

kidsinthecity

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13 January 2016

With the start of the school year looming, and a growing demand from schools for parents to play a part in their child's school day, is this a good thing for our children?

In recent years, parents have been increasingly encouraged to spend time in their child's primary school classroom. And now? It is the expected norm. But should it be?

When a child begins their journey into the school system, no longer do parents breathe a metaphoric sigh of relief as they pass over the responsibility of their little one's learning to the arguably more knowledgeable and highly trained mavericks of the education system, but instead a journey of collaboration between parent and educator unfurls, where mum and dad get used to the weekly requests for help in the classroom.

So, is this a good thing for our children? And how does this operate in our modern day society, where generally most parents work?

The need for help

"A connection between home and school is crucial to a child's success," reveals Clare Crew, leading child development consultant at Thrive Education and Wellness (thriveeducationandwellness.com.au). "The goal is to make the classroom an extension of the home, with parents assisting to help create an effective learning base."

"Parental involvement in childhood education is crucial from a developmental standpoint," agrees Dr Ash Nayate, clinical neuropsychologist at the Royal Children's Hospital. "A child's early experiences shape so much of who they become in adulthood, and this includes the school setting. It is important that parents are involved in what's happening at school. A parent's physical presence in the classroom is one way to achieve this."

So what motivates us parents to tick the 'YES' box when being asked to sacrifice our time in the classroom (when usually we have 101 other things we could/should be doing)? Fun? Guilt? Are we looking to create happier children or better learners? The latter, says Jenny Atkinson, primary school teacher and education specialist at Sparks Education Australia (www.sparkseducation.com.au). "Research shows that when parents are positively engaged in their child's schooling, a young learner is more likely to do better at school and stay in school longer," explains Jenny.

However, we should be mindful of any repercussions in assisting from the front with regard to our child's education, warns Dr Justin Coulson, author of *What Your Child Needs From You: Creating a Connected Family*. "Although research suggests that when parents are involved in their child's education they perform better academically, we must consider the question of helicopter parenting. Too much control can lead to a child feeling suffocated, losing their sense of autonomy."

Parents in the classroom – the Pros and Cons

So, what are the benefits and concerns of a parent helper in the classroom? Jenny Atkinson, Clare Crew, Dr Ash Nayate and Dr Justin Coulson set out the pros and cons. "Although there may be potential drawbacks, most of them can be addressed with clear guidelines, organisation and management by the teacher," says Jenny.

The Pros

- **Targets learning**
Having an extra adult in the classroom helps to ensure children are on target with their activities and also allows for immediate help if they get stuck or stray off track.
- **Enhances sense of school community (social cohesion)**
It allows for parents to become a constructive part of the school community.
- **Builds relationships**
Parents are able to bond with their child's teacher and also with other students of the class. Knowing who the children are that their child spends so much of their day with creates a deeper understanding of their world.
- **Increases individual attention**
Parents are able to give individual children greater attention when in the classroom, which helps fill any gaps when there is a large class group.
- **Enhances parental understanding**
Parents are able to get a clearer idea of what a day in the life of their school child looks like, which helps them develop an understanding of what their child is learning, how they learn and how demanding their day is. It also allows them to find ways to further encourage the child's learning.
- **Boosts educational value**
When a parent makes an appearance as part of their child's school day, the child gets a clear message that what they do at school matters and that home and school are synonymous.
- **Creates positive shared experiences**
When parents and children are able to enjoy a school experience together, positive shared memories are created and bonds with the school strengthened. It is very empowering for a child to share their learning with their parents.
- **Creates opportunity for feedback**
Parents get to see how a child's teacher teaches and can give feedback with regard to any teaching strategies which may be useful for their child or another child. For example, if a parent discovers that a child is more of a hands-on learner, the parent and teacher can work together to ensure that activities are done in a way that suits that particular child.
- **Manages parental expectations**
When parents are able to view the way other children function at school, they have a better idea of appropriate expectations for their own child. It can be useful for parents to see their child in such a context.

