

Spring Fever, or Spring Forward? How to Use Spring Break to Help Your Child Finish the School Year Strong

by Carrie Spaulding, CPC

Whether you're going on an active adventure, relaxing on a remote beach or in a quiet cabin, staying cozy at home, or visiting extended family, spring break is a perfect opportunity to connect and reflect with your child in a relaxed, connection-fostering setting.

Understandably, many parents wait until the end of the school year to take stock of their children's progress. While it's totally natural to associate reflection with an endpoint, waiting for the end of the year is a major missed opportunity for a couple of reasons. First, it can be hard to get your child to thoughtfully take stock of the year in the glorious excitement of summer's beginning. Come June, even the most school-loving child may be hard-pressed to do the kind of reflection you'd welcome. Second, if you wait until the end of the school year to take stock, you're missing a fantastic opportunity to help your child get the most out of the last two and a half months of school.

As you get ready for spring, take some intentional time with your child to harvest the bounty of the year so far and plant new seeds that will grow in the next few months. There are many advantages to doing a "spring tune-up" with your child. It gives you a strengths-based way to mark your child's progress and helps you tune up your *own* awareness of the positive experiences and growth that have already occurred. Verbalizing and celebrating this progress can foster confidence and create positive momentum for your child. Another advantage is that it encourages your child to set focused goals. Once these goals are set and an action plan is created, you have powerful touchstones to guide your communication with your child—you'll know what to follow up on and check in about.

What's more, a spring tune-up helps you give your child some extra personal accountability. S/he agrees s/he's going to take specific little steps to work toward specific goals, and so enters the last few months of the school year with a renewed sense of purpose. As your child moves through the spring, rather than just getting close to the end of the year, or getting closer to summer, your child is getting closer to a goal. You'll be able to look at any struggles your child encounters not as deficits, but as stepping stones in working toward that goal. Taking the time for a spring tune-up channels the energy of spring fever into positive, focused growth. Finally, a spring tune-up at home supports the work the teacher is doing to help your child at school.

Spring break should be a time for your child to rest, relax, play, kick back, explore, and have fun! A spring tune-up conversation need not be lengthy or heavy to be effective. While your reflection and planning may have the energy of a casual, lighthearted conversation, it can have a powerful impact on the rest of your child's year.

It may be helpful for you to draw on the following four-step process as a guide. As a teacher, I used this process with my students with tremendous results. (By the way, this process can help *you* with a powerful personal renaissance as well! Asking yourself these questions, both from a parenting lens and in looking at other areas of your life, may be beneficial.) This is just a jumping off point—a springboard, if you will. Whether or not your conversation ends up following this process, these tips will get you started.

1. Reflection: *Look back, “unpack,” and celebrate the year so far.*

To begin, choose a time when you and your child are relaxing together. Open with a celebration of all that your child has accomplished this year. Even if it has been a tough year in some ways, there is *always* something positive to highlight—something to celebrate. Really take the time to acknowledge the seven months your child has spent in school.

To start the conversation, consider saying something like, “I’ve been thinking...it’s March—there are still a few months in the school year—and you’ve already learned and grown so much this year!” Then, give a few specific examples. I suggest giving one academic example, one nonacademic/extracurricular/hobby example, and one social/emotional example. It is less important what you choose than it is that it’s specific and authentic.

For example:

You’ve become so much more fluent and confident with your basic addition and subtraction facts!

You’ve written poetry that gives me goosebumps!

You’ve showed such hustle in soccer.

Your artwork has been so creative.

You’re more patient with your sister.

You’ve made a new friend.

You’ve had a really tough time with _____ but you didn’t give up! You’ve shown a lot of persistence and determination this year!

Next, invite your child to reflect and share his or her own sense of accomplishment, change, growth, and points of struggle, using some of the reflection questions below. Know ahead of time: some of these questions might be a challenge for your child to answer. Rather than be discouraged by an “I don’t know,” know that there’s value just in *initiating* the conversation and *inviting* the reflection.

Sample Questions

- What are you most proud of so far this year?
- How have you changed since the beginning of ___ grade?
- How have you grown in (*subject area, social area, or hobby/extracurricular*).
- What are you struggling with?
- What has been the most challenging part of ___ grade?
- What has been your biggest success?

As your child speaks, celebrate the accomplishments and acknowledge the struggles.

