

Go Beyond
the Grades

Parent Guide

A School Readiness
Program

PRESENTED BY



School Readiness

Go Beyond the Grades

Welcome to the **Go Beyond the Grades** school readiness program. The purpose of this ebook is to provide you with tools designed to help students get the most from their education experience. The information is broken into a few sections:

The Story - *Bobby and Caitlin are fictitious siblings who face real situations that parents worry about and kids often confront in school. Children will better understand the skills you wish to impart if there is a story that helps them connect emotionally. You can share the experiences of Bobby and Caitlin, or ask your kids to think up real situations they or their friends have faced. Use this as the framework upon which to build their skills.*



The Explanation - This is the “why” of each topic covered. It gives you insight regarding the reasons the skill or mindset discussed is important for your kids to learn and practice.

The Practice - These are the simple steps you can implement at home to help prepare your children for the situations they may face in school, as well as how to adopt a positive, teachable mindset.

In the Studio - These are some examples of how Creative Connections providers build these skills into their martial arts classes to better prepare their students for a successful school year.





The Story Part 1

Mom watches anxiously as Bobby and Caitlin get on the bus. Her feelings mirror those of her children: excitement laced with nervous anxiety. She hopes it will be a good year. Bobby had a little trouble focusing last year, and Caitlin didn't seem to connect with her teacher, causing her to struggle with her work at times. Fortunately, neither of them had any issues with other kids, but mom always felt like a bullying situation could pop up at any time. She hoped her kids would be able to handle themselves. You simply never know what's going to happen. About the only thing she could accurately predict is the curriculum her children would be learning. She had no way of knowing how things would go socially; either with the teachers or their peers. She couldn't be there to moderate or mediate the hundreds of interactions that would occur each day, but she knew, as an active parent, that she could serve as a guide and help her kids deal with whatever challenges arose.



Good grades are important in school. So is learning to improve focus, navigate successfully through social situations, develop a disciplined work ethic, and increase confidence and character. In



the 21st century, education is about critical thinking skills and the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively. Children need to be lifelong learners who can adapt to the fluid, ever-changing world in which we live. Many students want to develop these competencies but are unsure how to go about doing so. When given some concrete exercises that teach them how to develop in these areas, children are given a sense of control and feel more accountable

for their own success. By taking a few minutes to apply a few basic principles we can increase the likelihood of imparting these valuable lessons to students.

Staying Focused and Maintaining Concentration

Why it's Important

Focusing on proper breathing while sitting at a desk will help students regain or maintain their focus and improve concentration,

especially if they are feeling a little overwhelmed, confused, or even bored. Proper breathing will also have a calming effect when nervous about a test or speaking in front of the class. Just a few diaphragmatic breaths periodically throughout the day can make a big difference.

What to Practice

Proper breathing involves just a few simple keys: Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth and/or nose naturally. There is no specific speed or rhythm that needs to be followed. However, making the exhale slightly longer than the inhale is beneficial. Let the belly expand when inhaling and squeeze the belly in to exhale fully. Hands should be flat on the desk or resting on the thighs. Eyes should be open and relaxed. This will help promote a state of active awareness as focus shifts between their teacher, their work, and interactions with their peers.

In the Studio

Classroom environments that involve a lot of movement are great for learning how to move in and out of focus. In the dojo, students will be asked to go from being actively engaged physically and vocally to instant stillness and silence. This is like lifting weights for their willpower, and will help them strengthen their ability to reign themselves in when the situation calls for it. They also will begin and end each class with diaphragmatic breathing, which will instill a habit of tapping into their “listening mind” as they prepare for the lesson. Similarly, at the end of class, those few breaths will give them an opportunity to calmly and consciously reflect on what was learned.

Making Strong Connections

The tools your children will need to be successful after their formal schooling ends have shifted dramatically. Following the rules and memorizing lists of facts are being replaced by 21st century educational skills like “The four C’s”: Creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

Collaboration and communication are reliant on a fifth “C” - “connection”. We live in a highly connected world that requires us to work well with others and be master communicators. The good news is, almost from birth, we have the ability to mirror others actions, which means we are very socially teachable. Infants less than 48 hours old have been recorded sticking their tongue out in response to an adult doing the same. This is important to consider, because it reminds us we can help our children actively establish rapport, empathy, and compassion through practice.

*To learn more, search the term “**Mirror Neurons**”.*

The part of the brain responsible for interpreting appropriate social behaviors can be slow to develop. (Often it doesn’t start developing until around age 12 and continues to develop into one’s 20’s.) That means awareness and mirroring, along with creating strong social habits, will help children foster positive social connections. This will

help them navigate better socially as their brain continues to develop neurologically.

