

MegaSkills[®] Building Children's Achievement for the Information Age

Dr. Dorothy Rich

Confidence

Motivation

Effort

Responsibility

Initiative

Perseverance

Caring

Teamwork

Common Sense

Problem Solving

Focus

Getting What Your Children Need to Succeed

Sharing Experiences

When we think about initiative, we often think about our ancestors, who traveled across oceans and boarded wagons and trains to make lives for themselves in new lands.

Tell about parents and grandparents who made those voyages, who took that kind of initiative. Talk about today's new immigrants who continue to come to America to make a better life for themselves and their children.

No matter what generation of Americans we are, the immigrant spirit is part of our nature. We are people of strong ideas and strong action. This desire to make things happen burns within us and, when channeled and focused, it's a powerful force in education.

Sparking the Conversation

Start with some examples of initiative. Small, everyday ideas will do. For example, let's say it's a weekend day, and you ask, "What will we do? Who's got an idea?" Your child pipes in, "Let's have a picnic."

What happens to this or to other ideas that come up at home? Children know they get serious consideration when the family decides together, yes, we can do it because ... or no, we can't because As many times as it's reasonable, follow through on a child's idea. When the idea moves into action, the child needs a role to play. If it's the picnic, there's food to be bought, made and packed. Kids need this practice in order to show their initiative.

Initiative Builder: Newspaper Activity

Use the newspaper to find articles of people using initiative. What are they doing? Setting off on a trip to outer space? Designing a new house? Starting a business? There are many ways in which people take action. Talk together about initiative that gets attention in the newspaper and on television and initiative that goes on daily at home. It's not in the news, but it is important.

Moving to Bigger Questions

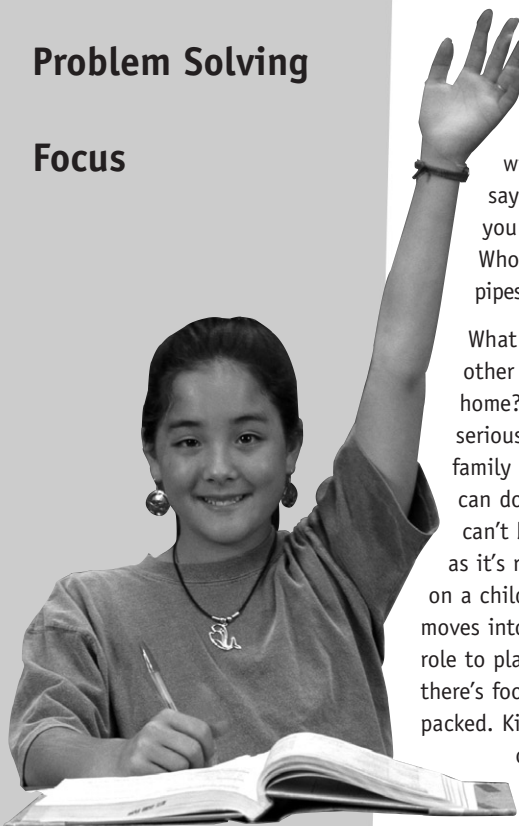
- Can taking initiative too fast get you into trouble? If so, what kind?
- Can waiting too long to take action get you into trouble? If so, what kind?
- Do you get lots of ideas, or do you wait for the one perfect idea to come along?

There's a wise saying: "The perfect is the enemy of good." So try to recognize the good when you've got it.

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"You dummy!" That's what kids said to me when I told them about my foot getting caught in the spokes of my brother's bike. I was barefoot, the bike hit a bump, my foot went into the wheel; it came out with a spoke in it.

Nobody has to remind me again. I wear shoes when I ride a bike. That's one way to learn. Children like to hear stories like this. And it opens doors to conversations about far more deadly consequences for children who today don't listen to the warnings about how to be safe ... safe from drugs, safe from AIDS, safe from crime. While no one can promise complete safety, there are precautions that help.

Sparking the Conversation

Today children have to listen and learn before they experiment. There is a lot of information around. Talk to your kids about all those other kids, the ones who need the lecture. Ask, how can we reach them? Brainstorm ideas. What are the pluses and minuses of each one? Even young children can get into the habit. For example, ask,

"How can we get Uncle Jim to stop smoking? Any ideas?"

Some ideas will be better than others.

