

# How to Teach

*Here is the general approach parents should use when helping with academics.*

**By Malkin Dare**

In each of the last eight newsletters, I have published an article suggesting ways that parents can teach some school-related subject to their children. I've tackled spelling, map-work, number facts, vocabulary development, reading, printing, precision, and homework.

This month, I am writing about the general principles parents should keep in mind when teaching any skill. Not surprisingly, most parents apply these general principles instinctively when teaching their kids how to ride a bike or build a kite. Somehow, though, many parents lack confidence when it comes to schoolwork.

## **Go Step by Step**

All learning can be broken down into steps. This is true for all learning and all learners; however, the size of the steps will vary according to the learner's various attributes: aptitude, maturity, motivation, previous exposure, and so forth.

You would never expect a child to learn to swim in one session. Rather, you would break the learning down into steps — getting comfortable in the water, putting his face in, floating on his stomach, kicking his legs, and so forth. Similarly, whether teaching spelling or the periodic table, you should split the topic up into steps.

It is best to start with very small steps, as this builds up the learner's confidence. You can always increase the size of the steps as you go along.

## **One New Concept at a Time**

It is very difficult for learners of any age to assimilate more than one new concept at a time. Consider how well you do yourself when your tennis instructor tells you to change three things about your serve — or your son shows you three new things on the computer.

So resist the temptation to throw in that neat shortcut or correct how your student holds his pencil. One thing at a time!

## **Correct Sequence**

You should begin with the easiest step (getting comfortable in the water), and progress to the next logical step once this has been mastered. If your student is already comfortable in the water, you can immediately move to the next step — and the next and the next, until you reach the first step which gives your student difficulty.

## **Clear Presentation**

To give your student the best chance of mastering the day's lesson, the new concept should be taught with exquisite clarity and simplicity.

If there is any ambiguity or confusion, your student may be frustrated or reach the wrong conclusion and actually be worse off after the lesson than he was before it — because now he will have to unlearn the mistake and then learn the correct lesson. Far better to get it right the first time.

After the lesson has been taught, immediately check to make sure that the student has grasped the new concept accurately.

## **Practise, Practise, Practise**

In order for new learning to be consolidated, it must be integrated into old learning and practised. It is very common for new learning to be forgotten by the next day. Simply reteach it — it will probably come back quickly. Frequent, short sessions, separated in time, are most effective.

## **Feedback**

Immediate correction of mistakes is a powerful teaching tool. If students are not monitored while they work, they typically repeat the same mistake over and over again, thereby engraving the wrong learning on their brains and making it harder to unlearn.

Positive feedback is even more powerful, and you should be making every effort to ensure that your student mostly succeeds (at least an 85% accuracy rate). That's why you start low and take small steps.

Reinforcements can include verbal praise, showing off to Grandma, progress graphs, stickers, M&Ms, pennies, a trip to the movies, and so forth. The need for concrete rewards tends to fade as students progress.

All students can learn anything. This means that everyone — including you — can learn to be a good teacher. If you would like advice on how to teach something, please feel free to contact me for advice (519-884-3166, [mdare@sympatico.ca](mailto:mdare@sympatico.ca)).

High expectations and good teaching can produce seeming miracles. You can do it!

## **Essential Elements of Good Teaching**

- ☺ Only one new item should be taught at a time, the student having already mastered all of the prerequisite learning.
- ☺ The new item should be explained with great precision and clarity, and the teacher should check to make sure that the learner has understood the new concept.
- ☺ The student should practise the new learning until it is automatic.
- ☺ Frequent, short, separated-in-time sessions are most effective.
- ☺ The teacher should check and recheck that the new learning has been remembered later on, as new learning is easily forgotten.
- ☺ Old learning should be revisited regularly, ideally in application to and consolidation with new learning.
- ☺ The student should be encouraged and praised.

*(Mrs. Dare has been a public school teacher and home-schooler. She is currently a reading tutor.)*