There are a lot of opportunities for us to help children refine their ability to positively interact with teachers, friends, and peers.

Examples include: active listening, understanding personal space, eye contact, focusing on the speaker without distraction, and practicing non-verbal skills.



Connecting with Teachers

Why it's Important

Research has determined that there are strong correlations between how well students get along with their teachers and how well they perform in school. The student teacher social dynamic can also dramatically influence a child's experience in school. Simply put, when students like and connect with their teachers, they like school more and learn better. A good connection with the teacher can help make the school year more constructive and enjoyable for everyone. Teachers get excited about students who are interested in learning. Students who sit slumped at their desk or staring off into space don't seem very interested in learning. Sometimes the students are interested, but their body language does not convey that to the teacher. Students can practice show-



ing that they are interested in what the teacher has to say with their body and face, as well as through their level of engagement in class.

What to Practice

You can practice at home by role playing and providing feedback to the student through the following exercises: Play the role of the teacher and have **the** student ask questions, volunteer answers, and contribute to discussions in a strong, confident tone. Practice focusing on the teacher whenever possible; try smiling, and nodding, making eye contact to demonstrate they are listening. Have the students work on keeping their shoulders back and head up while the teacher is talking; have them look up from their work when they can instead of always looking down at the desk.

In the Studio

What's the most effective way to help kids develop a skill? Make it a game. In class, the martial arts teacher will create fun challenges designed to develop the student's ability to maintain or regain focus. Students will need to be ready with a smile when the teacher looks their way, be quick to ask questions, and be confident in their answers even if the answer is "I don't know." They'll be reminded of how much fun it is to have a dynamic, interactive relationship with a teacher, while also understanding the value of actively listening and treating their teacher with respect.

Connecting with Peers

There has been a shift on the part of many school systems. Increasing attention is being brought to the subject of “positive school climate”. There is a huge amount of data demonstrating that the better the school climate, the better students and teachers perform. They are also finding that this a very effective way to reduce bullying. Consider this: how much bullying occurs in your child’s martial arts school? Hopefully the answer is “None.” The reason is because a culture is promoted in the school that encourages positive, constructive interactions between the students. A traditional public or private school is a much more difficult environment to control. However, each child can learn how to interact positively with their peers, to take the high road by avoiding speaking negatively about others, and choose to be a social role model for their peers. Every child who does this increases the overall health of the school’s climate.

What to Practice

At home, you can help your child with their peers in a number of ways. Talk to them about how they can introduce themselves to new people. Have them practice smiling and saying “Hello”. Give them feedback so that they can figure out how to be relaxed and confident in their interactions with others. Have fun playing “What if”: “What if someone you like doesn’t like you?” “What if someone likes you and they make you uncomfortable?” “What would be a really fun way to study with a friend?”. Come up with both positive and potentially scary situations.

The idea is to help them feel prepared to handle the unknowns they might face.

Children will spend a lot of time learning how to read and write in school. How much time will they spend learning how to interact positively with others? A lot of their “practice” will be unsupervised interactions with other kids. If they don’t know what to do, they’ll do something....that something is going to be an untrained reaction. The more you practice with your child, the more likely they are to respond both skillfully and appropriately. They’re also more likely to share an embarrassing or uncomfortable social challenge with you as the school year progresses. As a trusted adult, you can dramatically impact the quality of your child’s school experience.

In the Studio

In class, students will practice standing with a relaxed, open posture and a genuine smile. This will be a “ready stance” before implementing a technique. This will help them feel that although they should choose not to engage in conflict, they can be instantly ready to act if necessary. Students will also work in pairs, with one student watching the other and then recognizing something they do well in their technique. In school, learning to notice the strengths of others will foster more positive interactions. Our goal is for our students to act as both leaders and role models for their peers.

Connecting with Learning

“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”

William Arthur Ward

What happens when the student gets a mediocre teacher? Students shouldn't be reliant on the quality of the teacher as the determining factor regarding how well they learn. They can learn to be superior students, which will help them be successful regardless of outside factors. Students should view learning as an opportunity instead of a chore. They should be encouraged to be an active, curious learner, instead of taking a more passive approach. Which is going to lead to a better outcome? The child who thinks: “I'm here, your job as the teacher is to get me to learn.” Or the child who thinks: “We're here, and our job is to help each other so that I can learn successfully.”

There are many ways that we can help children become more effective learners. As adult role models, we can endorse school as a good thing, and learning as a fun and valuable privilege. We can teach students how to actively listen, and how to improve their learning capability through practice.

