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The New Homework (Revised)

Parents and Children Together on the Web

By Jamie McKenzie

[\(about author\)](#)

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Note: This article first appeared in **FNO** in 1997 and has been revised to match current Web trends and other developments.

You may download a PDF version of this article suitable for printing by [clicking here](#).

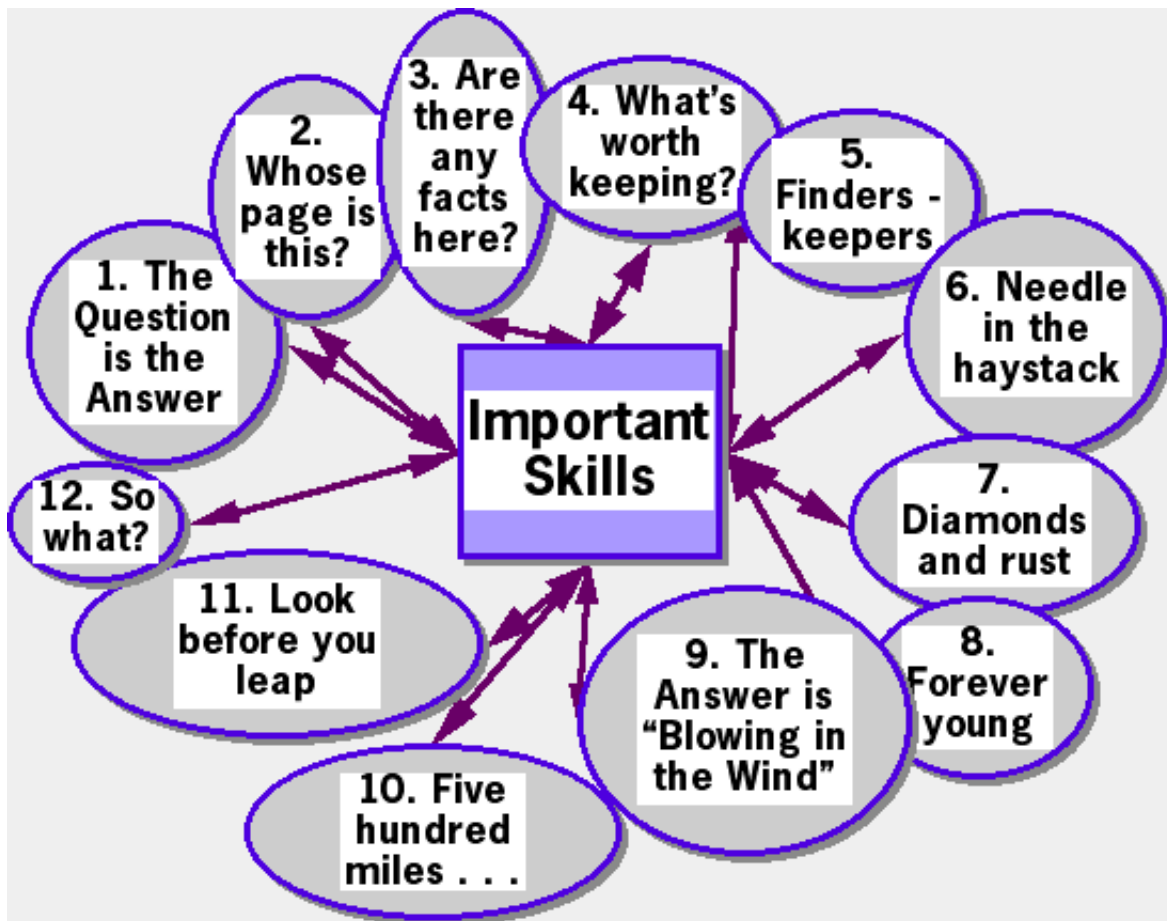


Parents can play an instrumental role in showing young children and adolescents how to explore their worlds, whether they be the rain forest, the beach, the glories of good books or the new digital landscape now available in many homes; yet recent reports suggest that parents rarely know little of their children's Internet activities, assuming that they are doing school research when they are often otherwise engaged.

This article offers a dozen activities parents might enjoy with their children to strengthen their information skills and enhance the value of time they spend on line. Schools and teachers are encouraged to make copies of this article to use in partnership with families to help us all avoid what Todd Oppenheimer recently called "The Flickering Mind" in his new book by that title.

Click on an activity in the cluster below or pick one

from the list.



Introduction

The Internet has proven frustrating and disappointing at times. We were told it would offer a gold mine of information, but all too often it seems more like a landfill. The nuggets are too few and too far. It turns out that books and libraries are still incredibly important and any parent should balance time on the Net with learning that involves printed materials and real world excursions. It would be a shame if our children only tasted a rainforest on the Net.