The Cons

- **Allows for judgment**
Parents may make judgements about other children's abilities and may share this information with other parents or compare their child's abilities to their peers.
- **Unsettles children**
It can unsettle children or exacerbate separation anxiety for children who find saying goodbye in the mornings emotionally challenging. A child can become overly reliant on their parental presence and may feel insecure when their parent is absent if they become used to them appearing at school. It can also cause a child to behave differently when a parent is present (i.e. showing off).
- **Encourages helicopter parenting**
When a parent turns up in their child's classroom, a child may feel controlled and/or crowded which can hinder their development and reduce their experience of learning. A child may be made to feel incompetent due to parental over-involvement.
- **Provides a distraction**
A child may become distracted watching their parent work with other students instead of focusing on their own learning.
- **Creates competition**
It can add to the competitiveness of some parents, who may put additional pressure on their child to perform at the level they have seen other students working at.
- **Provides access**
A plethora of parents have access to the class. Have they been police checked? Do they have the right manner, approach and knowledge to be dealing with children?
- **Reduces the quality of education**
Parents may interfere with the methods used by the teacher to teach. Parents are not trained teachers, so this may dilute the quality of education the children receive.
- **Creates difference**
A child may feel negative about their learning if their parents are not able to assist with helping in the classroom. It can separate a child from their peers and create insecurity.
- **Inhibits creativity**
Children may become too focused on pleasing their parents rather than being creative and innovative in their learning. Children are already trying to please their teachers in the school setting, so adding their parents into the mix can create additional pressure and strain.

How to support your child's learning in other ways

Can't make it into the classroom? Jenny Atkinson, teacher and education specialist at Sparks Education Australia, shares her 10 ten ways to support your child's learning in other ways:

1. **Be positive:** Show a positive attitude and give positive comments about your child's learning/homework/progress/efforts/teachers/school.
2. **Read:** Listen to and read to your child.
3. **Contribute in other ways:** Do you have a talent you can put to use at home that could benefit the class? For example, if you are good at calligraphy you could make beautiful nametags for each child's desk.

4. **Spend time with your child:** Do activities together. Ask their opinion. Talk about what they love to talk about. Raise hypotheticals. Discuss what's happening at school. Ask about the highs and lows of their day. It will strengthen your connection.
5. **Be aware:** Take note of dates for special days like mufti days and excursions, so that your child gets to participate in all the school activities.
6. **Foster resilience:** Help your child to develop resilience and independence – this will go a long way to contributing to their success as a student, enhancing their learning.
7. **Encourage your child to rise to a challenge:** Teach your child the power of determination and patience. Let them attempt a task before you step in to do it for them and they will develop a 'give it a go' attitude.
8. **Praise your child's efforts, not just their achievement:** Help your little one make the link between effort and results.
9. **Involve yourself with other school events:** Some school events may work better for your schedule, so consider involving yourself in these.
10. **Keep the lines of communication open:** Communicate regularly with your child's teacher and school to foster a good symbiotic relationship where you share your child's best interests.

Outside the classroom

But what if you can't or choose not to participate in your child's school day?

"It's important for parents to know that if they are unable or don't want to help in the classroom, they should not feel guilty or think that their child will be at a disadvantage," says Jenny. "What parents do at home on a daily basis to support their child with their education is far more important than helping out at school. Every day children pick up on their parents' attitudes and beliefs around school, and learn through their parent's comments and expectations, how their parents follow through on school rules and issues that arise at school, how they talk about the teachers, and how they ask about their child's learning or advocate for their child. These ALL have an impact."

"Parents should feel empowered that they can contribute to their child's education and success in their own way and in their own time," adds Clare. "It doesn't have to be about helping in the classroom. It can simply mean being there, playing, listening and engaging in day-to-day life together."

What parents say

"I helped with my son's class, and it was great to make a difference and to get to know the other kids and parents/grandparents. Then, I started assisting in my daughter's class, and I ended up concerned at how many parents were assisting and teaching incorrectly, especially with important things like reading."

~ *Belinda Brill – Mum to Connor (10) and Sofia (8)*

"I help whenever I can! Molly loves it when I come, but can get upset if she doesn't get to be in my group (although the teachers are usually right onto this and facilitate where possible). The majority of the time, I listen to children read, interpret text, make sentences from spelling words, or very occasionally undertake numeracy rotations. I enjoy having a rapport with the kids in my daughter's class, and she's a little bit proud of me (it could be just

because of my red lipstick, but I'll take it!) Giving up just 20 minutes of my day means the kids get a bit more individual help, and that can only be a good thing."

~ Ellen Griffith – Mum to Molly (6), Joe (4) and Harry (3)

What schools say

"When parents are partners in education, everyone wins."

~ Marianne Connolly, Director of St Paul's Junior School, Brisbane

Final word

"It is possible for parents today to be far more involved in their child's learning experiences (either at home or at school) than ever before," says senior clinical child psychologist Toulia Gordillo. "A physical presence in the classroom is not the key issue anymore. Rather, it is the parents' desire and knowledge to learn how to deliver, research and interpret information that will help their child the most. Research has consistently indicated that a warm and involved parenting style results in enhanced flourishing in our youth."

Will you be helping in your child's classroom this year?

Written by

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