

18 Questions to Ask on Back to School Night

Get the answers you need about how media and technology will be used in your kids' education.

Students heading to school this year may be the most technically savvy, media-aware bunch ever. [YouTube](#), [Minecraft](#), and even [MythBusters](#) are being used to engage kids in class, while [Instagram](#), [WhatsApp](#), and Netflix occupy kids at home. This year at Back to School Night, it's a good bet that media and technology -- both in and out of school -- will be hot topics.

How will your kids' schools use technology to teach, motivate, and promote digital citizenship? There's only one way to find out: Ask! Of course, you only get so much time with the teacher and administrators on Back to School Night, so here's how to find out what you need to know, whether you have five, 10, or 15 minutes.

If you have five minutes with the teacher:

What's the best way to reach you? Email, text, or phone call?

With so many ways to communicate, it's important to make sure you and the teacher are on the same page. Ask how your kids' teachers want to be contacted (and when), how they want students to contact them (and for what issues), and which contact method they prefer for different concerns. (If you need to clarify the homework for your kid, that might be a simple text. But if your kid doesn't understand the homework, he or she might need to send an email or make a phone call.)

Which websites or apps do you use the most in the classroom? How often?

Most teachers have the latitude to supplement lessons with popular apps and sites such as [YouTube EDU](#), [Khan Academy](#), [BrainPop](#), and, of course, Google as part of the instructional day. Some programs let teachers differentiate the lessons for different learning styles, levels, and proficiencies and provide vital insight on individual students' strengths and weaknesses. Take the opportunity to find out which programs the students use and how you can help your kid get the most out of them.

Which apps should we get and which sites should we bookmark for homework help?

It's been a long time since we parents were in school. The way concepts are taught (hello, Common Core!) and the style of teaching (forget drill-and-kill) continues to evolve. Teachers want parents to pick apps and sites that reinforce the methods they're using in the classroom. Being aware of what your kids are using also can help you support their learning, troubleshoot issues, and manage their screen time at home.

If you have 10 minutes with the teacher:

How much homework will require a computer or an Internet connection?

Knowing how much your kids will need to go online will help you prepare for the nightly routine. You might want your kids to get their online homework out of the way first, for example, and focus on non-screen stuff closer to bedtime. It also will help you keep your kids on track once they go online. You can allocate time, coordinate your kids' schedules, and plan accordingly.

Does my child need her own device for school? If so, what do you recommend?

Many teachers assign schoolwork to be completed on a device. But whether you can get away with letting your kid use yours or if she'll need a dedicated machine is an important concern for your back-to-school budget. You may need guidance on what type of device to get (tablet, laptop, ereader). Your teacher will have a good recommendation for what's appropriate for your student. If your school does not provide a device as part of a 1:1 program, ask if there's a computer lab or look into discount programs such as [Notebooks for Students](#).

Does the school use a private network for grade reporting, homework, and other communication?

More school districts are using online portals -- basically small private networks -- for grading, homework assignments, and communications. Find out how the teacher expects both parents and students to use the system. For example, parents often want to check grades every day, but the teacher may prefer that you check once a week, when grades are updated. Keeping expectations aligned is key to good communication among teachers, parents, and students.

If a homework assignment includes visiting a popular website such as YouTube, how do I make sure my kid stays on task?

In an effort to engage students, many teachers incorporate favorite websites and apps into schoolwork. But when kids go online to work on their assignments, it's easy for them to get distracted by, curious about, or absorbed in other subjects and start clicking around the Web. Ask the teacher for tips on how to make sure your kid sticks to the task at hand with questions such as how long the assignment should take, what exactly it encompasses, and how much "extra" online research the student needs to do to complete the work. Learning to tune out distractions, focus on one thing at a time, and delay the gratification of online browsing are important skills for kids to develop.

