

Envisioning a new school year

Have a vision, then create a game plan for you and your child's accomplishments this next school year

BY JOE BRUZZESE

"Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success." — Henry Ford

What is your vision for the school year? Is academic achievement at the top of the list or will this be the year your child breaks out of his social shell? Will your family grow closer or more distant as they face the challenges of another school year? Who will guide your child's development?

A vision defines a direction toward a goal. Realizing a vision requires support from a motivated group of individuals; a team of people, who band together through adversity, inspire motivation and acknowledge achievement. Who's on your team? According to the United States Census Bureau today's generation of school-age children spend the majority of their waking hours in the care of someone other than their parents.

Given the influence that teachers, coaches, mentors and extended family members have on a child's development the necessity for building a relationship with this group of people has never been greater. Creating a team of focused and motivated individuals who will continually support the ongoing growth of your child requires a new set of parenting skills.

Here are five steps to building your support team.

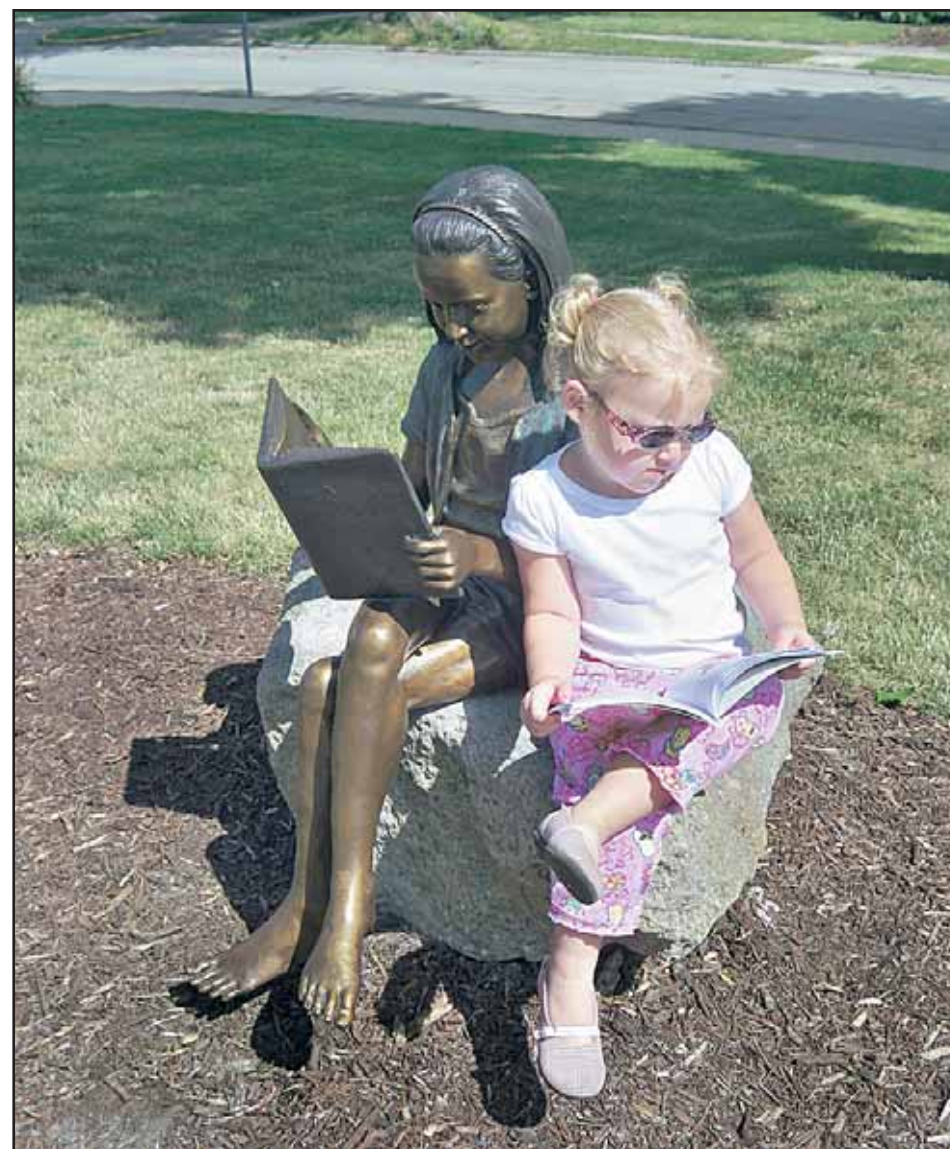
1) Create a roster. Create a list of the adults who will connect with your child during the first months of school. Teachers, school administrators, coaches,

mentors and extended family members are common additions to most team rosters.

