



18 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR CHILD'S INTELLIGENCE

What really helps boost kids' smarts at every age and stage? Find out with these simple, super effective tips that cover you from baby to teen.



When it comes to educating our kids, it feels like the heat is always on. We research and dig to find everything from the perfect preschool and spot-on school district to sure-fire study tricks and primo extracurricular activities sure to pack a punch. And we sweat plenty of details in between – and even well before all that, as early as when that little one is still in the womb.

While that’s all part of the process, to be sure, in reality, boosting your child’s brainpower isn’t rocket science. It is, however, a series of mindful little steps and tactics along the way. What, precisely? That’s what you’ll learn from [Dr. Julie Wargo Aikins](#), an associate professor at the Wayne State University School of Medicine and Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and Family Development in Detroit. Click on to discover her top 18 tips to shore up those smarts, from birth all the way through high school graduation.

Guide written by Rebecca Kavanagh





BABIES



10 TERRIFIC BOOKS FOR BABIES

The Very Hungry Caterpillar

Sheep in a Jeep

Goodnight Moon

*Brown Bear, Brown Bear,
What Do You See?*

Guess How Much I Love You

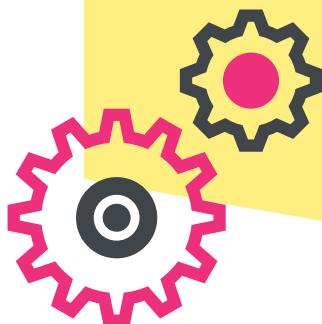
Chicka Chicka Boom Boom

Go, Dog, Go!

Baby Faces

Peek-a-Who?

You Are My Sunshine



1. Read to your baby

New parents may be enticed by “make your baby smarter” claims on specialty products, but don’t be fooled: The best tool for boosting brainpower is one-on-one attention from loving adults, says Dr. Julie Wargo Aikins, an associate professor at the Wayne State University School of Medicine and Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and Family Development in Detroit. Story time is the perfect way to strengthen those bonds. Choose sturdy board books with big, colorful pictures and read expressively, pointing to the words as you go. As she gets older, engage her in the story: “Show me where the yellow sun is,” or “What does the brown cow say?” Building your baby’s receptive language – understanding spoken words – is just as important as helping her learn to talk herself.

2. Go beyond baby talk

Having meaningful conversations with your baby helps build his vocabulary and grasp of language patterns. For example, when he coos in the bath, tell him about the warm water and fluffy bubbles – or what you have planned for the day ahead. Be sure to make it a two-way talk by pausing to let him respond. And label emotions whenever possible, Aikins says: “It hurts when there’s soap in your eye, doesn’t it? It makes me sad to see you cry.”

3. Stock up on cause-and-effect toys

Infants thrive on interactive mats with dangling toys that respond to their actions. Once your baby is sitting up, surround her with chunky blocks, balls, stackable cups and busy boards featuring cranks and knobs. Anyone who’s watched a baby gaze at a rattle, shake it and then put it in her mouth knows that infants use all five senses to soak up their surroundings.

TODDLERS



FUN SING-ALONG SONGS

- “Itsy Bitsy Spider”*
- “The Wheels on the Bus”*
- “The Farmer in the Dell”*
- “I’ve Been Workin’ on the Railroad”*
- “Hickory Dickory Dock”*
- “Do Your Ears Hang Low?”*
- “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes”*
- “B-I-N-G-O”*
- “London Bridge is Falling Down”*
- “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”*

4. Drop by library story hour

There’s a good chance your local library hosts a weekly play date led by a childhood development expert – for free! Early socialization gets toddlers’ brains firing, Aikins says. Being present as they learn to cooperate and play with others means you can help set the stage for strong friendship skills down the road. At the head of the class, fun lessons often focus on ABCs and 123s through song, dance and storytelling. Make note of songs to reprise at home for extra emphasis on rhythms and rhymes, including finger play and body motion for active learning.

5. Supply powerful unplugged toys

Snap-together blocks such as Duplos, puzzles and train sets all work the gears of your child’s brain. Simple building blocks teach lessons in geometry, balance, perception and gravity – all in the name of fun. Don’t be afraid to turn up the volume with musical options such as a toy piano or drum. Watch your child for cues as to what he prefers – not just what you think is best – at gift-giving time.