With "The New Homework" we are extending skill building practice outside the classroom:

- Building literacy skills
- Strengthening strategic reading
- Practicing inferential reading
- Preparing to meet curriculum standards

Why bother?

We seek a generation capable of . . .

- Handling info-glut, info-garbage & info-tactics
- Avoiding virtual truths
- Making up their own minds
- Solving problems
- Developing new ideas

Activity Number One - The Question is the Answer

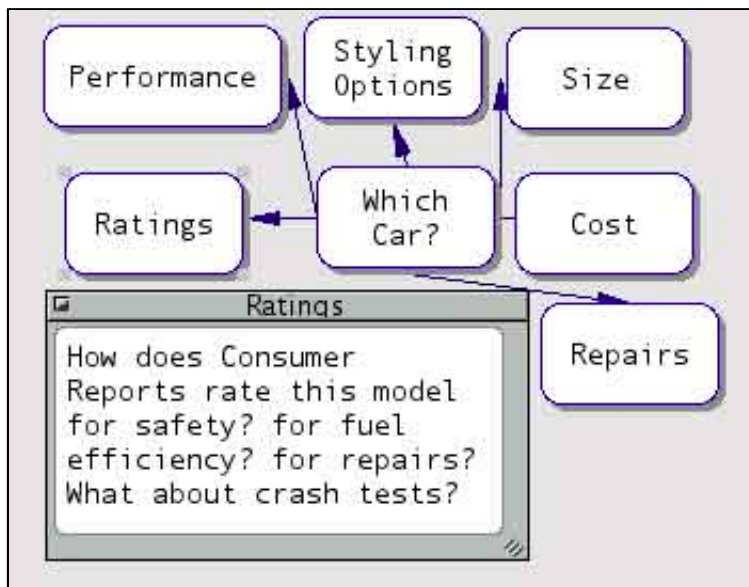
The most important tool for building answers is questioning. The more thorough and thoughtful the questions posed before and during the research, the greater the chance that the investigation will lead to insight.

Task:

Begin with a choice your family is about to make. Let's say your family wants to buy a new car or a new TV. Maybe you are thinking of a vacation.

Before you jump onto the Internet and begin your search for information, challenge your child to think of as many questions as possible while you type them or write them down. Questions beget questions. They are like families. For most important questions, you can easily list a hundred or more subsidiary questions, many of which can be grouped by category. In the case of a new car, questions might group under **cost**, **performance**, **styling options**, etc.

You might want to create a cluster diagram using a program like Inspiration™.



Once you have a healthy list of questions, keep your list open so you can enter relevant findings as you encounter them. Your child learns the importance of planning before researching. In addition, the act of searching becomes more structured as the skills of note-taking are introduced - note-taking which is channeled by the questions posed. When children are quite young, the parent can do most of the typing. As they reach upper elementary and middle school, they should be performing most of this questioning and note-taking themselves.

For more help with questioning, visit <http://questioning.org>.

[Index](#)

Activity Number Two - Whose page is this?

Many of the sites on the Internet are promotional. They often exist to sell an idea or a product. Young people need to learn how to identify the company, the organization, the special interest group or the person who published the information they are reading. Then they need to ask whether or not they have an ax to grind or a bias to promote.

Task: Decide with your child a controversial topic such as "global warming" and then Google for 10 sites to find a list of a dozen or more sites which include information about your issue.

Open each site and then ask your son or daughter to identify the sponsor or author of the site. In many cases this will be quite a challenge as the promoters and sponsors are often interested in maintaining a low profile.

Ask your child if they can see any reason the author or the sponsor might have to twist the facts or engage in any propaganda.

Make sure your child knows the meaning of "propaganda" and some of its tricks such as "partial truths," appeals to emotion and fear, exaggeration, stereotyping, and references to authority. Point out examples as you encounter them.

Ask your child to rate each site for bias - as "high," "medium" or "low." To what extent does each site provide reliable information on the topic?

[Index](#)

Activity Number Three - Are there any facts here?

Because many sites are more interested in persuasion than education, you will often find that facts and information are lacking. Since our goal is to show young ones how to make up their own minds, they need to find sites which provide the raw materials, not just pages of someone else's insights and opinions.

Task: Make certain your child knows the difference between fact and opinion.

Repeat the process used in "Whose page is this?" to identify a dozen sites treating some controversial issue.

Print out pages from each of the sites and then take turns with a highlighting pen identifying facts on those pages.

Challenge your child to rate the "fact content" of each site just as the labels on food products now tell us the "fat content" of foods. Is it high, medium or low?