Those are the ones you save, and you keep one handy to try out the next time you see Uncle Jim.

Problem-Solving Builder: Newspaper Activity

Clip paragraphs from the newspaper. Cut and separate the paragraphs and mix up the pieces. In many ways, writing is like making the pieces of a puzzle fit together. The puzzle pieces are thoughts. They need to connect. The challenge is for children to work these sentences back into a logical order.

Moving to Bigger Questions

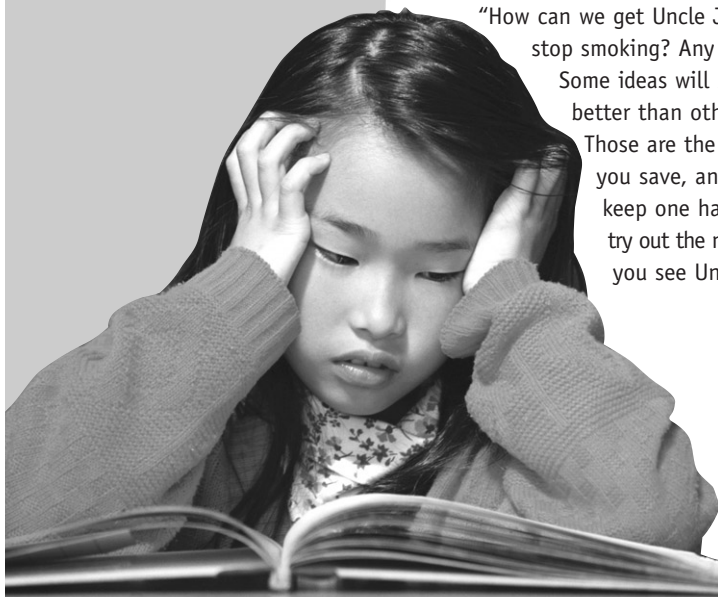
Try some of these with your young problem solvers.

- To get more kids to say no to drugs, what will it take?
How do we keep our friends from being "dummies"?

Ideas build on one another. They have a terrific ability to keep flowing as long as we keep drawing from the well.

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"I just have to have those shoes. I can't live without them." That's your sweet child talking. While asking for these shoes demonstrates your child's motivation, it doesn't say much for common sense.

How do you talk common sense to your child? One way that doesn't seem to work well these days is to recall how it was when you were a kid. That's when your parents went to the store and bought the most sensibly priced brand, and it all worked out fine.

The pressure on your kids to have what their friends have is overwhelming. How can they help preserve the family budget and get some common sense at the same time? Children have this chance when they get the opportunity to talk to you, not about the old days, but about today and the pressures you experience.

Sparking the Conversation

What are you as an adult under pressure to do? What do you say to yourself? What advice do your kids have for you? Can they see some of the same pressures they face in the pressures you face as an adult?

Encourage them to name some of the pressures they have just as you have named some of yours. You may find that your children have some good advice for you and for themselves.

Common Sense Builder: Newspaper Activity

Shopping for almost anything is an experience in reading and common sense. Read the ads, talk about them, compare costs and value. Hobbies such as gardening, painting, sports, etc., all lend themselves to research and to use common sense daily. Pick something to shop for in the ads, start clipping and comparing the different prices and different features. Price alone may not be the best determiner. You really have to use your common sense.

Moving to Bigger Questions

To a great extent, being like everybody else is a form of security, and everybody likes to feel secure. Questions like these can help your children get a better sense of the pressures they face:

- Who sets the fashions? Who tells us what to buy?
- When we hear product claims, are they always true?
- Can we each remember a time when we used our common sense?
- Can we remember a time when we didn't do what everybody else did, and it turned out all right? Sometimes it can turn out even better.

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Effort is funny. You've probably got lots of examples of times when you've made major efforts, and nothing worked out. And then, there are those times when you made little effort. Bang! Big results.

Children have the same experiences. They write a paper, for example, that takes days and days, and the teacher says, "You should have tried harder." Then they knock off another paper in ten minutes, and they get an A.

Where's the justice? Answer: There isn't much, but there is a law of averages. That means that when we try hard, some of the ships will come in, and some won't, but chances are, there will always be some ships in port. We have to help our children know the value of effort. Failure is no crime. Not trying is.

