

Helping Children with Homework

Making it easier for kids and parents

The number of hours kids spend on homework each week increased almost 50 percent between 1981 and 1997, according to the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The increase in homework often creates tension and frustration for both parents and kids. Here are a few suggestions for helping kids with their homework and making the process less stressful for all of you.

Create a "homework space" — To help your kid focus, set up a clean, well-lit table or desk that has all necessary supplies and few distractions.

Set a "homework time" — Help your child make a calendar of all activities for each coming week so you can plan daily homework times. During homework time, turn off the TV and don't allow phone calls.

Take a break — Allow time for kids to unwind after school. And throughout homework time, encourage your child to stretch or switch to a different assignment periodically. **Be available** — Making yourself available to answer questions during homework time helps your child feel supported and more confident in her efforts. If a caregiver watches the kids during homework time, talk to him or her about how to handle homework. Remind older students who are home alone what time to start homework and when you'll be available to help.

Help your kid find a study buddy — Discussing tough assignments or quizzing each other may help both buddies understand and remember the information better. (Best for students in 4th grade and up.)

Dealing with homework problems

Despite all your preparation, your child may still struggle with homework. Check to see if any of these common factors could be causing the problem.

Unclear assignment — Ask if your child understands what the assignment's asking for and if he understands how to do it. He may be confused by the instructions or may need to learn more about the subject.

Overwhelming assignment — If your child sees the assignment as too big, break it into manageable parts. Do the first question or problem with your child, providing encouragement at each step. Then tell her to do the next three by herself and that you'll come back and check them.

Procrastination — Get the toughest assignments out of the way first while your child is most alert. The remaining assignments will be less threatening.

It's tempting to correct the homework for your child, but don't. The teacher needs to see that he isn't understanding the assignments. You may want to attach a note to the homework assignment to ask the teacher for one-on-one help.

And even though many children are stubborn or defiant when it comes to homework, avoid punishing. Punishment does not motivate children to do their best on homework, and they may learn to see homework itself as a punishment. Motivation to learn can only be achieved through encouragement and self-discipline.

The best way to encourage good homework habits is to praise effort and independence, even if she doesn't get everything correct the first time. When giving praise, do it often and immediately, and be specific about exactly what you are pleased with (i.e., sticking to homework time or working independently).

Talking to the teacher

Your child's teacher may be able to help with homework problems. Consider contacting the teacher if:

- Instructions are unclear.
- You can't provide needed supplies.
- The assignments are too hard or too easy.
- Your child regularly has too much homework.
- Your child has very little homework. Find out if the teacher is not assigning homework, or if your child is failing to report assignments to you.

Approach the teacher with a cooperative spirit. Most teachers genuinely want to help you and your child, even if you disagree about something. Don't go to the principal without giving the teacher a chance to work out the problem directly.

By helping your children get organized, providing encouragement and praise, and partnering with their teachers, homework time should be less of a struggle for all of you.

Getting help

If you decide your child would benefit from one-on-one tutoring ...

- Explain to your child why you think a tutor is needed and what a tutor does.
- Ask your child's teacher or other parents for recommendations. Involve your child in face-to-face interviews with several tutors. (If your child is a part of the process, he/she will be more open to accepting help.)

- Observe your child working with the tutor. The session should include hands-on learning.

Request periodic reports from both the tutor and your child's teacher. There should be noticeable academic improvement within five to seven weeks.

And these free online resources can help students of all ages:

Kid-oriented search engine www.tekmom.com/search

Homework advice for parents www.familyeducation.com

Math advice by grade level www.mathforum.org/dr.math

Study guides for several subjects, with particular strength in English
www.sparknotes.com