

# Parents as Writing Partners



*Parents are eager to support their children's writing skills. Give them a tool kit that shows them how.*

**Mary Ehrenworth**

**E**very parent knows the feeling of looking at his or her kid's writing and wanting to fix it. This doesn't change as kids get older. I see my son write insightfully about Holden Caulfield while misspelling Holden's name throughout his essay (the name of *the main character*—it's repeated probably 100 times in the novel), and a bleakness enters my soul. I don't know whether to put him through the whole routine of "let's compare how you're spelling this famous character's name with how the author spells it—here, on this page, and this page, and oh look, on this page too," or simply remark that he's got it wrong and tell him to fix it, or retreat to another room and find a compelling beverage.

I don't know what to do, and I *teach writing*.

Parents want to help. But because we're at a loss, we overdo it, or we do nothing, or we do whatever we can come up with. It's hard to teach your own child. I know



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that Peter Johnston's (2004) advice about using choice words to build up a child's sense of being an independent problem solver works beautifully for me as a teacher, but it's somehow beyond me as a parent.

So parents need practical tips about what they can do—not as teachers of writing, but as something else. Enter the parent as writing partner.

### **School Leaders: Set the Stage**

#### *Communicate Your School's Vision*

Before you set out to enlist others in promoting your vision, it always makes sense to reflect on the beliefs and values that undergird your work. So start by explaining to parents how the vision you have for your students as writers shapes

the way your school teaches writing. Here's one example of how a school leader might talk about writing:

We believe that your children can learn to write well—that writing is a craft. To get better at writing, it's important that they write a lot. The more children write, the more fluent they are. So one thing you can do is be their cheerleader, helping them develop the stamina it takes to become a fast and fluent writer.

We will teach your children to be writers of narratives, arguments, informational texts, and poetry. We believe in narrative because for your children's whole lives it will matter that they can tell their own stories well. Every job interview, every scholarship application, every college essay will be an opportunity for your children to tell their own stories with grace and power. We believe in argument because we want your children to be able to advocate for themselves and others;

## Parent Prompts to Help Kids Rehearse Their Writing

### BASIC PROMPTS

- How will your (story/essay/article) go?
- Tell me about the parts.
- How will it start?
- Then what will come next?
- How do you think you want to end?
- What will be the most important moment in the piece?
- What will be the tricky part—where might it get confusing? Let me know when you're at that part, and we can talk it out if you want.

### MORE ADVANCED PROMPTS

- Try out a couple of leads on me. Let's see which ones really get a reader interested.
- What are you thinking about pacing? How will you control tension?
- Do you want to tell everything at once, or let out the details bit by bit?
- What do you want your reader to know right away?
- What do you want your reader to wonder about?
- What are you saving for the ending?
- How are you going to tailor this piece to your audience?
- Do you have to explain any technical vocabulary?
- Is there a particular perspective or point of view you want to represent?
- Will you do anything to acknowledge other points of view in this piece?

to defend positions with logic and evidence; to become ever more persuasive, compelling, and ethical. We believe in informational writing because your children will learn a lot that they can teach others, now and in the future. We believe in poetry because there is poetry singing in your children's souls, and you want to hear it.

We believe that writers of all ages benefit from having a writing partner who will help them rehearse their writing and give them knowledgeable feedback along the way. Therefore, you can make an immense difference by being a "first reader" for your child. We can help you learn to do that.

Be sure to look hard at what teachers in your school are striving to accomplish with writing so that you can describe it. Clarify your vision so that when you articulate it to parents, the work you describe will match the experiences their kids are having in your classrooms.

### *Determine What They Are Doing, and Ask What They Need*

If step one in making parents into writing partners is to communicate a clear vision, step two is to find out what is happening already. Survey kids and parents about what "homework help" looks like now. Ask teachers what kind of support they would love parents to give. Ask students what kind of help they would love to get and what they need as writers. Take their responses seriously.

When asked what they struggle with as writers outside school, lots of kids say things like, "finding a quiet space to write" or "finding any time, ever." It makes you realize that kids need help getting the television turned off, clearing a table, and managing their jam-packed schedules even more than they need a specific checklist or rubric. Sometimes we don't talk about the most essential elements that enable kids to thrive academically because we

assume they're a given, but kids are leading ever-busier, more fragmented lives. So double-checking on the essentials can be transformative in and of itself.