Sparking the Conversation

Ask children for their own memories of making an effort and not making an effort. Do they know kids who respond to low test grades by saying, "I didn't study anyway"?

What do your children think that this reaction shows?

Try to remember a time when you made an all-out effort, maybe to win someone's affections or to get on a team, and it didn't work out. Your children will notice that you are still standing, so making an effort can't be too disastrous.

Effort Builder: Newspaper Activity

Check the want ads. Pick a few to talk about. The job world is changing. Driving a truck used to be a man's job. Being a nurse was always woman's work. This activity helps youngsters start thinking and talking about what they might like to do when they are older. Suggest that youngsters cut out articles and pictures of people doing different jobs that might be interesting as a career. Discuss together the pluses and the minuses of each.

Moving to Bigger Questions

Try these for a lively discussion:

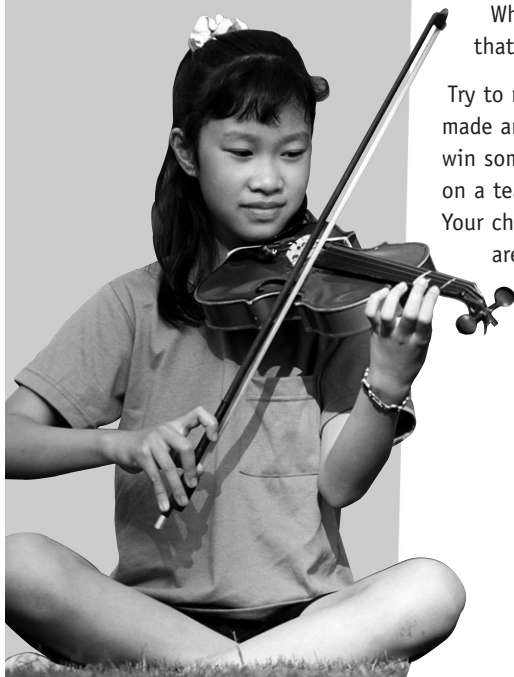
- Is there a fear among students about making an effort, a fear that if you try and lose, it's worse than not trying?
- What about expectations? How realistic are we about winning and losing?

Just as we learn in different ways, different kinds of effort are very useful for our well-being.

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We're worried about our children's motivation today, maybe more than ever. We see so many kids who say they are bored. Boredom used to be considered a problem for adolescents, but now it's striking younger and younger.

Our children are used to a new sensation every few seconds on television; they are used to flitting from one thing to the next at rapid speed. No wonder they get bored.

Motivation thrives on learning enough about something, over time, to get really interested in it. That's why hobbies are so good for children and for adults, too. If you had a hobby as a child, perhaps making model airplanes, or even collecting stamps, tell your kids about it. When children have a specific interest, they seek more information about it; they get involved. When they get involved, they get motivated. It's a remarkable cycle.

Motivation Builder: Newspaper Activity

Find articles that tell of events in foreign countries— "Lance

Armstrong Wins the Tour de France"; "Pokemon Sweeps Japan!"; "Foreign Ruler Overthrown." Can any of these events happen here?

Find in the paper a situation that affects your area. "Shopping Center Adds to Traffic Problem"; "Neighborhood School to Close." Talk about these with children. What's interesting

about the news? Is it relevant to their lives? In this way, children become more interested in what's happening around them.

Sparking the Conversation

Learning is at the heart of motivation. We're always learning but we're usually moving too fast to recognize it:

- Think about what you have learned in the past year, in the past week, in the last day.

For example, what did you learn about a certain person, about something new on the job? Share this with your child.

Moving to Bigger Questions

- Children may not know the word motivation, but they recognize it when they see it.
- Check with them: What are they encouraged by? What discourages them? Are they more motivated with certain people, certain subjects

There's been no better way invented to encourage children's motivation than seeing their parents as interested learners. So what's the next thing you want to learn about?

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There is not a living, breathing person who is confident all the time. Yet our children can get the idea that everyone else is more confident than they are, and that everyone else, especially a parent, has never been scared or felt the pangs of loss of confidence.

That's why it is important to share your experiences, to come clean, to tell your child about a time in your own childhood when you felt confident—really able to do something. Maybe it was jumping off the high diving board or excelling on the math test.

And what about the time when you felt not so confident, when you had trouble standing up in front of the class to give a speech, or when you realized you were short on cash at the checkout counter. Share as many memories as you can remember.