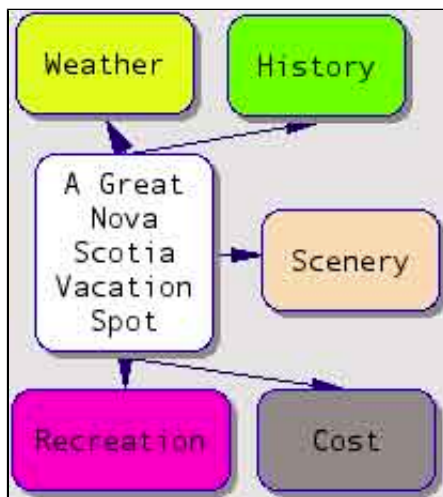
[Index](#)

Activity Number Four - What's worth keeping?

We have moved from an information-poor world to an information-rich society. Unfortunately, not all that glitters is truth.

We must teach our young ones to sort and sift carefully through the mountains of information, weighing carefully which ideas and which facts are most relevant to our original questions. It used to be that longer was better. Now we will see a shift to quality information and quality reasoning.

Task: Print out pages from several sites which relate to your research question - vacation resorts in Nova Scotia near the beach, for example.



Questions posed early in the search help determine which information is worth keeping. If you had five categories of questions about Nova Scotia vacation spots, for example, (the cost, the weather, the recreational opportunities, the local history and the scenery), provide a different colored marker for each category.

Take turns with each color. Give your son or daughter the color for recreation, for example, and let them hunt through the information until they find something worthy.

Before underlining any information, each player points it out and explains why they selected it. This gives you a chance to check your child's reasoning and share your own.

You and your child are laying the groundwork for the next activity which calls for saving information electronically.

[Index](#)**Activity Number Five - Finders - Keepers**

As much as possible we want our children to know how to take notes electronically, cutting and pasting when appropriate, paraphrasing when desirable. The information will be more valuable later on if it sits within the computer rather than being buried in a hundred pages of printed material. We want them to collect only information that is helpful and pertinent.

Task: Set up a word processor, database or cluster diagram with sections or fields within which you will be entering your findings. For the vacation exercise, for example, you may create a standard form for each resort which looks like this:

Resort Name:
Cost:
Recreation:
Weather:
History:
Scenery:

[Index](#)**Activity Number Six - Needle in the Haystack**

Sometimes we may need to find a very specific piece of information such as the temperature of a city we plan to visit the next day. Efficiency is paramount. We want our children to learn how to locate such discrete "correct answers" with a minimum of wheel spinning and time wasting. We also want them to understand the difference between *finding* an answer on the one hand and *building* an answer on the other hand.

Task: Brainstorm with your child a list of 20-30 fact questions that have correct and exact answers. What is the population of Seattle? China? What was the time of the winner of the Olympic marathon run? Hold a contest looking for answers.

For more assistance with searching consult "[Searching for the Grail](http://www.fno.org/jan98/searching.html)" at <http://www.fno.org/jan98/searching.html>.

[Index](#)**Activity Number Seven - Diamonds and Rust**

Not all findings are equally valuable. Some are real gems - diamonds, perhaps. They evoke an "Aha!" reaction. They are so startling and full of significance that they may create an avalanche of meaning, an explosion of insight or a burst of illumination. Others are ordinary and uninspiring. These findings may be ho-hum-drum and out-of-date. Rust.

Your child needs to keep an eye and a mind open for the gems. It is all too easy to miss the special findings while grinding away collecting, collecting, collecting.

Activity:

Pick a category such as "famous people from history."

Create a list of "targets" (i.e., Susan B. Anthony, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, etc.)

Take turns looking for startling insights about each person. Given 15 minutes on the Net, what's the most important and startling insight you can find about your person?

As each person reports their findings, they explain why they selected the information they are sharing, why it is more important than anything else they found.

[Index](#)

Activity Number Eight - Forever Young

Your children will make more productive use of their time if they can identify sites that were created with them in mind. Because many sites on the Internet are developed for an adult audience, reading levels are often quite demanding. Content can be very technical. Just because the site mentions the "tropical rain forest" doesn't mean your ten year old will be able to understand the substance or gather information and ideas which will contribute to understanding.

Unlike the public library, there is no clearly separate "children's section" on the Internet, yet, although many commentators and organizations have called for some such virtual separation of materials. Teach your children to start with lists of sites already identified as "kids sites," employ a "kids" search engine such as *Yahooligans* or *KidsClick*..

Task:

Using two different search engines, one for adults and one that is kid-oriented such as [Yahooligans](http://www.yahooligans.com/) (<http://www.yahooligans.com/>), conduct a search on each for an interesting "kid" topic such as "endangered species" or some sport that your child follows or enjoys.

Visit two or three sites with your child in order to find examples to fit the following difficulty ratings:

impossible
very hard
challenging

just right easy

Once you have agreed upon these ratings and your child feels ready to apply them, visit the top ten sites produced by each search engine and rate the reading level and difficulty of each site.

Compare the results for **Yahooligans** with the adult search engine. Which did a better job?

