

PTO, PTA...What's It All About?

By now, you've probably run through that [first day of kindergarten](#) a million times in your head. You'll load up that lunchbox, zip your kid into that jacket, and brace yourself for the big First Day Goodbye. Then you're supposed to get out of the way, right?

Well, not exactly! As a matter of fact, there's a whole other part of the school waiting to welcome you. In some schools, it's called PTA—a branch of the national Parent Teacher Association, which also lobbies on behalf of kids at the state and federal levels. In your school, it may be called PTO—Parent Teacher Organization, only loosely affiliated with any other groups like it—and now and then it's called something like the HSA, "Home School Association." No matter what the title, the general role is the same: parents regularly get together as volunteers to support the school. And they want YOU!



What do these volunteers do exactly? Specific projects will vary, and you should look for an introductory letter or email in your registration materials early in the year. But as a rule of thumb, you can expect that [parent-teacher groups](#) do whatever they can to promote successful community at your school. This covers anything from raising money, to organizing back-to-school coffees, to working with the teachers and principal on the school lunch program. And they always, always need parent help. As Jan Harp Domene, President of the National PTA, says, "All you need to do is fill out the form and I'll be knocking at your door."

As a new kindergarten parent, however, don't be surprised if all this hype seems a little, well, intimidating. What's the best way for you to get connected? Here's some advice from Domene, a 32-year PTA veteran, mother of three and grandmother of five; and from Tim Sullivan, father of four and founder and president of PTO Today, which provides resources for parent groups across the country.

1. Get Involved. Why does one of your children do his homework regularly and the other think of any excuse he can to avoid it? Why does one child excel at math and the other one dread it? As a parent, it can sometimes seem like an utter mystery what leads to student success. But while experts sometimes disagree as to what makes a child a lifelong reader, or what makes one shy and another outgoing, there's one area in which the research is absolutely clear: [parent involvement](#). That's why everyone from the PTA to the U.S. government itself has made it a top educational priority. "The research is clear," says Sullivan, "We know without a doubt that when parents get involved in schools, test scores go up, and dropout rates go down. Everyone does better." Whether you're ready to helm a huge parent event, or just bring paper plates to the fundraising barbeque, make sure that you find some way to participate in your school's parent group. Your kindergartener will be listening when you tell him school is important, but he'll also be watching. Show him with your actions that your family takes school seriously, not just with your words.

2. Think Out of the Box. Your parent organization probably has a slew of yearly events and traditions. And they'd probably love your help organizing them this year. But don't be put off if you don't see an instant match. Think about your skills, and about what you like to do. Offer them! "Background in accounting?" says Domene, "Wonderful! Baking? Terrific! I know dads that have set up chess clubs. I even know a dad that organized soccer every day at lunch and now he's been doing it for more than ten years." Whether you're a graphic designer who volunteers to redesign the school t-shirt, or a computer whiz who's ready to launch a PTA or PTO website, parent groups want your help and enthusiasm. These are volunteer organizations and if you're willing to start something new, most groups will be overjoyed to let you. Just be ready to take an active role when it comes to new endeavors, not just offer ideas about what *others* should do.

3. Pace yourself. Watching a child head off to kindergarten can be exhilarating, and you may feel tempted to dive in and volunteer for just about everything at once. Instead, cautions Sullivan, think long term. "You don't need to come in with guns a-blazing...find out how things work. Find something that fits your schedule and interests. Make it fit you, and make it last." It's better to volunteer for less things and be reliable, than volunteer for more and never show up.

4. Look for a mentor. Especially if you're just starting out at a school, says Sullivan, "Look for moms and dads who seem to volunteer in a way you'd like to do it." Get to know these folks and follow in their footsteps. Quite possibly, not only will you learn the ropes, you'll also make a new friend. Parent groups are a great way to help the school, but they're also a wonderful way to spread your wings socially. Domene, for example, is still in touch with parents and teachers from her children's very first years in elementary school, decades ago.

Ready to get involved? Go for it! Strong schools take partnership, not just leadership. As Sullivan says, "Great teachers teach the Three R's; great principals make good schools. And great parent groups make the difference between a big pile of bricks with teachers inside, or a real community."