Sparking the Conversation

Focus on a specific problem. For example, "When I first went to school, I had trouble speaking up in class. I felt shy. I guess I was worried that I wouldn't have the right answer."

This helps children start talking about their own experiences with confidence—when they have it and when they don't. We learned that my older daughter, a whiz in her classes, was having trouble making friends at school. And our younger daughter was spending so much time with friends, that she was finding too little

time for her work. It gave us all a chance to give each other a pep talk.

Confidence Builder: Newspaper Activity

Children who balk at math in class are often youngsters who figure out batting averages in their spare time. Some even understand the financial pages.

Capitalize on these interests. Try questions such as these: Which team has won the most games this season? Who are the high scorers? How much higher are they than the others? Use the newspaper to get the answers.

Moving to Bigger Questions

Try these bigger questions in conversations with your children:

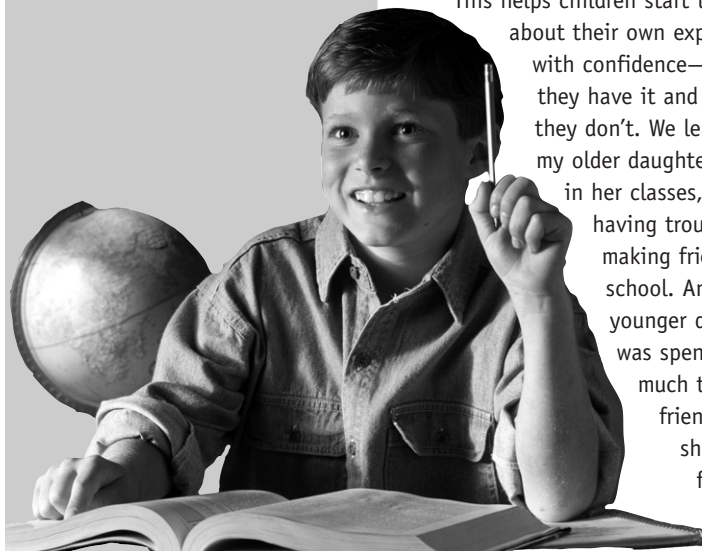
- What makes people scared?
- Does what we say to each other make a difference in our self-confidence?
- What kind of praise do we like to receive?
- How can we help each other feel more confident?

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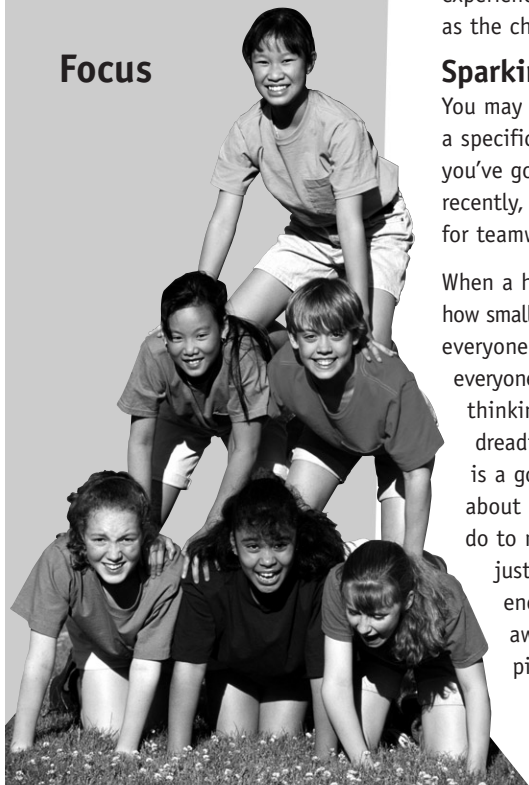
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Sharing Experiences

It seems that everybody's talking about teamwork. We see articles about it in the sports pages and the business pages. It's the key to success. Some folks call it the most desired MegaSkill today.

Many of our children know what it means to be part of a sports team. But they often don't know what it means to be a team player at work and in the family.

That's why it is so important to share your experiences about teamwork on the job and at home, too. Not all your memories will be wonderful. You may recall, for example, the times on the job when your boss or your fellow workers didn't pull their load of the job, instead pushing work off on you.

