

# HUNTERDON Family

BACK TO SCHOOL EDITION

## **Encourage Kids To Become Better Writers**

**By Joyce Magliaro**

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**Writing is essential in every subject and studies prove that the more exposure children have to writing the better they will perform in all subjects.**

Yet outside of taking notes and answering questions in written form, most students spend very little time writing. For teenagers especially it seems, music, television and phone conversations replace writing altogether outside of school. But students who master writing - the ability to describe, explain, compare, contrast and support in written form - will experience greater success in school, improved verbal test scores and more opportunity for job advancement.

Parents can improve their child's attitude-toward writing by implementing writing activities and strategies in the home that will not only have immediate educational benefits, but also can improve family communication in a manner that is both fun and interesting.

The key is for parents to place importance on written expression, emphasizing the power of the pen. To get your child on the road to successful writing, implement some of these writing strategies at home.

If a child disagrees with a parent's judgment or position in a family matter, allow the child the opportunity write and present a position paper. The parent may then reconsider his or her position on the basis of the paper. While parents cannot be expected to overturn all decisions, the paper may open the door for more productive discussion and compromise, as well as help the child to write effectively to advance a point of view.

Help your child develop a "feelings" book similar to a journal. A feelings book might include articles from the newspaper, favorite comic strips, mementos, pictures from magazines with annotations and captions, letters and notes. The book records each child's progression through adolescence to adulthood. You may want to start a tradition of providing each child with a new volume each birthday.

Work with your child to establish goals and objectives for school, friends, family and personal growth. Assist the child in developing strategies to meet those objectives.

Have the child write a "growth plan" including all of this information. You may want to have it bound at a print shop to make it "official." Growth plans should be revised every year or so.

Letter writing, an art form that Americans refined during the Civil War when American literacy rates exceeded the rest of the world, is now virtually extinct. And yet, writing letters is excellent practice for description and summary techniques. It is also a useful vehicle for expressing adolescent frustration. These are tips to encourage your child to keep in touch by letter.

1. Let your child select special stationery including paper, stickers and pens for letter writing.
2. Help your child make lists of events to "remember in your letters." This running list can be posted on the refrigerator with at least one item added daily.
3. Set aside some time each weekend, perhaps Sunday evening, for letter writing.
4. Encourage your child to write fan letters, cultivate pen pals in other countries, and send letters to companies regarding products.
5. Work with your child to develop a family "newsletter" for friends and relatives to enjoy. Articles can include family updates, trips, achievements, grades, recent activities, etc. All of these activities will promote writing as an active and effective form of communication and give real life-based applications. Parents can also contact teachers regarding writing activities so that at home activities can complement those in the classroom.

The ability to communicate is essential for success in today's competitive world. Curriculum leaders in schools and independent studies both emphasize that the student who writes well will be more likely to achieve that success, both in the classroom and beyond.

*Joyce Magliaro is the executive director of the Sylvan Learning Centers, which are in Flemington, Pennington and Hamilton.*

# Tips for Parents to Help Their Children Become Better Writers

\* Since writing is so directly tied to reading, start by finding out what kinds of books your kids like to read, Sterling suggests. Jot down the books your child has read in the past three months and look for patterns. Talk about the books. Then talk about your child's writing, "not the grammar, but the ideas," he says.

Claudia Gentile believes parents should ask their children about their writing every day. "Make a habit of saying, 'tell me what you wrote today.'"

\* Write to them. Leave a note that says, "I noticed that you did this and this and this." Kids are much more likely to write if their parents do.

\* Let them watch you compose all kinds of texts, from grocery lists to loving letters. Show letters to kids, those you're writing and those you've received. Also, keep a collection of letters the kids send and receive. It's a good way to see how they've grown.

\* Buy a computer and urge them to use it. Cole, at ETS, says the computer is doing for writing what the calculator did for math. "Keyboarding is really easier than handwriting. Mechanical aspects are becoming less important because those things are automated. The ideas are what will become important."

\* When your child is writing a book report, have her select a character from the book and rewrite the story from that character's point of view. Or, predict the character's situation in 20 years and write about that.

\* For factual reports, Sterling believes kids should look for information from a variety of sources--not just encyclopedias. "Have your child make a list of everything he knows about the subject. Some facts might be wrong but that's okay. As you research, you find those things out and you learn more."

\* Have plenty of paper and writing tools available.

\* Have your child interview older relatives at family reunions or parties. Write the information as an interview, then write it as a first-person story from the grandparent's point of view, says Gentile.

\* Encourage your kids to keep journals, and then honor their privacy. The whole family can participate in writing travel journals on trips.

\* And, finally, here's one that will help kids develop skills necessary for writing persuasive papers: Ask your middle school and high school students to put their arguments with you in writing. As their skills improve, maybe they'll win one now and then.

# Types of Writing and Possible Topics

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## PERSUASIVE WRITING

Younger children (grades 4 through 8)

1. Write a letter to your teacher expressing an opinion on a proposed law that would prevent children from watching television, and give reasons for your opinion.
2. Take a stand on whether school vacations should be shortened, and write a letter to your principal arguing for your opinion.

Older children (grades 8 through 12)

1. Take a stand on whether negative rating labels should be used to restrict teenagers from buying certain music, and write an essay supporting your opinion.
  2. Should the state legislature pass a law that students who receive failing grades will lose their drivers' licenses? Write an essay supporting your point of view.
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## NARRATIVE WRITING

Younger children (grades 4 through 8)

1. Pretend that you have raised a pet dinosaur, and write about one of your experiences together.
2. Imagine that you own a magical balloon, and write about one of your adventures with it.

Older children (grades 8 through 12)

1. Think about an embarrassing situation you have been in, and describe what happened.
  2. Choose any person from history and imagine you spend a day together. Write a story about what happens.
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## RESPONSE TO LITERATURE WRITING

Younger children (grades 4 through 8)

1. Think of a favorite book. Explain how you know who the main character is.
2. Read a magazine or newspaper article. Pretend you are one of the people in the article. How would you react in a similar situation? Explain.