When you think of parent involvement, do you picture moms and dads volunteering in classrooms? That’s one way to help—but research shows that supporting your child’s education at home is even more important. Here are four conversations that will help you stay involved.

“Let’s see what you brought home.”

Look at completed work to find out what your youngster is learning and how well she’s doing. You could comment on her geography report or pottery project, for instance. (“You know a lot about our state’s history!”) Also, respond to notes from her teacher, and sign her weekly folder or daily planner if required.

“Show me what you have for homework.”

It’s your child’s job to do her homework, but you play a role, too. Make sure she knows what she’s supposed to do by having her explain the assignments to you. After she’s done, glance over the work to see that it’s complete.

“Describe a book you enjoyed today.”

This gives you an idea of what your youngster prefers to read. Then, build a daily reading habit by asking what she’d like to read tonight. Encourage her reading and listening skills by reading aloud to her and letting her read to you.

“Tell me what you learned that you’d like to know more about.”

Use her interests as jumping-off points for activities to share. If she likes geometry, you might do tangrams together. If she’s fascinated by how animals adapt to winter, take her to the library to research the subject or to the zoo to see live animals.

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Finding a story topic

“But I don’t know what to write about!” If this is your youngster’s response when he has a creative writing assignment, share these ideas.

Think of an audience. What kind of story would his dog or his best friend want to read? Your child might come up with an idea for a tree that grows dog biscuits or one about the baseball game where he and his friend each hit a home run.

Catch your dreams. Sometimes good ideas come to writers in their sleep. Encourage your youngster to keep a pencil and a notepad by his bed and write down his dreams as soon as he wakes up. That dream about driving an ice cream truck may spark an interesting tale!

Get inspired by books. Suggest that your child browse through books at home or at the library—a topic or an idea could jump out at him. For instance, a funny school story might remind him of the time the class guinea pig escaped from its cage. Or a book about Mars can get him thinking about an outer space adventure.

Collecting objects… and more

Children who collect rocks, stuffed giraffes, or just about anything also collect a lot of personal skills along the way. Here are three.

1. Organization. Will your youngster arrange her key chains alphabetically by where they came from? Should she group her erasers according to color or size? As she decides how to store or display her collection, she’ll practice sorting and organizational skills.

2. Responsibility. Your child won’t want her snow globes to get dusty or her marbles to roll off her dresser and get lost. Keeping her collection in good condition will encourage her to be responsible for her possessions.

3. Personal finance. It’s fun to watch a collection grow. If your youngster gets birthday money or an allowance, she could budget for additions. Also, you can help her research how much the items she owns are worth.

Peer pressure concerns

Q: As my daughter gets older, I’m worrying more about peer pressure. How can I help her handle it?

A: It’s true that friends’ opinions become more important each year. But your values and beliefs will continue to influence her, whether she shows it or not.

Look for regular opportunities to talk about what matters to you, such as staying healthy and being kind to others. If she sees someone smoking, you could quietly say, “I hope you choose not to smoke when you grow up.” Or if you hear a mean remark on TV, you might say, “It’s sad when people make fun of others.” Knowing where you stand can help her withstand peer pressure.

If she mentions a friend is pressuring her, help her practice how to respond. (“I’m not going to cheat on homework. I’ll see you later.”) Remind her that friends should make her feel good about herself—if they don’t, it’s time to find friends who do.

A perfect fit

My son William told me about a project his class did to celebrate differences. His teacher cut a big sheet of paper into puzzle pieces, and each child decorated one to show what makes him interesting or different. Then, they put the puzzle back together.

William thought this would be fun to do with our family. He cut up a poster board and mailed pieces with instructions to relatives. Meanwhile, we drew and wrote on our own pieces. William drew himself doing a science experiment with his guitar nearby. My husband wrote that he has a birthday only every four years because he was born on February 29. And I put that I travel a lot for work and have been to 45 states.

Once everyone mailed back their pieces, William taped the puzzle together so we could hang it up. It’s a great reminder of how we are all different—and yet still “fit” together as a family.