

EARLY LEARNERS, ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE YEARS, HIGH SCHOOL

How parents can help kids shift their learning to the Common Core

by Tom Antis

I'll admit that the New York State Education Department's EngageNY website sometimes can be less than engaging. If you are a parent, or anyone not used to digging around the Internet — particularly state-sponsored websites — the abundance of material there can be overwhelming. But if you take a deep breath and patiently sift through the resources offered about Common Core Learning Standards, you will find information that can help you understand what is happening in schools today.



You don't have to agree with it, and we're not saying there isn't room and reason for debate, but today — right now — your child is studying math and English language arts under a new set of standards. Any changes designed to improve schooling, no matter how perfectly conceived, need parent involvement to succeed. So, your child needs you right now.

When Common Core standards were introduced, there was talk about "shifts" in the way subjects were to be taught going forward. It sounded ominous then, and people seem to be struggling with them now. But it doesn't have to be. We just need to take a breath, and wrap our grownup heads around what they are trying to do.

Shifts in English language arts

In English language arts (ELA), teachers will ask students in every grade level to read more non-fiction than before. We're talking about real-life events such as biographies, current events and historical stories. Parents can easily help with this. Knowing my nine-year-old daughter loves animals, we read stories about animals in the news and magazines, and biographies such as James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*. Why is this important? In real life, while it may be helpful to understand obscure allusions to Shakespeare or Hawthorne, most of us deal every day with non-fiction forms of reading.

Students will be asked to read more challenging material for their grade level. Studies show that the level of difficulty of reading material in schools

is far below the technical manuals, application forms, insurance claims, college textbooks and just about everything else we read out in the "real world." Schools will be challenging kids more now, so they are better equipped to succeed when they graduate.

There is a lot of talk about "evidence" in ELA classes now. Students are asked to read a selection and then use information gathered from the text to form their answers. Sometimes they will have to look really hard to figure out what information they need. They will be asked to write about what they have read and use the information from the text — evidence — to support their position.

Parents can help strengthen these skills by asking kids to support their arguments and discussions at home with evidence. When our kids wanted to get a dog, we asked them for five good reasons why having a dog would benefit our family. "He's so cute" didn't count as a good reason. It became a research project for them, and the stakes, in their eyes, were high.

Other shifts for ELA include growing a larger vocabulary. Language is power, and helping children stretch their vocabulary will pay dividends in their futures. Classwork also includes more materials that give your child a broader view of the world. Because progress and technology make the rest of the world easily accessible, the lines are quickly blurring between cultures, and American kids really should know about the world beyond their neighborhood.

One thing parents can do to help with all of these shifts is something that's been promoted forever. Read with your children. Go to the library together and explore. Your curiosity, shared with your child, becomes infectious and soon you will be discovering amazing things together through books.

Shifts in math

Most parents find it easier to support the ELA side of Common Core than the changes in the way math is now being taught. We have read the frantic comments on social media by distraught parents who simply cannot fathom the work their kids are bringing home each afternoon.

The shifts in math now emphasize mastery of math concepts. One teacher explained to us that the goal was to learn more about less, to slow down and dig deeper for better understanding. It's important for students to be able to show their work — how they arrived at an answer, demonstrating their understanding of the process used to get to the final result.

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How parents can help kids shift their learning to the Common Core, continued

The object is for kids to build skills grade by grade, learning to solve increasingly complex, real-world problems using math facts and concepts they have mastered the grade before.

Parents can help here too, but it may take a little more effort. Talk to your child's teacher. Get familiar with the concepts being taught this year and how they are being presented to students, and then make time every day for your child to work on them at home.

Be supportive when your child struggles in one area, and encourage him or her to ask the teacher for extra help. The teacher has the skill and tools to make the material understandable for children at that grade level.

It gets more fun when you go out into the world. Have your children "do the math" when it pops up in daily life. Trips to the store can be an entertaining way for kids to reinforce their learning and to amaze you with the skills they are developing.

Education researcher JD Chesloff says, "Research shows that the brain is especially receptive to learning math and logic between the ages of 1-4, and that early math skills are the most powerful predictors of later learning."

In the end, give children some credit. They can do this. We read articles all the time about the incredible untapped ability of the human brain, then often turn around and forget it all when we look at our own kids.

ADDITIONAL READING

All the information in this article can be found on [engageny.org](http://www.engageny.org).

What Parents Can Do to Help Their Children

(http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/parent_workshop_what_parents_can_do_handout.pdf)

The Parents Guide to Common Core Standards

(http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/parent_workshop_backpack_guide.pdf)

Parent Today's More kids prefer broccoli to math; why we should learn to love STEM skills (<http://bit.ly/1fG4HZj>)

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Parent Today coaches and encourages parents through four chapters of their children's education – early learners, elementary, middle years and high school – addressing important, age-appropriate topics with accessible, easy-to-implement tools and strategies, empowering parents to come alongside their children at any age with advice, support and encouragement.