Return to the "hit list" of the adult search engine and see if it would have been possible to rate difficulty just from the content listed on the "hit list" without wasting the time to open and visit each site. Your goal is to strengthen your child's ability to make such choices independently.

[Index](#)

Activity Number Nine - The answer is blowing in the wind.

Children need some experience with puzzling questions whose answers may be "blowing in the wind" as the famous Bob Dylan song reminds us . . .

*How many years can a mountain exist
before it's washed to the sea?
And how many years can some people exist
before they're allowed to be free?*

The most interesting and most important questions in life often prove the most challenging. In some respects they may be unanswerable. Even though convincing, complete answers may be elusive and unobtainable, the questions remain central to human existence. Often these are dilemmas, paradoxes, conundrums, mysteries and puzzles that have inspired playwrights, poets and songwriters for thousands of years.

Children are born with a knack for asking such unanswerable questions, but they are too often trained to suppress them by adults who have little patience for such questions.

"How big is the sky?"
"Why do so many people shoot at other people?"
"Why do so many people take drugs?"

Nurture this questioning talent in your child. Capture and then explore together some of these questions using the Internet.

For more on supporting your child's questioning, read **Parenting for an Age of Information** at <http://www.fno.org/parenting/outline.html>.

Activity:

Spend some time making a list of unanswerable questions with your child. See how many each of you can contribute. Give several examples to help start the list.

"Why are some people dishonest and others extremely honest?"

"When is the next earthquake likely to strike near here?"

"How far does the Universe extend? What's on the other side?"

After you have 15-20 unanswerable questions, pick one to explore together. How would you begin to gain some understanding? Where would you look together? Remember that the goal is to build plausible guesses or theories. The research is intended to "cast light upon" or illuminate the issue or question, not identify final answers.

[Index](#)

Activity Number Ten - Five Hundred Miles

Children need to learn that discovery often requires persistence. For generations raised on the instant gratification of modern entertainment media, this can be a difficult lesson to learn. "I want the answer and I want it NOW!"

Unfortunately, the focus upon trivial pursuits and questions requiring simple factual answers has fostered a "fast fact" mentality akin to a "fast food" attitude that expects neatly packaged answers delivered hot and fresh at a drive up window.

How many of our children have the persistence to build a model plane or a model cathedral with hundreds of small pieces that can only be put together if one READs the DIRECTIONS? How many can build a complex idea over the period of several days or weeks?

Children must learn to "go the distance." The ability to stick with a tough thinking or learning task over time will give your child an important advantage in school and later on in life.

Activity:

Ask your child to identify a topic or a subject that they might enjoy "tracking" or following for several months. It might be a baseball team, a celebrity, a serious disease in search of a cure, a National Park policy on airplane flights in the Grand Canyon - anything so long as the interest level is high.

Take advantage of the "personal page" function of Internet news sites such as the **New York Times** or **MSNBC** to search for breaking news on this topic daily. Or use one of the ALERT programs available to seek out certain topics or stories.

Create a storage area on your computer where you and your son or daughter can save all of the articles and information you can find.

The collection of information may start as a general, "grab bag" process, but as the files build over time, major questions and categories will start to emerge that will guide you in setting up sub folders and directories.

It is important to do some of this collecting as a team, but you should also make certain that your child will take personal responsibility for monitoring the topic. When working as a team, you can coach your child toward deeper understandings by elevating the questioning process, by probing and looking for connections with previous findings, by challenging your child to identify patterns, trends and relationships.

"How does this latest development change the team's chances for the pennant?"

"If you were manager, what would you do now?"

"What would you predict about the next week or so?"

With time and due diligence, your child is gradually becoming an expert in a subject. She or he is learning to appreciate the benefits of learning something in great depth over time. Learning in depth is a lost art that you and your child can rediscover.

For more on this approach, consult "500 Miles" at <http://fno.org/500miles/persistence.html>

[Index](#)

Activity Number Eleven - Look before you leap (and honor books)!

Children need to learn the advantage of (sometimes) heeding the suggestions of experts and scouts such as librarians and newspaper columnists.

Task: Check out the local newspaper to see whether they have a special Internet column. Test recommended sites with your child. Are the suggestions any good? Is this a source you each might want to follow on a regular basis? Build a file of trusted favorites.

Model the skill of consulting an expert by asking for help with a search next time you visit the library.

[Index](#)

Activity Number Twelve - The Test of So What?

New information technologies make it very easy to gather information, but when will your child learn to digest and synthesize such findings? . . . to make up her or his mind about important questions? It is important that children learn to take a stand.

Task: Challenge your child to put findings into a presentation, a proposal or a

performance of some kind.

Encourage her or him to take a stand.

[Index](#)

[Back to November Cover](#)

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[From Now On Index Page](#)