

Homework: How Much Should You Help?



Strategies to make homework time easier for both you and your child, including when—and how—to lend a hand.

by Jennifer V. Hughes

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Homework is an important part of a child’s education, but it can also be the source of stress and conflict. You want your child to do well, but you hate being a nag. You want to help, but you don’t know how.

With all the homework hoopla, many parents feel they are the ones back in the classroom, but experts say it doesn’t have to be that way.

Why Homework Matters

Meredith Resnick, a learning specialist and educational consultant, has a line she uses both with clients and her 8-year-old son when it comes to foot-dragging over homework. “I already went to 2nd grade,” says Resnick, who works in New York City. “Your teacher wants to see what you can do.”

In addition to reinforcing what students learn in class, homework gives teachers an idea of how well children are learning and gives parents a window into schoolwork. In the early years, homework also helps students develop the time-management and planning skills they’ll need as the work gets more difficult.

It’s important not to cross the line between helping and doing, says Marina Koestler Ruben, who wrote *How To Tutor Your Own Child: Boost Grades and Inspire a Lifelong Love of Learning—Without Paying for a Professional Tutor*. “If the reason you want Fred Junior to conjugate a French verb is so that he gets an A, then you need to take a closer look,” Ruben says. “If the goal is for the child to learn, the parent will encourage a child to do his own work and catch his own mistakes.”

How Much To Help

One question many parents have about homework is whether to correct their child’s work. There are different opinions on this, so ask your child’s teacher what she prefers.

Resnick suggests leaving the original with mistakes and then working with your child on the correct answer. Nancy Buck, a parenting expert and developmental psychologist based in Rhode Island, believes that children should take responsibility for checking their own work. “It’s the child’s business,” Buck says. “If the purpose of homework is to help them learn, then it’s the child’s job to figure it out. Your job is to support your child.”

Have a Plan

Some children benefit most from doing homework as soon as they get home from school; others need some downtime first. Some do better working in their room alone; some thrive at the kitchen table. You know your child best, so follow your instincts when establishing a routine.

Having a plan in place can lead to fewer homework hassles, says Audrey Klein, a private tutor and former classroom teacher from Chicago. “It helps so that you’re not arguing later,” she says. “They know it’s homework time, so let’s get to it.”

Setting up a plan doesn't necessarily mean you won't have any homework struggles, though. If a homework plan doesn't work, parents should change it, Buck says. "You tell the child, 'Let's try again. I know we can set it up so that when homework time comes, you can do it and feel good and I don't have to nag,'" she says.

Homework Strategies

It's one thing if your son makes an error on an assignment but another if he simply isn't trying hard enough and you know he can do better. For example, if he describes a book with the sentence "It was nice," Klein suggests replying with "Give me another word instead of 'nice,' something more specific."

"You can brainstorm with them," Klein says. "That's one of the wonderful things a parent can do, to give that one-on-one help."

Ruben says that when a child hits a roadblock in a homework assignment, a parent should first consider whether the student is tired or hungry, and work to prevent those common issues. Children also can worry that a parent will be judgmental. "You can't take it personally if your child is having trouble," she says. "You have to be able to disengage. Parents can be quick to say 'Why don't you remember this? What's your problem?' That doesn't help."

Switching gears is often helpful when a child gets stumped on an assignment, for example by talking out an essay before trying to write it. Switching parents can help, too. There is nothing wrong with taking a break.

If a child—or a parent—doesn't understand a particular assignment, write the teacher a note, suggests 3rd grade teacher Christy Bastos. That communication is one way she knows that what she's teaching is getting across.

"If I get seven kids...circling number seven and saying they don't understand it, I know I didn't do a good job communicating on something," says Bastos, who teaches in Washington, Pa.; teachers sometimes assume that "no news is good news," she says.

Most important, resist the urge to do your child's homework for her. Mom and Dad helping out too much may make it easier day to day, Bastos says, but it can be a barrier to learning.

Finding the Right Approach

Kathy Woods knew how it was supposed to go with homework in her house. Her son would sit peacefully and quietly at the dining room table with his pencils neatly lined up, and she would help as needed. “I had this whole June Cleaver idea for it,” says Woods, who lives in Teaneck, N.J., with her family of three boys—an 8th grader, a 2nd grader, and a 3-year-old.

Her oldest son had other ideas.

From the time he started to get homework, it was a huge battle, says Woods of her 13-year-old son, Jordan, who has been diagnosed with mild ADHD. “I thought that sitting there with him, it would be easier for him, but it didn’t work,” she says.

“I was doing a little bit of the helicopter parent thing, and I was annoying both of us,” Woods admits. “I felt that was what a good mother would do, but I was getting on my own nerves. I knew there had to be a better way.”

As her son got older, he started to be able to come home from school on his own while her other boys were at day care or with a babysitter. “Left to his own devices, he’d come home and sprawl out in the middle of the family room and listen to the most hideous rock music I’d ever heard”—Woods pauses for dramatic effect—“and he would get his homework done.”

She says she still checks his homework and she has found that most of the time, he is doing a great job. Her middle boy, 7-year-old Destin, does need the quiet of his room to study, but she’s realized that what Jordan needed to succeed was to set his own rules.

“The more responsibility I give him, the better he does,” she says. “When I hover, he’s like, ‘Fine, you do it.’ He gives the minimum amount of effort. That’s something I had to do, to give up worrying about the process as long as he gets it done.”

Teaching Responsibility

Janae Condit says she’s had a range of problems—and solutions—dealing with homework and her now 5th grade son, Colin, over the years.

For a while he would drag his feet, making homework take forever. She tried setting a timer, but he then rushed through and did sloppy work. Now she just insists that it’s done by 6 p.m.

He was always forgetting things, like books, from school. Condit instituted a new rule: For every forgotten book, Colin had to go to bed an hour earlier. His memory got better.

Condit, who lives in Beverly Hills, Mich., with Colin and his three younger siblings, hired a tutor to help him work on his study and organizational skills, a move that worked in unexpected ways. “He hated the tutor,” Condit says with a laugh. “We wouldn’t let him off the hook until he improved.”

In fall 2010, Condit let her son hand in homework without her checking it, so if he made mistakes he’d lose credit. “His grades suffered because of it, and I said, ‘We did it your way, now we can do it my way,’” she recalls. “He needed me to step in a little.” She checked his work in the second semester, then he went back to doing it on his own and was doing much better work. Best of all, Condit says, her son is proud of his work now.

“Before, he wouldn’t care less; now it’s the first thing he wants to show me when he comes through the door,” she says. “I think he’s really starting to take responsibility, and it’s really great.”