What to Practice

Make learning fun by helping your child learn and explore something they find interesting. Let satisfying their curiosity and learning new things be a “Got to” instead of a “Have to”. Go online with them or to the library and let them discover everything they can about dinosaurs, baseball, or ballet dancing. Twenty-First Century learners will need to be lifetime students; if they wish to be successful they will need to educate themselves continuously beyond the first few years of their formal education. Instilling a love of learning will help prepare them for life after school. Another way to connect them to the value of what they are learning is to discover how the things they learn in school would apply in real life. Have them think of a profession and then try to connect it to what they are learning in school. You may have to stretch a little, but this is also a fun way to get creative and maybe even a little silly. Using their imagination is a good thing!



In the Studio

In class, students will develop their “Listening Mind”. This goes beyond simply listening and following instructions. They will practice active listening, which goes a step further. Active listening requires the student to engage verbally and non-verbally, instead of passively receiving a lesson or instruction. They will repeat back directions in their own words. If they have a standard response to certain statements or questions, we’ll give them creative directions that will require them to think about what was said, process the information, and either repeat it back in their own words or ask a clarifying question. Students will also be made aware of their body language and facial expressions. They will practice showing the teacher that they are engaged, and what may make them appear distracted.

They will also explore off the mat application for their skills and techniques. For example, how could projecting their voice help them in other areas of their life? How could their training help a friend? What are some ways they could use their understanding of respect when at home? How could a technique help them perform better in another sport? We’ll also play brain games in class.

Here’s some examples:

- *Trivia questions like: What historical figure would have been an awesome martial arts kicker/striker/grappler?*
- *Counting repetitions in a foreign language.*
- *Name a favorite subject and do a pushup for each letter of the subject’s name.*
- *Using math to call out repetitions of skills. (Do $2 + 2$ punches!)*



Choose Confidence

The Story Part 2

Bobby and Caitlin came home buzzing about their first day. They liked their teachers, and were already talking about which activities they might pursue. Bobby was thinking about giving basketball a try, but he didn't think he was good enough to play. Caitlin wasn't sure what she wanted to do. Mom knew she tended to sit back and see what her friends planned on doing and then followed their lead. Mom wondered out loud,

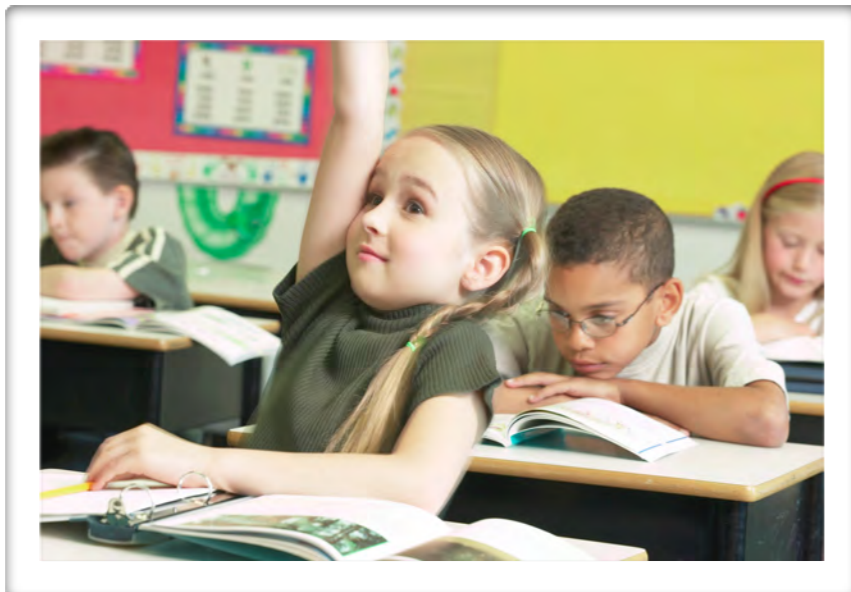
"What's the one thing standing between you and trying something new?"

Caitlin rolled her eyes, "Myself."

Mom also wondered, "What's worse than failing at something?"

Bobby promptly stated, "Not trying at all."

Mom smiled, "You two are so smart." Choose Confidence



Why it's Important

According to the National Mental Health Information Center, positive self-esteem and confidence are indicators of how successful students will be in school. Children growing up with confidence in their own abilities tend to do better in school, take better care of themselves than their peers with low self-confidence levels, and excel in sports and socialization. Teens with self-confidence are better able to withstand peer pressure and to make decisions with their own best interests in mind.

Children and adults feel nervous and insecure at times. Confident seeming people may not always feel confident; they learn to act confident. The shape of the body has power, and by practicing a strong shape and a strong voice, our feelings will respond and so will the people around us. Many bullying and difficult social situations could be avoided by projecting a more confi-



dent demeanor. Just the appearance of being confident will increase your likelihood of success in whatever you are doing; whether it's trying out for an activity, making a new friend, or dealing with a challenging situation. A little belief goes a long way!

