

# PARENTS FIRST



**Parents  
and  
Children  
Learning  
Together**



**Garry Burnett and Kay Jarvis**

*Parents First*  
*Parents and Children*  
*Learning Together*

Garry Burnett and Kay Jarvis



Crown House Publishing  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

and

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
P.O. Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495-2223, USA  
[www.CHPUS.com](http://www.CHPUS.com)

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Enquiries should be addressed to  
Crown House Publishing Limited.

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue entry for this book is available  
from the British Library.

**ISBN 1904424139**

**LCCN 2003104688**

Printed and bound in the UK by

*Cromwell Press Ltd*  
*Trowbridge*  
*Wiltshire*

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# Introduction

## *What do you want for your child?*

A study done on mothers around the world asked the question, “What do you want your child to be when they grow up?” Mothers in Japan almost always answered, “to be *successful*.”... When American mothers were asked exactly the same question, you can imagine what the answer was: “We want our children to be *happy*!” I was raised in an old-fashioned Italian family. I don’t think my father really cared whether I was happy. Oh, I suppose it was of concern to him, and I’m sure that he also wanted me to be successful. But if you had asked my father, and especially my mother, “What do you want your son to be when he grows up?” both would have answered, “We want him to be *good*.”

**Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story* (2000)**

When asked this question, it is very likely that one of *your* responses will be, “For my child to be successful”. Without a good education a child’s life choices are limited and, naturally, most parents are anxious that their children will achieve their fullest potential.

But many well-meaning parents feel frustrated because they don’t know how or where to begin to help them to do so!

We believe that parents and carers are the key to raising aspirations and educational achievement in their children.

You *can* and *do* make a difference!

For most parents their understanding of the education system is based on their own experience of schooldays and, for many, these weren’t always “the best years of their lives”. Many remember the negative experiences more quickly than they remember the positive!

School experiences may vary from person to person, but one thing is consistent – teaching and learning methods have changed over the years.

## *The purpose of this book*

*Parents First: Parents and Children Learning Together* aims to explore *how* to learn effectively in order to enable you to develop a deeper understanding of how to support your children with confidence through their school years, and especially through times when they are faced with the challenge of learning in new environments when methods – and expectations of them – may not be as familiar as they were previously.

## *Natural-born learners?*

The range of skills and knowledge you have already taught your child is likely to be extensive. The important point is that *you* were your child's first teacher and have taught them so much already. This need not change during their time at school. Parents have so much to offer in supporting and encouraging their children in "lifelong learning".

A home that nurtures a learning culture teaches children that education is important and is to be valued. We hope that the following exercises and information will equip you with the confidence, skills and understanding you need to help your children to succeed and to develop a dynamic learning culture in the home.



**! Remember:** You were your child's first teacher and have taught them so much already!

## *So what is "Learning to Learn"?*

*Parents First: Parents and Children Learning Together* is a book designed to improve your child's self-esteem and self-motivation in order that they might feel confident to take on new challenges. It is also about understanding and applying a little of the current research into how the human brain and mind work and to learn ways to "reflect" on *how* we learn effectively. It explains effective strategies for improving memory, for developing our intelligence (of which there are several different types) and for sharpening up thinking skills for learning, answering

questions and preparing for examinations. It also explains how we might improve our own abilities to learn more effectively.

We hope that this book will interest and involve you in the learning process and provide you with the skills needed to help your child learn confidently and effectively. In organisational terms the book is very much made up of two halves, the first part looking at and reflecting on past and current learning experiences and the second part offering practical strategies for supporting your child with their learning. The book provides plenty of advice and activities to help you and your child learn to learn and put our ideas into practice. Each tip or activity is indicated by one of three symbols defined below:



Every time you see this symbol it means that there is an activity you may complete yourself or with your child.



Next to this symbol you will see words of advice, quotes or slogans.



This symbol is placed next to advice which is rooted in modern brain research and is designed to allow your child to learn more effectively and naturally.



**! Remember:** If you demonstrate to your child that education matters to you then she will grow up believing it is important for her!