6. Get messy

Supervised play with messy materials such as water, sand and mud teach your toddler about the properties of liquids and solids. During bath time, the brain wires in knowledge about water, slippery soap and terry towel textures. Sensory experiences are grist for the learning brain. Because messy can be beautiful, stock an easy-to-reach shelf with art supplies – crayons, sidewalk chalk and washable markers.

PRESCHOOL

7.

Read with children, not to them

From building vocabulary to sharpening critical thinking skills, reading is so crucial it made this list twice. Keep story time interactive by calling attention to words and sounding them out together. You can also pause between pages to ask thought-provoking questions: “How would that make you feel?” or “What do you think happens next?”

8.

Encourage make-believe

Keep a dress-up box stocked with castoff Halloween costumes, junk jewelry, ties, hats and uniform items. Offer plastic dishes, school supplies and career tools such as stethoscopes. Dolls and stuffed animals can sit in as students or patients. But the best prop is a colorful imagination. Don't laugh at a child's pretend world. When she pulls you into it, call on your inner actor and play along. Following her lead instead of trying to call the shots promotes positive cognition, says Aikins, so go with the flow.

9.

Find everyday teachable moments

Start your day by announcing the forecast and inviting your child to pick out the right clothes. As you're driving through the neighborhood, quiz her on which way to turn. If she points, reinforce her correct answer with a direction: “Yes - we're turning left!” While grocery shopping, ask her to pick out three yellow apples and two red ones, or challenge her to point out everything that starts with the letter A. And once she's parked in front of *Sesame Street* - which isn't a bad entertainment option at all for its age-appropriate educational value - sit next to her and talk about the show: “Why is Elmo laughing?” or “What number comes next?”





ELEMENTARY SCHOOL




10. Make music

Studies have shown that musical training increases reading and verbal comprehension – and it sounds good, too. Help your child audition instruments to join the school orchestra or band. If that’s not an option, consider piano lessons at home or a ukulele – this inexpensive four-string instrument is easy to learn, just right for small hands and helps with an eventual transition to guitar.

11. Jump around

“Physical fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body, it is the basis of dynamic and creative intellectual activity.” President John F. Kennedy was on to something, as studies have shown that people pick up new vocabulary words 20 percent faster after exercising. Cheer for your child’s interest in whatever sport she enjoys, and encourage frequent off-the-field fitness ranging from bike rides to dog walks to front yard Frisbee.

12. Cook up something good

When kids lend a hand in the kitchen, they learn incidental lessons in math, science and cause-and-effect. Toss your son an apron and teach him how to measure ingredients, double recipes and predict outcomes. Beyond honing life skills and enjoying one-on-one time with a parent, his reward is a true sense of accomplishment – and a full belly.



MIDDLE SCHOOL

13. Gather for game night

Playing Scrabble or Monopoly with your tween is a ton more fun than those preschool trips through Candy Land – and is a sneaky way to sharpen math and spelling skills. A simple deck of cards offers hours of entertainment, and gives you a glimpse into your older child's logic and strategic aptitude.

14. Encourage extracurricular involvement

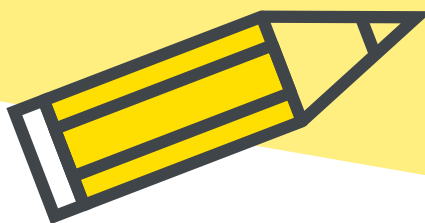
Not only will theater club and tennis team participation look good on that eventual college application, these after-school activities stretch your child's mind well beyond the confines of the classroom. Aikins suggests letting kids join the groups they're most passionate about, even if you have to look outside of school to find the right fit. For example, if your daughter shows an early interest in engineering, see if your community ed offers a robotics club.

15. Be art smart

Research has shown a correlation between the arts, cognitive development and academic success. Painting, drawing and other fine arts not only develop creativity but also increase reasoning skills. By the time kids reach middle school, weekly art class often becomes an elective, so be sure they have plenty of supplies to choose from at home.