2) Position the players. With a completed roster in place, identify when and where your child will see these critical people. Identifying who will supervise your child beyond the conclusion of the school day creates an accurate picture of your child's life and the role that each adult will play this year.

3) Connect. During the first few weeks of school take two minutes to communicate with each person on your roster. Send a written note, e-mail message or share a quick conversation in person. The message to convey is short yet sincere, "Hi, I just wanted you to know how excited I am to have you in my child's life this year." This quick introduction sends a powerful message to everyone on your team about the importance of their role on your child's life.

4) Check-in. Don't wait until a problem arises to initiate a conversation. Every two or three weeks check-in with each of the people on your roster. Start the conversation with, "How are you?" and then let the discussion flow from there. Beginning with an open-ended question allows the conversation about your child to evolve naturally. Leading questions like, "How was her behavior today?" or "Were there any problems?" bring immediate focus to a potentially negative set of comments that result in creating greater distance between parents and key adults in



BARBARA BALDWIN

NAOMI SCHROEDER IS "READING WITH A FRIEND" outside the Ligonier library. This photo was taken in July by her grandmother, Barbara Baldwin of Kendallville.

their child's life. The opportunity to share positive comments or questions is lost amidst the negativity.

5) Celebrate. Reaching milestones and achieving goals is cause for celebration. Placing a quick call to your child's teacher after the conclusion of a long term project or class play shows acknowledgment and appreciation — two characteris-

tics of supportive teams. The more often team members celebrate together the stronger the relationship grows.

Bringing the valued members of your team together both, at home and in the community, allows your vision to become a reality. Celebrating the fulfillment of a vision inspires motivation for continued success. Enjoy the year ahead with your family.



GRACE HOUSHOLDER

ARTIST PEGGY TASSLER, owner of Sozo Art Studio in downtown Kendallville, and volunteers from Parkview Noble Hospital, Kendallville, helped to design and paint learning paths on the sidewalk at Bixler Lake Park in Kendallville. The project, which provides "teachable moments," was part of the United Way of Noble County Day of Caring in July. Trying out the new hopscotch are Ryan Johnson, 6, and Carmen Johnson, 10.

United Way creates Learning Path

BY KRISTEN JOHNSON

Education is the key to getting a good job with a solid income and health care benefits. Children start learning at birth; and the foundation for future learning is laid in the first few years. Disadvantaged children come to school at least two years behind their peers in pre-reading skills, and most never catch up. By third grade, a child's grades and absenteeism rates can predict with 90 percent accuracy whether he or she will complete high school.

That's why United Way has put a stake in the ground on education. The United Way of America has set a goal to cut the number of high school dropouts in half by 2018. They've issued a challenge to all 1,300 United Ways and their community partners to find ways in their own communities to foster an early and life-long love of learning.

In response to this challenge, this year during their Day of Caring event, United Way of Noble County partnered with Sozo Art Studio in Kendallville to

create a "learning path" at Bixler Lake Park. We wanted to create a sort of adventure for families with children who visit the park. So, we came up with three different fun activities that parents can do with their children.

Peggy Tassler, owner of Sozo Art Studio, created the artwork to make the activities come to life. Each "path" offers an opportunity for parents to teach their children something different in a way that is fun and interactive. One path that incorporates shapes, colors and numbers, another path teaches measurement. There's also a path that teaches children how to identify animal tracks from different species of wildlife that can be found in the park.

Studies show that children's brains develop more quickly before the age of 6, so we want to develop a variety of learning tools for this age group that are free and available to the public in family-friendly locations such as parks and libraries.

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