If you have 15 minutes with the teacher:**Does the school allow teachers and students to be friends on social networks?**

It may seem odd to you (especially if you're not an avid social media user), but it's not uncommon for teachers and students to be friends with each other online. Some teachers use social networks such as [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) strictly to communicate class-related information to their students. But some teachers and students "follow" each other on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter socially. Ask teachers if they use social media with students -- and talk to your kids about what's appropriate to post, especially if they're interacting with teachers.

What media -- and how much of it -- do you use in class?

Movies, YouTube videos, and TV shows all are used in the process of teaching and engaging students. But it's worth finding out what your kid is watching, how much screen time he's getting at school, and even whether the broadcasts include commercials or sponsorships.

Is it OK for my kid to do her daily reading on an ereader?

Some kids really prefer ereaders, but the devices' bells and whistles may detract from the reading experience teachers want kids to have. So [the jury is still out](#) on whether ereaders provide the same literacy, comprehension, story-retention, and even motor skill benefits that print books do. In general, all reading is beneficial, but get guidance from the teacher on whether (and what type of) ereaders work for your kid's specific needs and goals.

If you have some time with an administrator:

What are the school's rules about when kids can and can't use devices? How are these rules communicated to students?

Many schools are developing codes of conduct around devices. Some let students bring cell phones so long as they keep them off at certain times (such as during class and assemblies). Some schools tolerate students playing games and listening to music at lunch and on the playground. It's a good idea to be aware of the rules so you can reinforce them. You also will want to know the discipline process around misuse.

Will my kid need to create any accounts online for school? If so, how will you let me know?

If students will be using technology in the classroom -- anything from school-issued tablets and computers for online testing to educational apps and Web-based resources -- they most likely will need to provide [certain information to register](#). Ask your school administrators some basic questions about how they are collecting, using, storing, and destroying your students' information.

Does the school (or the district) offer any extracurricular STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs?

Job growth in [STEM careers far outpaces non-STEM occupations](#), so you might want to nudge your kid in that direction. Extracurricular opportunities might include a robotics program, a LEGO class, computer programming, and coding. Many high-tech and biotech companies even sponsor school programs.

Is there any education around digital citizenship and cyberbullying prevention?

With social media use starting as young as the elementary grades, it's important that schools take a community-based approach to fostering a caring environment. Ask whether the school rewards kindness, empathy, and cooperation as much as other achievements. Find out if anti-bullying efforts focus on prevention or simply are punitive. Get your school signed up for [Common Sense's Digital Citizenship program](#).

How does the school deal with cyberbullying?

Look for a coordinated, consistent, compassionate procedure for dealing with bullying. You'll want to make sure that the school takes cyberbullying seriously and encourages kids to report it. The disciplinary process should respect the role of social media in kids' lives by encouraging kids to stand up for each other. But you can't expect the school to do *everything*. Talk to your kids about using social media responsibly and respectfully and supporting targets of bullying.

If you have a child with special needs, these questions can help clarify the teacher's rules, recommendations, and expectations around tech.

What kinds of tech can help kids develop socially?

Teachers are keenly aware of their students' socialization habits and can play a big role in fostering an inclusive community. They may be able to recommend specific apps to help your kid work on social skills at home. They also may be able to recommend social sites and apps your kid can use to interact with peers virtually -- for example, [Club Penguin](#) and [Minecraft](#).

Do you have any tips on how my kid can use a device to help with focus and organization in school?

The teacher may be able to recommend certain features that customize devices for people with disabilities. For example, the [iPad's Guided Access setting](#) turns off access to all apps except for the one being used to help the user focus on one task at a time. Task lists, alerts, and organization apps can help kids follow directions. If your teacher doesn't have a lot of experience with these settings, ask for a recommendation of another staff member who could help (perhaps a technology coordinator or a special-needs instructor).

If your child uses an electronic assistive device, check to see if there are any rules around device use in the classroom that may call negative attention to your child.

Find out if any of the teacher's classroom rules may prevent your kids from accessing their devices when they need them. If necessary, work with the teacher to agree on how to talk about your kids' device use in a way in which everyone feels comfortable and that will help the other students accept it.

Caroline Knorr is *Common Sense Media's* Parenting Editor

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