

Family Guide to Fostering Whole Child Development



By Rebecca Bauer & Helen Westmoreland

You know that reading with your child can help boost their literacy skills, but you might be stumped on ways to help them build life skills. The good news is—you are already helping in more ways than you know!

You are your child's first teacher. You started instilling important values and modeling a variety of traits and skills from the moment your child was born. Teachers are experts in education and child development and have a crucial role in teaching and reinforcing these life skills. Your child's healthy development depends on the strength of your partnership with teachers and school administrators.

A framework for family engagement in whole child education

- + **At home.** By modeling life skills at home, you are fostering your child's ability to manage their own feelings. At home, ensure you align with the school's approach to whole child development to help your child gain the skills they need to be a good member of the classroom community.
- + **In the classroom.** When you regularly talk with teachers about your child's interests, needs, strengths and areas for growth, it ensures that all of the adults in your child's life are on the same page regarding their development. Building a caring relationship before problems arise means that your trusting partnership is ready to address any challenge by working together.

- + **In the school and school district.** You can help your child get what they need from the school or district, by starting to learn about how the education system operates. Once you understand the school and district priorities, you can better advocate for the change you want to see.

Facilitating Whole Child Development at Home

There are many ways you can facilitate your child's development beyond academics. For example, you can help them develop life skills, including the ability to solve problems and how to use coping strategies when they face challenges. For more details, visit the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning website at CASEL.org/Core-Competencies.

Experts have shared several ways you can create opportunities for children to practice these skills every day:

Ask open-ended questions. Rather than asking questions that could be answered in one word, like, "How was your day?" try questions that prompt your child to share something meaningful.

Examples:

- + What is something interesting that happened to you today?
- + What is something you learned that you were fascinated by?
- + What is something that you found challenging?

Offer choices—within limits. Making decisions is a skill that gets better with practice. Offering choices about small aspects of your child's life may seem unimportant but making these small decisions at an early age enhances executive function and activates the same parts of the brain they'll use when they make bigger decisions down the road.

For younger children, these decisions may look like...

- + Choosing which vegetable they would like with dinner
- + Picking which shirt they would like to wear
- + Selecting what book they would like to read before bedtime



For older children, letting them make decisions that might have consequences may be scary, but it's equally, if not more important.

These decisions may look like...

- + Picking what electives they want to take at school
- + Choosing how they want to spend their time outside of school

Practice using “feelings” words at home. Just as children have to practice learning and understanding new words, they also need to practice identifying and articulating their feelings. When you sense your child is experiencing an intense emotion, help them name what they are feeling.

Examples of these types of questions or prompts include...

- + I see you have clenched your fists and your ears are red. I'm thinking you may be feeling angry. Is that how you feel?
- + It seems like you may be sad about what just happened. Are you feeling that way right now?
- + I'm curious if you're feeling worried about what you just saw on television. How are you feeling about what you saw?

Use everyday opportunities to help your child develop empathy and better understand others.

Ask your child, “How do you think that person felt?” as you...

- + Read stories or watch movies together
- + Discuss their interactions with friends and family
- + Learn about history
- + Discuss current events
- + Observe how people are treated by others

Develop healthy habits as a family. Health and nutrition are essential for your child's physical development and are also closely connected to your child's social and emotional well-being. Get started by...

- + Encouraging your child to participate in sports and other active hobbies
- + Discussing the importance of exercising safely, using sports equipment properly and wearing helmets and other protective gear
- + Serving nutritious, well-balanced meals and teaching your children about the types of foods they need to eat to fuel their bodies and their minds

Use mistakes as learning opportunities. If you receive a call from your child's teacher or principal about how they acted up in class, fought with a peer or cheated on a test—no matter how you feel about your child's behavior—remember that everyone makes mistakes and teach your child take ownership for their actions.

When your child makes a mistake, consider asking them...

- + What motivated you to do behave that way?
- + How do you think your actions affected the people around you?
- + What can you do to make amends with the people you hurt?

Supporting Whole Child Development in the Classroom

You can most effectively support your child's development when you partner with your child's teacher and school. Because children benefit from consistency and clear expectations, it is helpful for you and your child's teacher to use a similar vocabulary and set of strategies for fostering life skills.

Initiate a three-way relationship between you, your child and your child's teacher. Building a strong connection with your child's teacher will enable you to operate as a team. By establishing an open dialogue with the teacher and your child, you create opportunities to discuss your child's interests, strengths and areas for growth.

Discuss with your child and their teacher...

- + What are your goals this year?
- + How do we communicate with each other?
- + How will I know if my child is progressing appropriately?

