

The Homework Dilemma

The Homework Dilemma: How Much Should Parents Get Involved?

Before discussing ways you can help your child with homework, it is important to discuss why teachers assign homework and how it benefits your child. Why do teachers assign homework? Teachers assign homework for many reasons.

Homework can help children:

- review and practice what they've learned
- get ready for the next day's class
- learn to use resources, such as libraries, reference materials, and the Internet
- explore subjects more fully than time permits in the classroom

Homework can also help children develop good habits and attitudes.

Homework helps children learn to be responsible and gives them a sense of control and accomplishment. It can teach children to work independently; encourage self-discipline and responsibility, and to manage time and meet deadlines. Children who spend more time on homework, on average, do better academically than children who don't, and the academic benefits of homework increase in the upper grades.

Just what kind of parental involvement — and how much involvement — truly helps children with their homework? The most useful stance parents can take, many experts agree, is to *be somewhat but not overly involved in homework*. The emphasis needs to be on parents' helping children do their homework themselves — not on doing it for them.

The basic rule is, "Don't do the assignments yourself." It's not your homework — it's your child's. It can be hard for parents to let children work through problems alone and learn from their mistakes. It's also hard to know where to draw the line between supporting and doing. Remember, don't confuse, "Helping with Homework" with "Helping"!

How to Help: Help Your Child Get Organized

Set up a Homework Schedule

Many children benefit from a set homework schedule. For some, the responsibility of deciding when to sit down and do homework is too difficult. These children may decide to do their homework after school or after dinner. This is a personal choice and has to do with *learning style*. However, once the time is determined,

the schedule should be adhered to as realistically as possible. This will also relieve the problem of having to "hunt down" or "corral" children to get them to do their homework. It may help to write out the schedule and put it in a place where you'll see it often, such as the refrigerator door.

Outside activities, such as sports or music lessons, may mean that you need a flexible schedule. Your child may study after school on some days and in the evening on others. If there isn't enough time to finish homework, your child may need to drop some outside activity. Homework must be a high priority.

The preset routine should also include a specified amount of time that must be devoted to schoolwork. This is very helpful for the child whose motto is "fastest is best" and also the one who "forgets" his homework because the child knows that he will be required to spend a predetermined amount of time doing something "academic." For instance, if your fourth-grader knows she's expected to spend an hour doing homework, reading, or visiting the library, she may be less likely to rush through assignments so that she can watch television. A required amount of time may also discourage her from "forgetting" to bring home assignments and help her adjust to a routine.

Schedule Breaks in the Study Routine

Break up the homework routine with short breaks for snacks or quick exercise. Set a time limit for the breaks.

Pick a Study Place

A desk is nice, but the kitchen table or a corner of the living room can work just fine. A study area should have lots of light, supplies close by, and be fairly quiet. Your child may enjoy decorating a special study corner. A plant, a brightly colored container to hold pencils, and some favorite artwork taped to the walls can make study time more pleasant.

Remove Distractions

Turn off the television and discourage social telephone calls during homework time. (A call to a classmate about an assignment may, however, be helpful.) Some youngsters work well with quiet background music, but loud noise from the stereo or TV is not OK.

Provide Supplies and Identify Resources

For starters, collect pencils, pens, erasers, writing paper, an assignment book, and a dictionary. Other things that might be helpful include glue, a stapler, paper clips, maps, a calculator, a pencil sharpener, tape, scissors, a ruler, index cards, a thesaurus, and an almanac. Keep these items together in one place if possible.

How to Help: Provide Guidance

Talk About the Assignments

Ask your child questions. Talking can help him think through an assignment and break it down into small, workable parts. Here are some sample questions:

- *Do you have everything you need to do the assignment? Ask to see any necessary books, worksheets, or teacher instructions.*
- *Have you ever done any assignment like the one you're supposed to do right now? See if your child has already done similar assignments that can guide her in completing this particular one.*
- *Also ask if your child has already spent time in class on this assignment, and if so, how effectively she used her time in school.*
- *Do you understand what you're supposed to do? After your child has read the instructions, ask her to tell you in her own words what the assignment is about.*
- *Do you need help in understanding how to do your work? If you understand the subject yourself, you may want to work through some examples with your child *. But let her do the assignment herself.*
- *What do you need to do to finish the assignment? Your child may want to talk through the steps with you (or make a written list of them, if he's able to), as described in the section above on good study habits.*

(* Note: One online resource for Homework Help for a wide range of subjects is www.kidbibs.com/homeworkhelp.htm)

Rank the Assignments

For some children, the decision about what to do first becomes a major chore. They may dwell over this choice for a long time. Other children use *horizontal perspective*. This occurs when everything takes on the same level of importance and no priority is seen. Use the due dates for assignments, as well as commitments to extra-curricular activities, guide you and your child in setting priorities.

