

# Project-Based Learning: Resources for Parents

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**Project-based learning can be a fantastic way for kids to get engaged in hands-on, active learning. Here's how parents can encourage and support their children -- and their children's school -- in project-based learning.**

By Suzie Boss



As a parent, you may be wondering what it means when your child's teachers say they teach with projects. How much do you know about project-based learning, or PBL? In a nutshell, students learn important content through PBL by investigating questions, generating original ideas, and working collaboratively to produce products that demonstrate what they have learned. This research-based method of teaching and learning is quickly gaining popularity in schools that are focused on preparing students for future challenges.

Here are four ways you can get involved:

## **1. Become acquainted with project-based learning practices**

Perhaps you're wondering if PBL will be demanding enough to help students learn what they need to know. You may remember projects from your own school days that

were fun but not very rigorous. Or you may wonder how your children will be graded on projects that involve team effort instead of individual tests.

Here are a few resources to help you understand why PBL is gaining momentum as a way to keep students interested and engaged in school while also helping them develop a deeper understanding of important content, along with essential 21st century skills like critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

Get a quick overview of PBL in this animated video, *Project Based Learning: Explained*<sup>[1]</sup>.

Listen to students describe how PBL makes a difference in their lives in this video, "*It Really, Actually Changed My Life.*"<sup>[2]</sup>

The Buck Institute for Education (BIE)<sup>[3]</sup> offers an extensive introduction to project-based learning. As BIE experts like to point out, PBL is about serious, "main-course" learning, not fluffy projects that seem more like dessert.

## 2. Keep an open mind

Bruce Alberts, former president of the National Academy of Sciences, says one reason project-based learning isn't being tried in more schools is that parents don't support it. That is because they were taught in a more traditional way and aren't acquainted with how project-based learning works.

But think about the role that projects play in your own life -- at work and at home. In almost every career field, from aerospace to fashion design to marketing, project teams bring together interdisciplinary experts to accomplish important work. Community challenges are often tackled by collaborative teams, too. You may not have done PBL as a student, but it's a safe bet that you're involved in projects as an adult. Consider the skills and collaboration required for projects to run smoothly. PBL will give your children a head start on developing the skills they'll need in the future -- such as managing their time, getting along with others, and knowing how to access and evaluate resources in the information age.

## 3. Support PBL in your child's school

A PBL classroom offers many opportunities for parents to get involved in their children's education. Here are a few ideas for how you can contribute to PBL.

**Volunteer to be a project parent (instead of a room parent).** Help locate resources or provide student transportation for project-related work.

**Share your expertise.** In PBL, students often consult with experts from outside the classroom as part of their investigations. Let your child's school know that you're willing to share your knowledge. You might be asked to serve on a project review panel to give students expert feedback, be part of a focus group, or answer technical questions that involve a subject you know well (from landscaping to engineering to managing family finances).

**Ask questions.** Talk with teachers to learn more about how PBL works. It's likely that your child's teacher uses tools to help kids stay organized with PBL. Ask for access to their project calendars or Web resources. Talk with your children, too, about what they're doing with their projects. They may be stretching to develop new skills or understand challenging content. Give them an ear as they talk about what they're learning. Reflection is a big part of PBL -- it helps learning stick.

**Attend showcases.** Projects tend to wrap up with a culminating event where students share what they know or can do as a result of their investigations. Be sure to attend these celebrations of learning. You may be amazed to hear how much students learn and accomplish through projects.

## 4. Ask how your employer could support project-based learning

Because students are involved in real-world projects, local companies and organizations have much to offer in terms of support. Smart employers recognize that their future success will depend on today's students, but they may not know how to engage directly with schools.

Make introductions to connect your child's school with your employer. Companies and nonprofit organizations may be able to provide expertise, materials, volunteers, or funding to support student projects. Think about field research and mentoring opportunities, too. What could students learn from a visit to your workplace? Let them

see what a day-in-the-life looks like for your career. What problems are you addressing that might get students thinking about relevant project ideas?

Employers involved in the fields of STEM—science, technology, engineering, and math—are eager to build a pipeline of students for these important disciplines. If your work involves STEM, you can volunteer to support school projects at the National Lab Network<sup>[4]</sup>.

## Additional Resources to Learn More

### Suggested Reading

*Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*<sup>[5]</sup>. This new book by Tony Wagner offers insights for parents about developing the talents of young people.

*Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach*<sup>[6]</sup>. This book by professors Sylvia Chard and Lilian Katz, first published in 1989 and revised in 2000, provides an introduction to the project approach to learning.

*An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*<sup>[7]</sup>. This book by Ron Berger makes a case for encouraging children to do "beautiful work." He explains how a simple but powerful process for giving peer feedback helps children achieve greatness.

### Useful Websites

Buck Institute for Education (BIE)<sup>[8]</sup>. BIE is one of the leading organizations for materials around project-based learning, including research reports, videos of project examples, and training materials for teachers.

The Project Approach<sup>[9]</sup>. Professor Sylvia Chard's website offers lots of information and resources, including project examples, a blog, and tools for understanding project-

based learning.

Global SchoolNet Foundation Project Registry<sup>[10]</sup>. Created for teachers, this website contains worldwide projects using technology from classroom teachers and organizations such as NASA, iEARN, and GLOBE. The projects can be sorted by age level, subject, and project start date.

Donors Choose<sup>[11]</sup> is a Web platform for fund-raising for school projects. Help teachers market their projects to attract support for the resources they need.

Edutopia's Project-Based Learning Core Strategy Page<sup>[12]</sup>. Our central landing page for all the latest videos, articles, research, and blogs on PBL. Be sure to check out *A Parent's Guide to 21st-Century Learning*<sup>[13]</sup>, which has many more resources for understanding PBL.

**Last updated: June 2012 by Suzie Boss<sup>[14]</sup>**

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1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMCZvGesRz8>
2. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZxYSe26O9I>
3. <http://www.bie.org/>
4. <http://www.nationallabnetwork.org/>
5. <http://www.tonywagner.com/resources/creating-innovators>
6. [http://www.amazon.com/Engaging-Childrens-Minds-Lilian-Katz/dp/1567505015/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?ie=UTF8&s=books&](http://www.amazon.com/Engaging-Childrens-Minds-Lilian-Katz/dp/1567505015/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&s=books&)
7. <http://www.heinemann.com/products/E00596.aspx>
8. <http://www.bie.org/>
9. <http://www.projectapproach.org/>
10. <http://www.globalschoolhouse.org/pr/>
11. <http://www.donorschoose.org/>
12. <http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning>

13. <http://www.edutopia.org/parent-21st-century-learning-resource-guide>
14. <http://www.edutopia.org/suzie-boss>