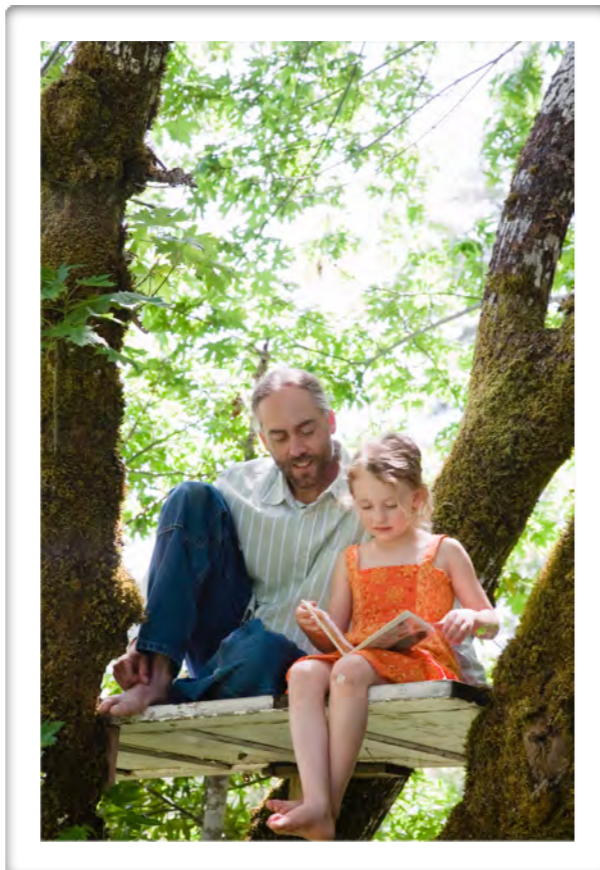
What to Practice

For the Body

- Remind your child to smile easily, and make eye contact with people.
- Encourage your child to offer their name or a greeting first when it is appropriate.
- Have them pay attention to how they stand and move when they feel good; then remind them to duplicate that same posture when they feel less confident.
- Have them talk to you while keeping their arms relaxed and their stance open; they should face you squarely with their head up.

For the Voice

- Have your child practice projecting their voice and speaking clearly without shouting.
- Explain how to avoid pre-qualifying in the negative. (Stating that you can't do something or won't perform well before making the attempt.)
- Encourage them to do their best without making excuses, and speak about themselves and others in a positive way
- Discuss avoiding conversations that are negative, especially toward another person.



In the Studio

The martial arts teach students how to be skillful and appropriate in the way they respond to a situation. When learning a martial arts technique, students will practice being ready, yet relaxed. They will smile, make eye contact, and show a confident exterior even when feeling nervous or unsure. The dojo provides an environment where students are expected to practice action and reaction with their peers. They will be able to test how well they respond, and refine those skills through repetition.

The Story Part 3

The year flew by. Bobby gave basketball a shot and decided it wasn't his thing so he took up swimming instead. Mom was glad he stepped up and tried. Caitlin had some rough moments with some girls in school. After a several days of tears at home, her refusal to be a victim caused the girls in question to back off, without mom having to go to the school and intervene. In evening conversations Mom and the children discussed what to do in various social situations. Their was often humorous role playing sessions they shared as Bobby and Caitlin practiced to increase their abilities to succeed in school. For them, it was just another form of homework. For Mom, it was maintenance and preparation: Maintaining their ability to handle life's challenges, and preparation for the day when instead of getting on a bus, they'd be getting behind the wheel of a car and heading out on their own.

Safer + Healthier = Happier

School is supposed to help pave the way to responsible adulthood. The lessons learned go far beyond the ability to read and write. Students are learning what type of person they wish to be. They are discovering what they value. They are exposed to a variety of influences, and not all of them will be positive. The key to success is preparation. When a crisis occurs, and fear or anxiety kick in, the child who can say “I know this. I’ve practiced this.” has a huge advantage over their less prepared classmates who are forced to randomly react because they lack a better option.

In the martial arts, there is a saying: “Repetition is the mother of skill.” Practicing these few techniques consistently will help students squeeze the most out of school. School should be fun, not scary. Giving children tools which will help them succeed on their own will give them a sense of accomplishment that will help them develop into a responsible adult. Ultimately, that is every parent’s goal; to know that his or her child has been given an opportunity to live a successful life and transition from child to adult.



Let's
make this the
best school year
EVER!