“After completing the ‘Learning to Learn’ course, I’ve a more positive approach about things in general and patience with my children. I now know that my input *can* make a difference to their success.”

**John Wilkinson (2002), parent of two teenagers**

## *So how do I begin to help?*

A question that parents often ask is, “How do I help my child with homework when so much has changed since my own schooldays?” You don’t have to know everything to begin helping your child, just to be practical.

## Chapter 2

# Effective Communication

Another crucial element, and part of developing self-esteem and confidence is the ability to communicate effectively. A child who is listened to and whose opinions are respected is more likely to grow up feeling positive and valued. Effective communication is a skill that we nurture in our children from the moment they are born. Most people adapt their behaviour and communication techniques to suit the child's level of understanding.

When your child was very young you probably used "baby talk": you held your child quite close to your face so she could see your eyes and you smiled a lot. Researchers have found that young babies focus on facial expressions and tone of voice. As they develop and begin to speak, we modify our language so that they understand. We tend to keep sentences short or use single words or phrases.

Adults sometimes make the assumption that a child shares the same level of understanding and has the same reference points as they do. But this is not always so!



In *Cider with Rosie* Laurie Lee as recalls his first day at school:

"What's the matter, Loll? Didn't he like it at school then?"

"They never gave me the present!"

"Present? What present?"

"They said they'd give me a present."

"Well now, I'm sure they didn't."

"They did! They said: 'You're Laurie Lee, ain't you? Well, just sit there for the present.' I sat there all day but I never got it. I ain't going back there again!"

## Approaching adolescence

Adolescence can be a difficult time for parents and teenagers, as young people begin to assert their independence, take risks and experiment with relationships and lifestyles. To communicate effectively with our children we must first recognise and accept that this phase of their lives will also challenge our own beliefs.



**! Remember:** As parents we must be ready to accept that our views and thoughts may be challenged by our children. It's part of growing up!



Discuss with your child how you felt about your own relationships with your parents – their grandparents. How would you have liked your own relationship with your parents to have been?

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How would you like your relationships with your own adolescents to be?

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Are there any similarities or differences?

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Discuss these with your child and set out some agreed principles below. For example, 'Talk, don't shout.', 'Ask, don't demand.', 'Respect each other's views and opinions.'

---

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We have agreed that

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## Chapter 8

# Solving Problems

### *Improving your child's thinking skills for learning*

There is a vast range of thinking skills that your child will develop to become a more effective learner. In this chapter we will share ideas for activities which can help you to practice some of these skills with your child. Hopefully this will help you feel more confident to experiment with your own ways to improve different aspects of your child's creative thinking.

### *What is 'problem-solving'?*

At work, at home and at school, we are constantly being challenged with problems that need to be solved. Some people rise to the challenges and see them as opportunities: they have clear and effective systems for tackling problems, which in turn gives them a greater sense of self-confidence. Other people fear the challenge of solving problems. They have few skills (or none at all) to call on when tackling problems. Often this is because no matter how minor or trivial the problem may be; they fail to identify the nature of the problem – that means that they are not able to recognise what skills they already have that would help to solve the problem, so they are not in a good position to apply the correct tools to solve it. This need not always be the case.

Parents can help children to think of problems as challenges that can *always* be overcome. If we can first help children to work out *how* problems may be broken down into manageable parts, we can begin to develop crucial thinking strategies for problem solving. This approach will provide children with many valuable skills that they can apply time and time again in many learning situations.

For example, my five-year old daughter is a jigsaw puzzle *expert*. She is never intimidated by even the largest of puzzles because she has

developed an effective and systematic problem-solving strategy for jigsaws. She breaks the exercise down into smaller parts! First of all, she collects together the straight-edged pieces; then she looks for strong colours that connect together, then faces, clothes or buildings, while all the time studying the big picture on the box to give her guidance.