Communicate with your child's teacher about what your child is learning and why they are learning it. Teachers often cover core elements of the curriculum during back-to-school night or through classroom newsletters. Take the time to go beyond an overview and ask why they're focusing on the topic and what skills the unit will help your child develop.



Ask your child's teacher...

- + What developmental milestones should I expect my child to reach this year?
- + What skills will my child work to develop this year and how can I help?
- + What should I do if I don't know to help my child with the content being taught?

Be honest with your child's teacher about the behavior you're seeing at home.

Whether your child is reading books at home while simultaneously struggling in English class, or you're concerned about a sudden reappearance of temper tantrums, sharing what you notice about your child will allow you to collaborate more effectively. When teachers are aware of these details, they can better understand and support your child.

Think about these questions and share the answers with your child's teacher...

- + What is your child passionate about?
- + What tasks does your child struggle to complete?
- + How does your child react when they find a task challenging?
- + What calms your child down when they are feeling worked up?

Use parent teacher conferences to find out more. The parent teacher conference is your opportunity to find out what you want to know about your child's progress. Listen to the teacher's analysis of your child's academic and life skills and ask questions that will help you better understand your child's school experience and help support their success.

Ask your child's teacher...

- + What do you see as my child's strengths?
- + Which areas should my child continue to work on?
- + What can I do at home to support my child's learning?

Ask your child's teacher how they talk about and teach life skills in the classroom.

Using similar vocabulary at home and at school sends a consistent and clear message to your child that

you and the teacher are on the same page. For example, if the classroom uses rock, paper, scissors to decide who goes first, use that strategy during sibling disputes at home.

Ask your child's teacher...

- + What strategies do you teach students to help them understand and manage their emotions?
- + What conflict-resolution techniques do students practice in the classroom?

Understanding what whole child education looks like in action will also enable you to better support your child and understand their teacher's approach.

Common characteristics of a child-centered classroom include...

- + Noise, laughter and chatter
- + Small group projects and opportunities for inquiry
- + Children's work displayed on the walls (and not just the perfect examples)
- + Different ways for the teacher to check for understanding—not just an end of unit test

Advocating for Whole Child Development in the School, District & Beyond

Collaborating with your child's teacher around their development is easier when a whole child approach is already in place, but when a school has not committed to these priorities, it can be more challenging. If your child's classroom lacks the common characteristics associated with whole child education, it may be due to a broader school or district culture or policy. There are several ways you can advocate for a greater focus on life skills and a more child-centered learning environment.

Ask questions. To get a comprehensive picture of the ways your school may be using a whole child approach, ask about your school's goals and procedures. Examine your school's core documents, like its strategic plan, mission and vision, to get insights about key priorities.

Things to ask include...

- + What types of training and professional development does your school offer teachers? Do the trainings include content around social and emotional development or do they focus solely on academic curriculum?
- + How does your school seek feedback from students and families around school climate? Is the school setting goals that are related to enhancing student-wellbeing and sense of community?

- + What is your school's approach to discipline? Do the disciplinary practices in place enable students to learn conflict resolution skills or are they primarily punitive?
- + Do we have counseling services?
- + What policies exist to ensure children have adequate recess and opportunities for physical activity?

Determine a specific goal or issue. Because whole child education is a broad topic, it will be useful to narrow your focus for advocacy purposes. After asking questions, think about what aspects of your child's school experience you would like to change. Perhaps you disagree with a "silent lunch" policy, as it limits children's opportunity to develop social skills. Maybe you would like to increase the amount of recess your child receives to provide more time for exercise, fresh air and free play. Regardless of the choice, having a specific "ask" is crucial in advocacy.

Identify key decisionmakers and stakeholders. Once you have determined the area you would like to focus on, figure out who the decisionmakers are for the policy. If, for example, the amount of recess is determined by the principal, you can take a different approach than if it is a rule mandated by the superintendent. Also, consider what leaders in your community are invested in the issue and may support your position. If your school district has an administrator dedicated to issues related to social and emotional development, they could be a helpful ally.

Come prepared to make the case. While anecdotes regarding your child's school experiences are appropriate in the conversation, providing research that supports specific education practices can be even more persuasive. Use the information provided in

National PTA's "What is Whole Child Education?" and delve deeper into the issue you are focused on to create a compelling argument supported by evidence.

Whole child education has implications beyond the school walls. If children are bored at school and disconnected from their communities, they will not grow to become curious, engaged and productive citizens. Families and schools must work together to prioritize children's healthy social, emotional and physical development—instead of narrowly focus on academic development—to develop a generation of well-rounded, creative leaders and problem solvers.

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