your child into a positive state for learning by:

- Asking questions
- Looking up when they are feeling down
- Helping them to create positive pictures in their minds
- Telling them stories with positive messages
- Play upbeat (or calming) music
- Getting them to play games on the way to school
- Using the positive language in Chapter 6 to suggest having a fun day.

Helping your child to make connections for easier learning

What does connection mean? Connection means understanding. That is, our ability to make meaning from something. New information needs to be related and attached to information that we already know in order for us to make sense of it.

Children who are good at comprehension in reading, are constantly referring to their internal dictionary and making connections between that and the text.. When very young children first learn to read, they have reading books that have a high ratio of pictures to words. This aids connection; that is, the word ‘car’ goes with a picture of a car. As readers get more competent, the amount of pictures in books decreases and they have to make internal pictures to help them understand the story.

It’s much easier to listen to a story and imagine it happening than to read it for yourself. There is an extra step when we read. We have to concentrate on reading the word and making sense of it at the same time. I am working with an adult who finds reading novels very difficult for this reason. He is practising reading a sentence, stopping and asking himself, “How do I know what that means?” He is practising making full internal representations after each sentence so that he connects with the story.

So how can we help our children to make the connection?

Like everything else, the first step in helping anyone is to help them become aware of their internal processes. And in order to help them become aware, you need to get really interested in how your child does what they do.

Here’s a conversation I had with a child who is mildly dyslexic and whom I was helping with comprehension.

Me: How do you know what the word ‘table’ means?

J: It’s brown.

I could see that she was finding a picture in her mind through looking up. I also knew that she was accessing a visual image because she said that it was brown. Telling me that it is a certain colour presupposes a visual thought.

Me: What's the difference between an old table and a new table?

J: The old one is a bit raggedy and the new one is shiny.

Again, J was giving me visual qualities in her answers.

Me: So you know what those words mean because you have a picture of them in your head.

J (looking a bit surprised): Yes, I do.

I was now aware of her internal processes for comprehension.

I also asked her about more abstract words and we made up silly sentences for her to remember.

Then we moved on to her current spelling words for school. For each word, we did the visual spelling strategy for the actual word and attached meaning to it through deliberately creating a mental image or sentence to go alongside the word. For each word we did the following:

Write the word out on a separate piece of paper in a colour of the child's choice.

Me: What sort of colour would the word 'right' be?

J: Pink

We wrote the word out on a separate piece of paper in pink.

Me: How do you know what 'right' means?

J: I don't really know.

Me: Well I imagine a big tick with the word 'right' beside it.

J: Oh I was thinking about me with an arrow on my head pointing to the right!

Me: Great! It means that too.

So for each word, we did a drawing, symbol or contextual sentence to concrete the meaning.

J was learning how to do this for herself every time she got a new list of words. She also realised that it would be a good idea to stop and think about the words when she was reading. This allowed her time to find her internal reference for the meaning, rather than focusing so hard on the actual word that all comprehension was passing her by.

J and I spent just over one hour together learning these two strategies: how to remember the spelling and how to remember the meaning. Her mother has told me that her confidence has improved tremendously, she spends approximately a quarter of the time learning her spelling and is consistently getting most of them right, and she is choosing to read more often which has led to a big improvement in her reading ability. She told me that J volunteered to read aloud in class, which is a big step.

Hugo's Story

Hugo left his school at the end of Year 3 (aged 7) to move to another part of the country. As he came out of the school gates for the last time, his teacher leant over to his mother and said quietly, "Here are his latest test papers. I'm afraid Hugo has a quite serious comprehension problem that you might like to tell his next school about." Hugo's mother was speechless – she had no idea, and did not appreciate hearing it for the first time in this way. She told me that Hugo didn't particularly like reading but she certainly didn't know that he had a problem.

While we were over at their house I said to Hugo, "By the way Hugo; when you are reading, make pictures in your head as you go along so that you know what's happening." He looked at me thoughtfully and nodded, "OK", and ran off to find his friends.

When I next saw Hugo, his mother told me that his new school had found no evidence of comprehension problems. "Wow, Hugo that's fantastic!"

"Well, Emma, you taught me how to do comprehension last time you were here."

"Did I?!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, you remember, you told me to make pictures when I'm reading."

Imagine my surprise – that one suggestion had been enough to change the way he understood what he was reading. Wow.

Brilliant Tips for making connections

- Help your child's understanding by getting to know what they already know and are interested in and relate the new learning to that. Present the information in a fun way.
- Help your children understand words and prose by encouraging them to make mental images. If necessary, draw pictures for them that explain the meaning.
- Ask, "How do you know what that means?" to help them become aware of their internal dictionary.

Summary

You can help your children become life-long learners.....

- Learning is an active process. The more we are asked to think about and practice what we are learning the more effective our learning will be.
- Learning will only take place if the new information or required skill can be connected to something the learner already knows and understands. If it cannot be connected, no learning will take place.
- Children need to be in a positive state to learn effectively; anxiety inhibits learning.
- Encourage your child to ask questions by being positive about all questions. Help them to believe that all questions are useful.
- Get interested in their strategies for learning to make them aware of unconscious processes.
- Share your successes at home with your child's school in a positive and supportive way.
- Look for learning opportunities in everyday activities.
- Always relate the learning to real life. What's useful about knowing this or being able to do this skill?

Brilliant Parent is available on Amazon and in most good bookshops. You can contact Emma on emma@emmasargent.co.uk and she has free videos including "The number 1 skill that parents need to know but don't get taught" on www.brilliantparent.com