### **A Tool Kit of High-Leverage Strategies**

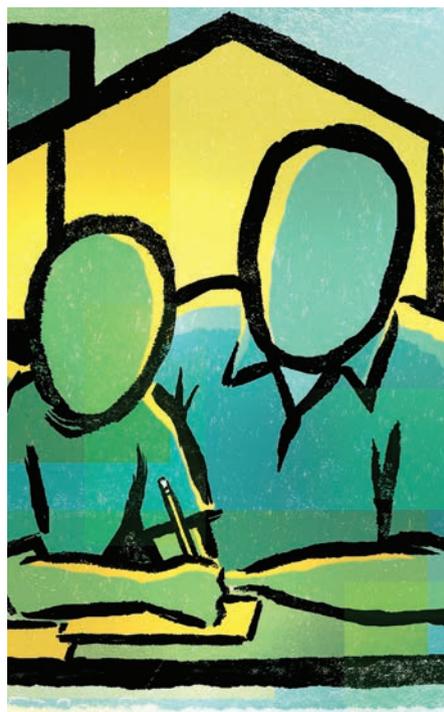
My colleagues at the Reading and Writing Project and I work with parents across the United States and internationally. Everywhere we go, we see that parents want their children to succeed. The lesson is, never underestimate parents. Give them a tool kit of high-leverage, practical tips for coaching writers, and they will be the school's best resource. Here are some of the major tips for parents to become effective writing partners.

#### **Tip 1. Help writers rehearse their structure.**

A lot of parents jump in to help kids at the end of their writing. Lucy Calkins and her colleagues at the Reading and Writing Project (2013) suggest, though, that one of the biggest issues kids have is structuring their writing. To help with that, you want to help at the beginning of the process—while kids are figuring out how their writing will go. Talking helps kids sort and sequence and correlate. Deanna Kuhn (2011) has shown that this kind of rehearsal has a particularly significant effect on students' argument writing.

One question parents can ask *before* kids begin to write is, How will your (story/essay/article) go? Ask them to tell you about the parts. If it's a story, they'll often talk about the beginning, middle, and end. If it's an argument, they'll often talk about the claim, the reasons, and the evidence. If it's informational writing, they'll often talk about the topic, the subtopics, and the text features. If they don't talk about these parts, act curious about them.

Sometimes it helps to use your hands while repeating the parts, folding down your fingers or counting across them. Sometimes, as a child names the parts, it is helpful to jot them down and then ask whether one part is going to be more important than the others and, if so, star it. In a narrative, this helps a writer figure



out where the heart of the story lives. In an essay, it helps a writer figure out whether the introduction or conclusion will share the most important insight, or what particular piece of evidence will most strongly support the central argument. Just leave that slip of paper in front of your writer before you walk away—it's going to help him or her.

#### **Tip 2. Help writers elaborate.**

When you rehearse with a writer, you also set yourself up to be an expert partner later in the writing process. We often see kids who say a lot more

than they write. Maybe they struggle with grapho-phonics or with key-boarding; maybe stamina is an issue; maybe too much time has passed between rehearsal and actually getting their ideas down on paper. When you rehearse with a writer, work on trying to remember what he or she has said so that you'll be prepared later to help with elaboration.

Jot down great phrases or ideas. Keep the notes so that later, if that thinking is not in the writing, you can say (casually), "There was one thing you said that was really cool. . . . It was . . . Do you want to get that in here?" Other times, you can't really jot because it just doesn't feel right to whip out a clipboard in the middle of dinner or while you're driving. So work on your concentration and your memory skills. Don't listen with half a mind. Don't look at your phone or glance at your e-mail. Put your worries about your own work out of your head for these few minutes. You need to be able to compare your child's plan for the writing with what he or she actually writes. You need to ask yourself: What parts did my child mention earlier that aren't in here yet?

Transcribing—writing what a kid is saying while he or she is saying it—can also catapult a writer into elaboration. "Wait a second, say that again," you'll remark, and then you'll jot down or type every word, and hand it back with "definitely get that part in—that's great." It's really satisfying for kids who say more than they write to see their words appear as writing. Lots of writers need help sometimes to capture all their thinking.

Mostly, being this kind of writing partner means getting involved at a real partnership level—caring enough about the piece and the writer to give them authentic, deep attention even in the midst of our frantically busy lives.

### Tip 3. Work with checklists and exemplars.

John Hattie (2008) has demonstrated that one way to accelerate achievement is for learners to have a crystal clear vision of what they are trying to achieve. Give a writer an exemplar that is just above the level at which he or she is writing now, and that writer can envision one path in which to grow. Add in a clear checklist that lists some of the qualities in the writing, and the writer will be better able to articulate and measure his or her goals.

When your child is writing something and you don't know what good writing would look like in that genre, at that age, ask the teacher for an exemplar—or better yet, coach your child to ask. Paul Tough (2003) reminds us to move children beyond compliance. Being innovative, reaching out for help, measuring themselves against high standards, persevering at hard things—that's what takes them far. Teach your children to ask for mentor texts and to either ask for or generate checklists. When they go off to college, they'll know how to say to their professors, "I'm wondering if I could see a strong example of this kind of writing" or to ask, "Could you perhaps clarify some of the qualities of this kind of writing?"

