

Homework Without the Fuss

by Patti Ghezzi

Homework can be humbling for the involved parent. How is it that the boy who's always gotten straight A's brings home a teacher's note saying he hasn't been submitting his homework on time? How about the daughter, so organized when it comes to her American Girl doll collection, who manages to lose her homework before she can turn it in? Or the child who tells you five minutes before bedtime that a report not yet started is due the next day?

Homework has a way of bringing out a child's tendency toward procrastination, sloppiness, and selective amnesia. Some parents get so frustrated, they're tempted to become copilots, sitting next to their kids and working through every math problem in tandem.

But there is a better way, says Lee Hausner, coauthor of *Homework Without Tears* and a former psychologist with the Beverly Hills school district. "It's not something you have to have a nightly fight about," she says. "Homework is the responsibility of your child, period. Their job is to do homework, and you're there to set the stage."

Hausner recommends setting a designated time for homework. If your child says he doesn't have any homework, he can read, write in a journal, or play outside instead.

She also suggests using a daily assignment sheet on which your child can check off each assignment as it's completed. Likewise, kids can benefit from a long-range planner to help break down large projects into manageable pieces. "So two days before the project is done," Hausner says, "we don't have screaming and shrieking."

Practical Parents

Ernest Brown, an Atlanta father who is closely involved with his four kids' schooling, says dealing with homework has shown him how different his children are from one another. The oldest has always completed homework without delay because the work comes easily. His second son procrastinates and needs a more rigid schedule. Then there are his twins: One is self-motivated, the other needs a nudge.

"We expect our children to do their homework and come to us if they have questions or need clarification," Brown says. "We are firm believers that homework is their responsibility."

For the children who need prodding, Brown helps structure the homework session. "We look at the number of problems and allocate a reasonable amount of time for completion," he says. "Then we use checkpoints to see how they are coming along." The strategy has helped them budget their time better on both short- and long-term projects.

Suburban Atlanta mom JoAnn Vitelli makes sure she's close by when her 5th grade son, Miles Badie, does homework. But she doesn't hover. "We have an understanding; I am available for him as needed," she says. "I don't answer the phone, so he knows he has my attention if needed."

Vitelli never takes over a troublesome assignment, however. "When he was younger, he had a habit of asking if it was correct after every problem," she says. Vitelli made a point of breaking that habit; now, she checks only the first few math problems to make sure Miles is on the right track.

Another tip: Vitelli keeps the phone numbers of classmates handy in case the assignment isn't clear.

The years of consistency and structure have kept homework from being a time of tears and arguments, even when Miles' parents are the ones requiring extra work. "He tends to rush through things a bit," Vitelli explains. "When he knows it's not for a grade, he gets a bit lazy. We have had him redo papers."

Control the Chaos

The homework wars rage even in homes with good students and smart children. But homework fatigue isn't necessarily a sign of learning disabilities or a defiant character.

Many problems are related to organization, not academics, says Ruth Peters, a clinical psychologist in Florida and the author of *Overcoming Underachieving: A Simple Plan To Boost Your Kids' Grades and End the Homework Hassles*. Parents are busier these days, often with both of them working. And kids are in more activities than ever, making it that much harder to stay on top of schoolwork.

Peters recommends parents invest in a homework organizer folder. "Have the child put the daily assignment sheets in the right-side pocket; all papers to be completed, filed, or thrown away in the left-side pocket; and all work to be turned in to the teacher stays in the center pocket," she explains. This way, all the homework is kept together and is less likely to disappear between the time your child leaves the house and arrives at class. "Don't stick the math homework in the math textbook," Peters says.

Parents have battled with children over homework since the days of the one-room schoolhouse. The best way they can help is to give their kids the proper tools. "You can't get your homework done," says Peters, "if you don't have the right materials."

6 Steps to Homework Success

- Designate a regular time for homework.
 - Use daily and monthly planners to stay on track.
 - Be aware of differences in learning and organization styles.
 - Make yourself available, but don't hover.
 - Keep contact information for classmates at hand.
 - Organize and consolidate completed assignments.
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