2. Vision: *Look forward and create goals.*

After reflecting over the year so far, move on to create a vision for the rest of the year. You might segue by saying, “I’m also wondering what you’ll do next!” If you already make New Year’s Resolutions as a family, framing these new goals as spring resolutions (or Renaissance Resolutions, to get a little fancier) may make sense to your child.

You might say, “Spring break is a time you get to decide who you want to be for the rest of the school year. You get a little fresh start, and you get to decide what you’re determined to accomplish!” Especially when it has been a hard year, or when kids have been struggling through a late-winter slump, I’ve found that many children are surprised and encouraged to hear that they can choose to make a fresh start.

Sample Questions

- What do you want to get better at?
- What are you looking forward to/what are you most excited about?
- When you look back on the end of ___ grade, how do you want to feel? What will you have accomplished that will make you feel that way?
- What are your friendship goals?
- What are your learning goals?
- What are your (*fill in hobby, passion, non-academic class, or extracurricular activity*) goals?

Again, if your child has trouble articulating goals, don't lose heart. While many children are asked to create goals at the beginning of the school year and even in the new calendar year, your child may not be used to taking "springtime stock" this way, at this time of year. Some kids need a lot of help with goal setting no matter *what* the time of year! If you find yourself muddling through the process, remind yourself that you don't have to do this perfectly for it to have value. Think of this conversation as an investment; encouraging and empowering your child to set personal goals is a gift that will reap benefits well beyond the spring.

3. Action: *Plan steps to bring those goals into reality.*

Help your child to choose just two or three goals to work on. Even one is a good start! For each of the goals your child articulates, help your child create a concrete plan to work toward it.

Sample Questions

- What's one thing you can do to work on that goal of (*describe goal*)?
- What little tiny action could you take every day in order to make progress?
- What are three things you can do to get closer to that goal?
- You said that on the last day of school you want to feel ____ about your year. What can you do between now and then so you'll feel that way?
- How committed are you to doing that?

It's important to take the time to help your child break down a big or vague goal like "be nice" or "get better at reading" into specific steps, like "use a calm tone when I speak to ____" or "read 30 minutes every day after school." Your child needs your scaffolding and support in making an actionable plan.

4. Share the goals with your child's teacher so s/he can be on the lookout for progress.

The teacher will likely appreciate that you've helped your child gear up and focus for the end of the school year, and be more likely to notice and reinforce the positive choices your child is committed to making. Your child will get more positive reinforcement when his or her teacher is tuned in to the tune-up—which can help to strengthen your child's commitment. In sharing your child's goals with the teacher,

you also create the opportunity to get more focused feedback on how s/he's progressing.

Here is one possible email/note script for you:

Dear (Teacher's Name),

I hope you had an enjoyable spring break! I wanted to let you know that ___ and I had a great discussion over spring break about his/her accomplishments so far and his/her goals for the rest of the school year. S/he is most proud of (insert achievements/pride points). S/he has decided s/he wants to (insert goals here). In order to achieve that, s/he's committed to (insert steps here). Would you be willing to (insert request here)?

[Example 1: ___ has set a personal goal of being more confident and fluent with her math facts. She has committed to practicing her multiplication facts for 10 minutes every night. Would it be okay for me to check in on what difference you're noticing every couple of weeks?]

[Example 2: ___ wants to end the year feeling like he has been nice to everyone. He has set a goal of speaking kindly to classmates—especially to ___ and ___, with whom he's had some friction. Would you be willing to keep an extra eye out and let me know if you notice him being particularly kind?]

Thank you so much—I am really happy to be able to partner with you. I appreciate any feedback you can give me, and let me know if you have any goals for ___ that I can support at home.

Best,

(Your Name and Contact Info—even if the teacher has it, it's helpful to include it!)

Including the teacher in your child's spring plan helps both you and the teacher best support your child, and invites productive and positive communication between and among all points of the teacher-parent-child triangle.

Children grow and change so much in the course of a school year! In March, it's amazing to realize that the boy or girl you dropped off at school in September is not quite the same boy or girl you see in front of you today.

Some of the most important seeds you and your child can plant in springtime are new hopes and dreams that can grow from April through June. Use spring break as a chance to help your child regroup, reflect, and resolve. Taking the time to reflect, envision, and plan during the break sends your child the message that there is important work and growing to be done yet! In doing this, you also offer your child one of life's greatest gifts: an opportunity for a fresh start.

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