Child development expert urges parents to make time to talk with children

Early school years are important to lifelong success, Wiles says

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – When it comes to helping their children achieve academic success, it sure doesn’t hurt if parents remember how to multiply fractions and diagram sentences.

But Kansas State University child development specialist Bradford Wiles said there is a more basic way that parents can spur their children’s growth.

“First and foremost,” he said, “parents need to be present and engaged with their children.”

“Parents are children’s first teachers (but) as they get into formal schooling, you don’t want to maintain that primary teaching role; you want that to be an in-classroom experience. But the support from the child’s family – or, the home and school congruence – is really critical to success.”

Wiles describes parent involvement as an effort to understand what is happening in their children’s lives.

“It really starts with an environment where what happens at school is something that adults are inquisitive about; that is, they want to know what’s going on,” he said. “That includes being able to have discussions with children about what’s happening at school. Parents should be engaged with their children’s lives.”

Parents should consider volunteering at school activities and boards, such as PTO, if possible. They should talk to the child’s homeroom teacher regularly, as well as other school personnel such as administrators, coaches, librarians and non-homeroom teachers.

Wiles said: “Ask them questions like, ‘are they paying attention and doing what they’re supposed to do?’ And then involve your child in those discussions. Learn to develop a comprehensive lens that includes your own view, your child’s view, and the teacher’s view in order to understand the full picture.”
“Success in school really does start with having an open line of communication with your child’s classroom and the school at large.”

Wiles said the early years of a child’s education are especially important: “A lot of children are really anxious to get older, and yet there’s a lack of appreciation for what it takes to be older and successful which are -- in my view -- the things you learn in pre-kindergarten through sixth or seventh grade. We need to recognize that is part of the developmental process. All the things they will learn after are built on that foundation.”

Wiles encourages parents to establish a “family culture” that centers around two things: “My child is important and what they’re learning is important for their future.”

“Even if they are telling you they are doing things they shouldn’t be doing, that is not the time to be upset, angry or disappointed,” he said.

“The important thing is to let them know you care about them and you’re glad they shared with you. Once you’ve had a chance to process what they’ve said, you can figure out what needs to change. But being grateful and encouraging your child to share with you is the foundation of really solid adult-child relationships through late childhood, early adolescence and all the way through to emerging adulthood.”

More information on child development is available online from K-State Research and Extension.

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