And you may recall the times when it was as if you'd won the World Series, as a team. Share as many experiences as you can for as long as the children will listen.

Sparking the Conversation

You may find it helpful to focus on a specific situation. For example, if you've gone through a move recently, your family knows the need for teamwork.

When a household moves (no matter how small it is), it's a lot better when everyone pitches in. Talk about what everyone had to do. If you're thinking about a move, and dreading it (who doesn't?), now is a good time to think aloud about what everyone will have to do to make it work well. It might just nudge your children enough to start throwing away some of the junk that's piling up in their rooms.

Teamwork Builder: Newspaper Activity

Save a few newspaper TV guides so that they can be cut apart ... and put back together. The challenge is to read and construct your own guide of favorite TV shows for at least two days. Do this together as a family. Talk about and compare the choices. What shows would you run if you managed a TV station ... and why?

Moving to Bigger Questions

- When do we like working with others?
- When do we need to work alone?
- What jobs do we do at home as members of a team. What jobs should we turn into teamwork jobs?

If any one member of the family is still doing all or almost all of any one job, (for example, Mom cooking), then teamwork is the right MegaSkill at the right time for your home.

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Sharing Our Experiences

Who among us hasn't had daydreams that go something like this: You're playing the piano on a concert stage. All eyes are upon you, admiring you. Guess what you forgot to do? The answer: practice.

You're standing at a podium, before a crowd of thousands, about to make the most important speech of the decade. Guess what you forgot to do? The answer: write it.

Sparking the Conversation

Focus on a dream that you like to see happen. Tell your children about it. For example, a parent might sit down to a banquet every night (all right, once a week) without having to pay for it, shop for it or cook it. A child might come home with an all-A's report card without having read the books, written the papers or studied for the tests. How we wish these dreams could come true, just like that. But reality is different.

Talk together about how to realize your dreams. Who can help with that banquet? What books and papers need to be read and done to get those good grades? To have that banquet, to get those grades, takes time, effort and perseverance—sticking at something until it is accomplished.

Perseverance Builder: Newspaper Activity

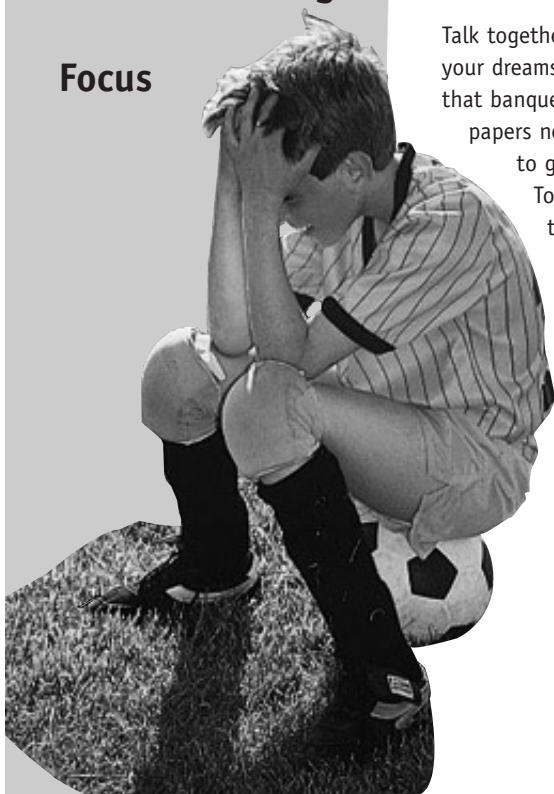
Good writing needs ideas that are united, combined and tied together to make a logical whole. Find words in big-size letters in the newspaper. Cut them out. The goal is to combine these words into logical sentences. Let's say you choose the words "toys," "trip," "sunny," "teachers." You might come up with this: "On sunny days, teachers often let their classes take toys with them on school trips." Even when the ideas defeat logic, putting them together provides good mental exercise, gives everyone lots of laughs and teaches perseverance.

Moving to Bigger Questions

- Is the journey to a goal really the best part, or is the best part finally getting there?
- Is stubbornness always a bad thing? Can it be good sometimes?
- How do we force ourselves to do things that we don't want to do?

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Sharing Experiences

It's easy to see the headlines in the newspaper and hear them on television and get the idea that people just don't care for each other anymore.

