

“My child goes to French school: What role should I play?”



by Pierrette Gaudreau

Every parent wants to help his or her child succeed in school. But if your child is in a French school and you are not perfectly fluent in French... or you hardly speak French... or you don't speak it at all... what can you do? This article will discuss simple and efficient ways to play a positive role in your child's life and schooling, regardless of your own skills in French.

Before your child starts going to school, you as a parent are a teacher. You teach your child the zillion things that form the basis on which the school will help build new, formal knowledge. Once your child starts going to school, what part are you expected to play? Should you still be a teacher? Your child already has one in school. Children may love their teachers, but that doesn't mean they want to come home to another one. What we must remember is that certain types of teaching are better left to teachers.

So what roles are preferable? Let's work with an analogy.

Many children take up a sport. They need a **coach**. Occasionally, parents play that role officially. More often, they act as coach by repeating the coach's advice and encouraging some form of practice.

Most parents are content with providing technical support such as enrolling their child in the first place, buying equipment, providing transportation... We will call them **soccer mom and dad**.

And parents are always **fans**, providing moral support and encouragement, rooting for the

team, applauding successes and downplaying failures...

Your specific challenge is that your child is in a French school. But there is more to learning than using a specific language to do it. When you focus on the fact that your child goes to French school, you risk focusing on differences with your own schooling and forgetting all the resemblances between what you learned and what he or she is learning. You focus on what you cannot do instead of focusing on what you can do.

The truth is that you can be a coach, in whatever language, by helping your child develop general skills such as:

- **Observation:** In reading, writing, science, math, your child will have to notice resemblances and differences between letters, words, plants and animals, etc.
- **Classification:** Forming categories is useful in a variety of school situations: reading different sounds, recognizing verb endings, classifying mammals and reptiles...
- **Memory:** Memory is indispensable to attaining more and

more knowledge, remembering the beginning of a story until we get to the end of it, using grammar rules and math calculations...

- **Concentration:** Children often have a short attention span. Helping them gradually improve their concentration helps them succeed in school.
- **Reasoning:** Learning demands constant reasoning, the establishment of links between items, the use of clues to understand what is not specific.

Think up activities and play games that promote these skills with your child.

You can also be a **coach** when specific skills are not language-related:

- **Reading:** The love of reading is a treasure that you should help your child acquire.
- **Writing:** Writing develops communication skills.
- **Communicating:** Verbally or non-verbally, it is a demanding skill—in any language.
- **Mathematics:** Problem solving and calculations are important in everyday life, in any language.

- **Science, Social Studies, Religion, etc.:** Learning is linking new information to existing knowledge that you can help your child acquire.

What is important is the fact that general and specific skills such as these will serve in a variety of learning situations and they will transfer to French even if they were acquired in English.

In a French school, French is the focus and also the main tool students use to become competent in a variety of subjects. However, there is only so much that can be learned in school: your child must learn as much French as possible and school is not enough.

Be a soccer mom or dad: provide technical support.

- Languages in a bilingual environment should be associated with specific persons. For example, a child uses French with mom and English with dad. When the

child. For example, the mother's side of the family always uses French and the father's side always uses English.