If you choose to rank order, suggest which assignment to do first and so on. Many children tend to use a *quantity orientation* (number of assignments left) rather than a *qualitative orientation* (difficulty of assignment). This means that if they have five things to do, have them finish the four easy ones first. In their eyes, they have only one assignment left even though it may be a more difficult task.

Look Over Completed Assignments

Check to see that assignments are started and finished on time. Ask to see the assignment calendar if you are uncertain of the assignments. If you aren't home when the homework is finished, look it over when you get home.

Note on Using Computers

Most families have personal computers in their home. Computers can be a great learning tool and helpful for some assignments. However, you do not have to have a computer for your child to complete homework assignments successfully. Many children prefer using a computer to hand writing their work. As a parent, you can guide your child in making decisions about whether it is appropriate to use the computer, pointing out considerations such as computer availability (do other family members need the computer this evening?), time frame (when is this due?), and status of other pending assignments. For assignments using word processing, children may also need reminding to always do the typing of the text first, and then if time remains, then they can change the format, fonts, colors, graphics, and so on.

Give Praise

People of all ages respond to praise. And children need encouragement from the people whose opinions they value most—their parents. "Good first draft of your book report!" or "You've done a great job" can go a long way toward motivating your child to complete assignments.

Children also need to know when they haven't done their best work. Make criticism constructive. Instead of telling a third-grader, "You aren't going to hand in that mess, are you?" try, "The teacher will understand your ideas better if you use your best handwriting." Then give praise when a neat version is completed.

How To Help: Monitor Homework Sessions

Be Available

Elementary school students often like to have someone in the same room when working on assignments in case they have questions. If your child will be cared for by someone else, talk to that person about what you expect regarding homework. For an older child, if no one will be around, let him know you want him to begin work before you get home and call to remind him if necessary.

Allow Your Child Some Personal Space during the Homework Session

This is a big problem for some parents. Parents employing this technique are not only setting themselves up for tremendous frustration and anger, but they are also creating "learned helplessness."

Many parents will say that their children cannot work unless they are sitting next to them. It is not that many children are unable to work, but that they choose not to work. The work stoppage on the part of children occurs when a parent attempts to break away and no longer provides them with undivided attention. This "dependency" is very unhealthy because it is not imitated in the classroom. Consequently, such children may put off doing their classwork and bring the unfinished work home. In this way they may gain mom or dad's full attention.

If you are already locked into this type of situation, you should not break away all at once. You should *desensitize* children a little at a time. Sit at the end of the table for a few days. Then slowly increase the distance between yourself and the child's work until he or she is working alone. Remember, you can still "be available", yet provide your child some personal space to develop independence.

Avoid Doing or Finishing Assignments For Your Child

Some parents will complete an entire assignment for their children. While the parents' motivation may be helping their child finish a difficult assignment, the end result may be very destructive. Children tend to feel inadequate when a parent finishes homework. First, they feel a sense of failure. Second, they feel a sense of inadequacy since they can never hope to do the assignment as well as mom or dad. This can only foster increased dependency and feelings of helplessness on the part of children. As children advance through school, our goal is to nurture independent thinkers who take ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

And Finally - Accept the Challenge

Parents often send a message that a struggle with a homework assignment is a sign of a problem. We accept struggle in sports — when a young athlete practices lay-ups for hours, or drops a sweat-soaked jersey in the washer after a hard game — our response is usually pride, and "good job." But we seldom respond similarly to an academic challenge. "I was never very good at math either," we might say, observing our child encounter difficulties. Even the way we ask about the homework can imply an expectation that it will, or should, be easy. Instead, we can ask — conversationally rather than authoritatively — how they're doing, what they're struggling with, and offer suggestions of how to meet the challenge of the assignment.

By: Mrs. Raude - <http://teacherweb.com/FL/SunsetLakesElementary/MrsRaude/ap4.aspx>