Yet, all of us who are out here in the world know that there are both very harsh and very soft, caring events happening every day. The soft ones just don't make the headlines.

That's why I never tire of telling about the leaders in the MegaSkills workshop program, many of whom are volunteering to help fellow teachers and parents. If I read the news as a barometer of how people really fell about each other, I would have never predicted this outpouring of help and, yes, love. Because these stories of caring don't make the news, it's all the more important for us to make sure children know that caring exists and to have examples of caring, not grizzly headlines, as models for their actions.

Sparking the Conversation

In your own experience, you see caring ... the boss who boosts your confidence; the neighbor who watches out for your child; the teacher who sends home a note telling you what your child has done right.

Caring Builder: Newspaper Activity

Using the newspaper, ask students to identify people in newspaper articles who show caring and those who do not. Examples are features on folks who manage to save a child from a burning house and others who get into traffic accidents by not paying attention to their driving. Collect newspapers over a few days to have a number of caring examples to share.

Moving to Bigger Questions

- Does caring for others and giving to others do anything special for the carer? For the giver?
- What does it mean to act selfishly? Who is an unselfish person that you know?

There is a saying that the more we give, the more we get back. How have you experienced the pleasures of giving? How have your children? Talk about the special returns that come from giving.

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Sharing Our Experiences

When our lives become complicated, and life is coming at us too fast, self-discipline and focus are more necessary and important than ever.

Some of the obstacles standing in the way of focus are so obvious that they get overlooked. For example, it's hard to get organized in the midst of stress and disorganization. Focus demands that children and adults get enough sleep and food. It demands a level of structure in our homes and classrooms, so that we, can focus our minds. Our children need to be able to control their impulses and to see the adults around them controlling theirs. Our children need to become what psychologists call self-regulating. This gives them the ability to be calm enough to be attentive and focused.

Sparking the Conversation

Talk about your goals and how you work to meet them. Talk about those you have accomplished and those you continue to work on. Ask children for their goals—big and small.

Focus Builder: Newspaper Activity

Use those glamorous, colorful advertisements to illustrate the idea of main point, or "thesis." Ask the following: What's the main idea in this ad? What is it trying to persuade us to do? A strong, handsome man drinking a certain soft drink in a fancy car with a beautiful girl at his side is telling us something about that soft drink.

Moving to Bigger Questions

- What do I want to accomplish?
 - Finding a goal
 - Selecting an objective
 - Moving into action
- What do I have to do?
- What do I have going for me?
- What do I do to get there?

The strength of focus as a MegaSkill is that it connects so well to meeting goals. Goal setting has the remarkable ability to keep our minds and our thinking centered.

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Sharing Our Experiences

In the past, we never really had to think about our responsibility for the environment. We knew that litterbugs got fined, but that was about all.

Times have changed. One of the big differences is that we know a lot more than we used to. We know about dangers, acid rain, detergents that don't biodegrade and plastic cups that will live forever.

We need this information and need to share it with our children. This is not to frighten them, but to build their awareness of what each of us can do to help. Check with your library and with environmental organizations directly to find out what you can do.

Sparking the Conversation

Ask your children for their ideas on how they can help right around your home: for example, recycling newspapers, moving lamps (away from air conditioners), keeping the refrigerator door closed more than open, using the back of sheets of paper to get more mileage from every sheet.

Children make excellent nags to keep parents responsible. For example, they can remind you not to keep the car motor idling, and to start the barbecue with paper and sticks rather than lighter fluid.

Because of increased awareness in the classroom about the environment, your children may know more than you do.

Responsibility Builder: Newspaper Activity

Ask children for ideas about activities they'd like to do during their holidays from school. Children can cut out articles from the

newspapers and write notes, suggesting their ideas. Use large sheets of paper, leaving plenty of blank space for each day. Talk about what everyone wants to do. Make plans not just for outings, but for home projects, too. As children get ideas, they pencil them in. Keep these realistic, at no or low cost! This gives children practice in responsibility and in doing independent research. Share these ideas to see which ones are workable.

Moving to Bigger Questions

Because your children may have a head start in their knowledge about the environment, let them teach you and lead you in answering questions like these:

- Can people get sick from pollution? What kinds of illnesses do they get?
- When businesses move to recyclable packaging, how can we let them know we approve?
- How can we make more people aware of their responsibility in taking care of the environment?

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