

Building Background Knowledge: Site-based Activities that support School success

My name is Laura Maynard Lane, and I've been a Big Sister for 11 years and an elementary school teacher for 9 years. So much of what we do as Bigs helps with school success for our Littles, but is sometimes hard to measure concretely. The idea of this list is twofold. First, as you read through it you will likely realize how much the things you already do contribute directly to school success. Second, I hope you will find some new ideas about how to deliberately weave more school success activities and more conversations into what you are already doing.

Reading and Writing!

Reading is a critical piece of school success. Many of our Littles do not have access to a large home library, and may not have adults in their life that read. Here are some easy things you can do to promote reading and writing:

- When picking books, make sure they are at a “Just Right” reading level. A good rule of thumb: have your Little read one page. If they need help with more than 3-5 words, it's too difficult for them.
- Tell your Little about the books you read.
- Tell stories together — you could start the story, and then leave it on a cliff-hanger and have your Little finish the story.
- Play the alphabet game and take turns thinking of words that start with each letter; think of a word and take turns saying a word that rhymes with it (good practice for consonant blends like sh, ch, etc.). Good for walking and talking!
- Find out what your Little is interested in. Find a book on this topic.
- Find something you enjoy reading together—a magazine, a comic book, the newspaper.
- Get a craft book from the library and follow directions to make something
- Make a list of activities you'd like to do together. Have your Little do the writing.
- Keep a scrapbook of activities you've done & take turns writing the captions/ stories.
- Write a letter together. This could be to a teacher, a parent who does not live with the child, an out of town family member. Practice addressing the envelope.
- Set a reading goal. Celebrate when your Little reaches their goal!
- Decorate cards with short notes for residents of a nursing home or Meals on Wheels clients.
- Don't dumb down your language! Use big words, but make sure to use them in context and explain what they mean to your little
- Teach your Little how to find valid information online. Have them help you research details for an activity you'd like to do together
- For older Littles—Read the newspaper and talk about current events, even if their main interest is sports; show them how to read utility bills, an apartment lease, a job application

Math, Memory and Problem Solving skills!

As a Big Brother or Sister, you have a uniquely wonderful opportunity to show your Little many real concrete examples of using math in your day-to-day life.

- Play board games—these are great for teaching math and problem solving skills

- Teach your Little a strategy game—like chess, checkers, backgammon, etc.
- Play memory games — (I’m going on a picnic and I’m bringing…)
- Make your own memory card game with pictures of things your Little likes.
- Build something—have your Little help measure, make a plan, make a list of supplies, and follow a plan
- Ask your Little what they are good at (jumping, kicking, hula-hooping, etc.) and decide how to measure it (length, time, etc.); have them do it a certain number of times and together track it on a graph showing the number of times and what each try measured
- Bring measuring cups and take water outside; guess how much water is in a container and then measure it, record on a chart your guesses and actual amounts
- Sew something with your Little—have them help measure, make a plan, make a list of supplies, and follow a plan
- Discuss saving money—figure out how much something would cost, how much would need to be saved, how long it would take, etc.
- Find online educational games that teach math principals—Lemonade Stand is great
- Talk about your own savings plans
- Have your Little count loose change; make up how much things cost and practice counting

Developing Social and Communication Skills!

Many Bigs are very aware of this category, and are deliberate in thinking about how to help build social and communication skills with their Little. In this section I’ll try to highlight some ways that might connect back to school.

- Model for your Little how you interact with different kinds of people—friends vs. elders vs. authority figures vs. strangers, etc.
- When asking about school, help your Little problem solve about issues they might be having at school. If they’re having a conflict with a teacher, talk through and maybe even role-play ways of dealing with the issue. If the conflict is with other students, talk through options and practice what your little could say to the friend.
- Ask your Little what they do when they need help with something at school. If they are reluctant to ask for help, offer suggestions about ways they might seek out help.
- Play charades – the guesser has to guess what the person is doing and how they are feeling. Helps the child identify and name emotions. Be sure to display an emotion on your face.
- Near the beginning of the hour, ask them each to share a “glitter” (great thing) and a “guts” (not great thing) about their day/ week and you do the same.
- Anger: teach kids that sometimes people are like volcanoes. When emotions erupt, they lose control. Talk about these 3 steps so they don’t become a volcano: 1) Think - what happened?, 2) Feel – name the emotion, 3) Respond – choose appropriate reaction
- Teach 3 Easy E’s to a good conversation: 1) EYES: Keep your eyes on the person you are talking to; 2) EARS: Block out all extra noise and don't listen to those around you; if you are talking to someone, you should only hear what they are saying, block everything else out; 3) ENERGY: Put all your energy into the person you are dealing with, don't work on anything else or try to do two things at once
- Open-ended inquiries: start with “Tell me about”, “What was the best part”, “What do you think”