MASTERFUL ART SUPPLIES

- Paint and brushes*
- Palette or empty egg carton*
- White paper of all sizes*
- Colored construction paper*
- Child-safe scissors*
- White glue and tape (including duct tape)*
- Markers, crayons, colored pencils, pastels*
- Rainbow pompoms and googly eye stickers*
- Pipe cleaners*
- Cardboard rolls and paper plates*
- Yarn and fabric scraps*





HIGH SCHOOL

16. Enroll in stretch classes

Honors, AP and advanced courses often cover the same material as the standard level but at a faster pace or in a more in-depth manner. Thought-provoking classroom conversations and group projects not only prepare students for their Advanced Placement tests; they offer an early look at the college experience, too. Be sure to ask kids about what they learned in school that day, says Aikins, who notes that helping teens tie historical lessons to current events, for example, brings coursework to life.

17. Invest in SAT/ACT prep

If you've got the funds for test-prep classes or tutors, great. But you can also invest time through free online practice tests. Either way, getting ready for junior year standardized tests is a smart move – and will do wonders for math and reading skills long after pencils are down.

18. Insist on a good night's sleep followed by a healthy breakfast

Studies show sleep deficiency can play a major role in decreased academic performance, and it makes sense: An exhausted kid can't keep his head up, let alone learn. Keep your teen's focus sharp by enforcing a reasonable bedtime, with phones off an hour before that to ensure quality sleep. Don't let him wake up five minutes before the first bell and dash out of the house without eating. Students who take time for breakfast not only are more alert than their counterparts who skip it but also have better visual-spatial memory. Aikins says breakfast also offers a family meal alternative to dinner, which is often a challenging time to gather due to work and sports schedules. She says talking around the table is an easy and fun way to expand minds – your child's and your own.

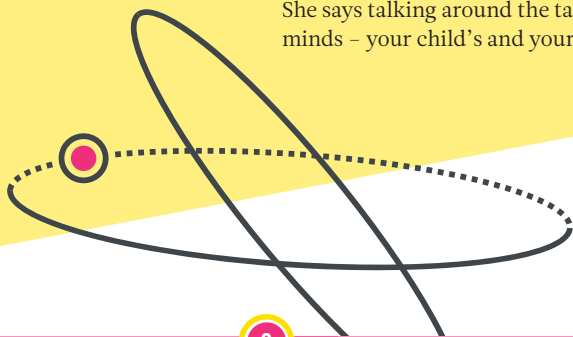
HOW WAS YOUR DAY?

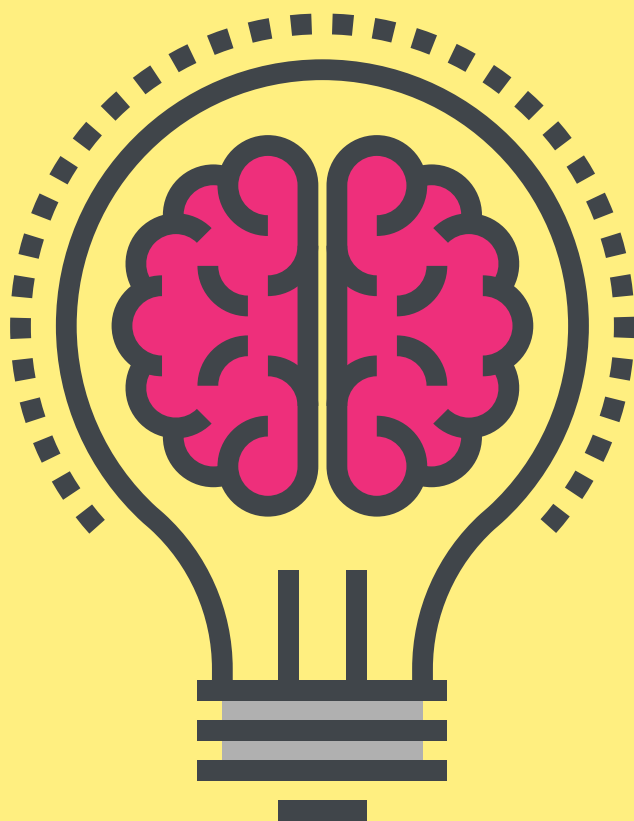
When sitting around the kitchen table, instead of asking kids the question that almost always results in "Fine," look for ways to encourage a more colorful report. Some families take turns sharing Roses, Buds & Thorns:

Rose: Something good that happened that day – and why it was good.

Bud: What they're looking forward to in the near or distant future.

Thorn: Something bad that happened that day. This is a clever way to get insight into your child's life away from home, with information you might not have otherwise heard.





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