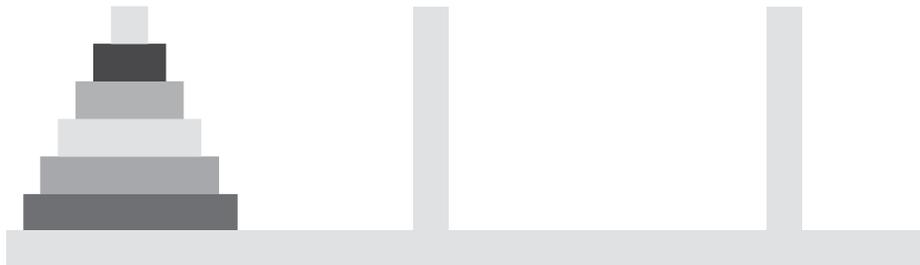
## *What's the problem? Analysis and synthesis*

Problem solving can be more effective when the task is broken down into smaller, separate but related parts. The process of breaking a problem down into simpler pieces has itself two parts. Scientists call these two processes 'analysis' and 'synthesis'.

**Analysis** is the ability to break a problem down into sub-parts in order to see how they fit together.

**Synthesis** is the ability to put the parts of the problem back together in a way that solves the problem. This is precisely what Grace's jigsaw-solving strategy includes.

One famous problem solving activity is called the Tower of Hanoi, invented by Edouard Lucas in 1883. A number of discs are placed on a peg at one end of a three-peg board with the smallest at the top:



The object of the exercise is to get all the discs from the left hand peg to the right hand peg, with the largest disc at the bottom again. The only problem is that you may not place a larger disc on top of a smaller one. A quick look on the internet will offer many ways to solve the puzzle but the point is that once you can understand how the puzzle works (the *knack* of it) it's easy to solve. However, it is often this initial stage of problem solving, understanding the core of the problem that causes children (and adults) the greatest difficulty.

## Chapter 10

# Help Your Child to Learn to Spell



“Christopher Robin respects Owl, because you can’t help respecting someone who can spell Tuesday, even if he doesn’t spell it right, but spelling isn’t everything. There are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn’t count.”

*The House at Pooh Corner, AA Milne*

Although Christopher Robin is quite right, that there is a lot more to the successful and effective use of language than just being able to spell words correctly, spelling is an important skill because it enables your child to communicate meaning clearly in writing.

There are lots of complicated new words your child will be expected to learn at all stages of her education – far too many to write down here. The aim, therefore, is to develop an effective way of learning new spellings that she can use with any word she meets, in any subject.

The work you did in Chapter 9 will now be put to the test. Remember to use the very powerful ways of working with your brain and all of your intelligences to learn. Encourage your child at every stage, and praise successes at every opportunity, however modest.

### *How to learn to learn to spell*

Try using the following approaches to help your child with learning spellings in the future.

#### *Step 1: Look at how the word has been attempted*

Which part of the word does your child need to learn? If your child misspells a word, look carefully at the parts of the word spelled correctly,

and the parts of the word misspelled this time. Affirm that she will always spell the word correctly in the future and that the mistake was a mere temporary “setback”. Congratulate her for the letters she did get in the correct place and order.

## Step 2: Actions

### 1. Chunking

- Take a word such as “caterpillar”: how many words can you see inside it? (Cat, pill, pillar, ill, at, ate, cater.) So, “My cat ate a pill and was ill behind a **pillar**. I cannot **cater** for her!”
- Take the word “friend” (a **friend** will always be there in the **end**)
- Remember “separate” has a **rat** in it!
- Imagine **abundance** (plenty) as a **bun dance**

Make a list of twenty words that have *other words* inside them. Write the “other” words in a different colour:



- Safeway (*safe, few, way*)
- Manchester (*man, chest*)
- Scarborough (*scar, car, rough*)

Then make up a “silly sentence” with each of the “found words” in – for example, “I always feel very **SAFE** when I’m shopping in Safeway!”

### 2. Association

Earlier, we saw that learning to count in German could be supported by associating the word with a physical action, in order for it to be encoded onto our long-term memory systems. As you know, this kind of “connecting” to something else is very effective because it works with the brain’s natural way of linking information to other knowledge.

