

# Learning at Home and School

*By Dr. Roger McIntire*

How do kids learn? They are always coming up with surprising questions: “Dad, if Poochie gets bigger, will he cheat on his diet, too?” Then the pressure is back on Mom or Dad to explain something and once again, teach their kids a little more about the world.

So one answer to how they learn is that kids pay attention a lot more than we think. Even when they are in their own little computer world, they suddenly show they have been listening and they try out your attitudes with their language. They copy better than they listen. Watch your habits.

They practice your language and what you do, and their constant jabbering about their behavior and yours not only improves their verbal abilities but also allows them to develop new ideas.

School routines can improve their practice by adding student-led school conferences and in-school student tutor programs.

The Seattle public schools set out to replace the badly attended parent-teacher conferences. This was usually a rushed visit comprising a brief individual moment with four or five teachers in middle or high schools. Instead, each student was invited to lead the parent-teacher conference by showing Mom and Dad his schoolwork and reporting on his progress.

The student learned by putting together his portfolio with examples of his daily work, his own assessment of his progress and his thoughts on what needed more effort. Conferences usually lasted between 15 and 30 minutes.

Parents found this situation very comfortable because the conversation was between parent and child. They were not coming to school to hear teacher complaints but for their child's report and to see the results of his work, while each student had a chance to spotlight his success.

Parents could still opt for traditional conferences or schedule a follow-up meeting with just the teacher. Only the student's main teacher was part of the conference.

Last year parent attendance at Seattle school conferences was up from below 60 percent to over 85 percent with many more conferences attended by both parents. Mom and Dad both want to see their student perform.

Another important school program that provided practice recognized that teaching itself is a great learning tool. In this Maryland program, tutors were assigned to other (usually younger) students for crucial one-on-one time under teacher supervision. While the tutors practiced their skills, many young students gained helpful coaching in math, science and other subjects. Each teacher supervised about 10 tutors, which is a very efficient way to provide individual help to many.

Tutors don't have to be the best and brightest. In the Maryland program tutors were intentionally selected from the ranks of poor students, and they actually benefited the most. Tutors gained crucial motivation to learn when they had to teach the subject. Even many educators will admit that they didn't become fully comfortable with their subject until they had to teach it.

Two people are learning in the tutor situation and both are learning more about the subject as well as practicing good social and language skills.

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