Teachers, you can provide parents with checklists and exemplars so that they will better understand what work their children are striving to accomplish. Often, kids and parents are working in a kind of void, without any clear notion of how to raise the level of writing. Parents, like kids, shouldn't have to intuit what makes for strong writing. They need accessible tools

### Parent Prompts to Help Kids Elaborate

- There was something you said before that struck me . . . you have to get that bit in here!
- When you were talking about this, I jotted down this one idea/phrase that was very cool. . . . Is this something you want to add?
- Say more about this one part . . .
- Wait a second, I'm going to jot down what you're saying. . . . Now take this—see if it works anywhere.
- How did that part we started [or that part you said was most important] turn out?
- You know, thinking about how strong this piece is, it might be worth thinking about the beginning [or the ending] a little more. . . .

so they can work hand in hand with teachers.

Checklists and exemplars can be found in various places. The Common Core State Standards include annotated samples of student writing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Student Achievement Partners has released an even more extensive collection of student exemplars on its website ([www.achievethecore.org](http://www.achievethecore.org)). Calkins and colleagues (2013) have published checklists and student pieces for grades K–8. And of course, schools can make their own tools.

In general, kids respond more to checklists that are in the first person—language that reminds a writer of important work "I" can do as "I" write. Here is a sample from a 5th grade checklist for opinion writing:

I wrote an introduction that led to a claim or thesis and got my readers to care about my opinion. I got my readers to care by not only including a cool

fact or jazzy question, but also figuring out what was significant in or around the topic and giving readers information about what was significant about the topic.

I worked to find the precise right words to state my claim; I let readers know the reasons I would develop later. (Calkins & colleagues, 2013, p. 95)

Practicing working with exemplars and checklists would be a good topic for a parent workshop. The school might also send home some pieces of children's writing that have been annotated to highlight the skills teachers are teaching.

Parents will learn a lot about writing as the school shares checklists and exem-

plars. Giving families tools and tips democratizes the knowledge of writing. It puts assessment into the hands of children while they are writing and lets families be part of this important work.

### Tip 4. Show children how to work with study partners.

We can also help our children turn their friends into study partners. When kids go off to high school and college, they'll do better if they can learn to study with their friends—especially if they can truly learn to push one another. Moreover, Pedro Noguera (2003) warns that when peer culture and academic culture divide, peer culture always wins out. A lot of kids have a peer culture that honors athletic prowess. It's important for them to build a peer culture that also honors academic prowess.

They'll need explicit help with this. Kids have no trouble giving one another advice in their personal lives. But they are often oddly reluctant to

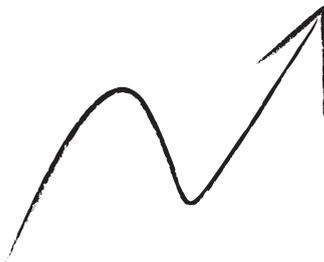
engage one another about their academic goals.

Kids' skills in working with others will matter in their overall success, and you can use writing as a way to build those skills. You want to coach them in what Gladwell (2008) refers to as *practical intelligence*, or *savvy*—how to interact with others with some grace. Parents can help by orchestrating times for friends to write in the same space and watching how it goes. You can tuck in tips on how friends can help one another. “Did you try out your story on Amber?” “You might have Henry look over your essay with the lens of . . . .”

Writing is interesting, though, because the actual moment of writing often requires solitude. Susan Cain (2012), looking at introversion, reminds us that kids often need opportunities to work alone before they work with others. When parents see how friends work together, they'll be better positioned to coach children on achieving a balance of working alone sometimes and helping one another at other times.

### Workshops Help Parents Implement the Tools

Workshops give parents opportunities to practice these tools for helping their children with writing. To get parents to attend, school leaders and parent leaders need to design these workshops together. Parent leaders will have important insights into effective incentives and parental needs. When can parents most easily spend an hour at school? Is it easier for them right after morning drop-off? Will that exclude too many working parents? Is it better to offer a workshop at night, perhaps right after work, so they don't have to leave the house again? If it's in the early evening, can you offer a story hour in the library or a movie in



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the cafeteria for young children, and a space somewhere for older children to do homework, while parents attend? Can you offer pizza, so parents don't have to worry about feeding themselves or their offspring that night? These are all things that parents worry about, and if you attend to these details, you'll make it more likely that the parents you most want to reach are there.

Think about a title for your workshop. Your first challenge is to persuade multitasking adults to get themselves to your building. A clever workshop title like *Help Your Children as Writers Now and They're More Likely to Get into a Top-Notch College Later* might pull them in. *Help Them Now or You May Never Be Turning Their Bedroom into That Guestroom* might also work. Or maybe send out just the date, with Harvard as a watermark in the background. Don't be afraid to be cheesy. You can give the best workshop in the world, and if parents aren't there, it won't matter.

So parent leaders and school leaders—get creative with thinking about when and where these learning opportunities can occur. A glitzy stand-alone evening workshop is often a big deal and a big draw. So is

a mandatory orientation for incoming families. You could use curriculum night. You could create a tip sheet to be given out at parent-teacher conferences. You could offer seminars, or a series of repeated workshops, perhaps offered in different languages, until you have reached most of your parents.

It's worth it. Teaching parents to be effective writing partners can have a huge effect on student achievement. **EL**

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