Take the word “shoe”, which doesn’t look much like it sounds (shoo). If your child wanted to learn to spell “shoe”, one way he could learn it by association would be to connect it to words he can already spell with an identical letter string. For example: **shoe, toe, foe, hoe, does.**

“I nearly lost my **toe** when a **foe** took a **hoe** and chopped my **shoe**. What **does** he think he’s doing?”

Remember, you may **hear** with your **ear**.

You could link a word such as “**laughter**” with **fight**, **tight**, **might** and **sight**.

Find words you can associate with each of the following:

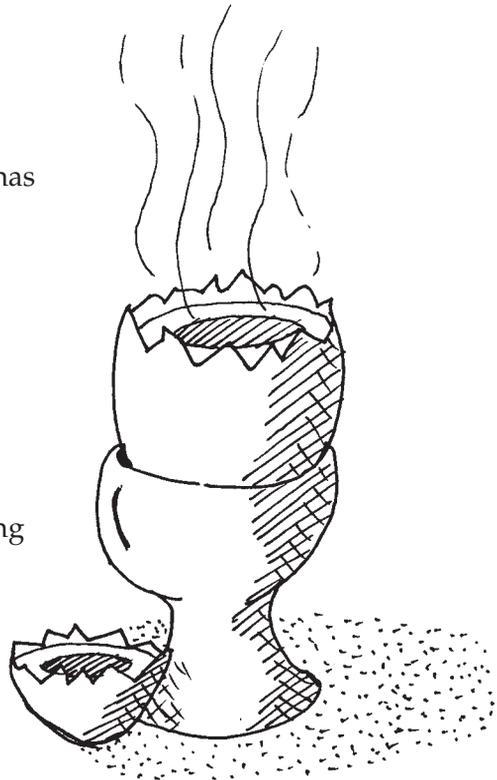


<b>here</b>	<b>dis</b> appear	<b>school</b>	<b>sensible</b>
there	dis	sch	ible
where	dis	sch	ible

### 3. *Mnemonics, jingles and rhymes*

Using emotion (humour or surprise, for instance) can help create powerful memories. Take a word such as “beautiful”, which has what could be a tricky beginning: “beau”. If you were to make a mnemonic like “**bad eggs are useless**”, it can help you to remember the order of that letter string.

Think of some “fun” mnemonics, jingles or rhymes with your child that will be useful for remembering spellings. Ask your child to design a poster which will help teach someone how to spell a new word. A cartoon illustration will help bring the idea to life!



**Parents First** is designed to improve your understanding of how children learn in order for you to help your child face the challenges of our modern educational system. It clearly explains some of the key current research about how the human brain works and provides practical advice on how to apply that research to studying and learning at school.

Garry Burnett and Kay Jarvis explore practical ways for you to help your child learn effectively which include:

- Developing confidence and self-esteem
- Effective listening and questioning
- Creating an effective learning environment
- Building a healthier brain for learning
- Improving memory, recall and spelling

**Parents First** puts you right at the centre of the education process, raising the aspirations and achievements of your child.

“Research shows that support from parents is the single most important driver for pupils’ success at school. ... This book will help parents to support their children in learning how to learn ...”

**Susie Parsons, Chief Executive,  
Campaign for Learning**

“... a must for every parent—and grandparent—who wants some down-to-earth, practical advice on helping children to learn, to think, and to use their imagination.”

**Lord Ronald Dearing,  
Education Adviser**

“I wish there had been a book like this when my children were young!”

**Paul Ginnis,  
author of  
The Teacher’s Toolkit**

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**Crown House Publishing Limited**  
www.crownhouse.co.uk

Cover Illustration Bob Maher

**Education/Parenting**

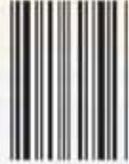
**UK £9.99**

**USA \$14.95**

ISBN 190442413-9



5 1495



9 781904 424130