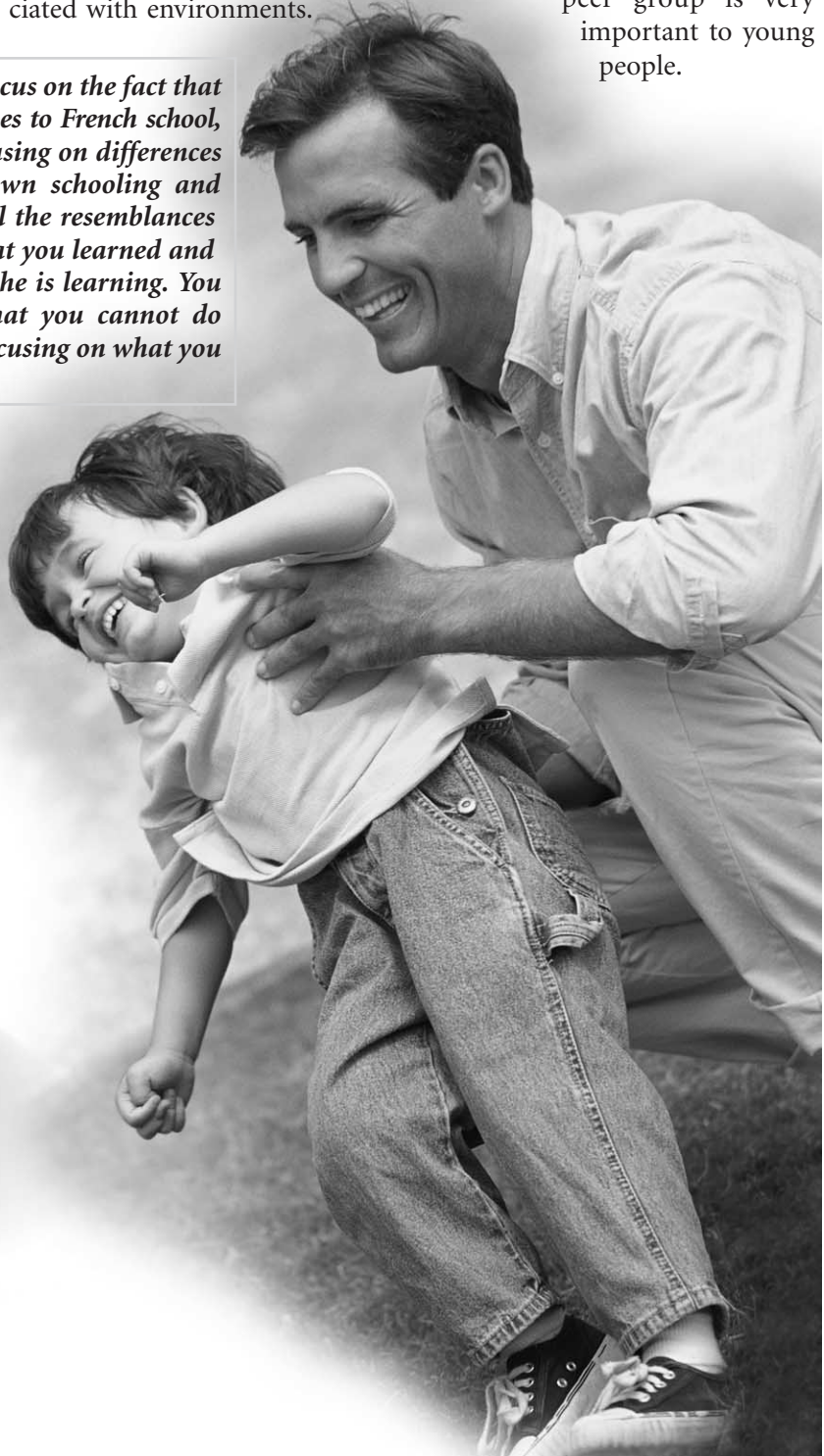
- Languages should also be associated with environments.

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Enrol your child in daycare, sports, summer camp... in French. He or she will make friends with whom to speak French. The influence of the peer group is very important to young people.



whole family is engaged in conversation (meals, leisure time, outings...), English can be used by all to ensure general communication. Enlist the cooperation of family members and friends in using a language, always the same one with the



Be a soccer mom or dad: make compromises.

Allow French in your home, in your car, in your environment.

- Encourage French radio and television for some period every day.
- Watch with your child the French version of a movie you have already seen in English.
- Bring French books, videos, magazines and newspapers into your home.
- Accompany your child to French events such as festivals.

Be a fan.

How do you feel about your child knowing more French than you do? It's what education is all about, isn't it: helping others surpass us, being proud of having helped somebody that we love accomplish more than we did.

- Go to an authentic French restaurant. Let your child help you with the menu and the ordering. Active participation makes children feel good and confident about



their ability in French and lets them experience the usefulness of it.

- In stores, let your child conduct business in French, ask for what he or she wants, for the price of it...
- Shop in French neighbourhoods to expose your youngster to native speakers.
- Show positive feelings towards the fact that your child is learning French: "You're smart to be able to use two languages. I'm proud of you. You're lucky to be bilingual."
- Occasionally ask how a word or an expression is said in French. Use whatever French you know to show acceptance and interest, and to give value to the language.

Homework

1. Supervise to make sure it's done.
Soccer mom or dad.
2. Make him or her read vocabulary words to you so that you can later dictate them and check on the spelling. Use a method to teach your child how to learn.
Coach.
3. Make him or her explain the task, translate the instructions or the math problem, explain the rule. Then see if you can help.
Coach.
4. Ask your child to always bring home workbooks where work similar to the homework was done in class. This will provide you with a model.
Coach.

5. Distribute homework and lessons throughout the week. The French-speaking parent can help where the English-speaking parent can't.
Coach.

6. Subscribe to the homework program in your school if one is available.
Soccer mom or dad.

7. Use the Internet to provide help.
Soccer mom or dad.

<http://www.sosdevoirs.org>

<http://www.alloprof.qc.ca>

<http://www.csdm.qc.ca/petite-bourgogne/signet>

<http://www.webmaths.com>

<http://www.cyberpapy.com>

8. Ask the teacher to make sure students can do most homework by themselves as much as possible.
Soccer mom or dad.

And don't forget to be a parent.

Your child is not only a student. Discuss his or her whole day as a person as well as a student: "How was your day? What did you do today? What activities did you like? What did you learn? Did the teacher read you a nice story today?"

Avoid or at least postpone questions that focus on the negative or the technical: "Did you have difficulty in school? Did you listen well? Do you have any homework?"

Focus on your child's whole well-being, not only on his or her head: "Did you enjoy your day? Why not? What can we do about it?"