

Avoiding Homework Wars

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Does your child always have a problem finishing homework correctly within a reasonable amount of time? Do you have to survive a battle or devote a lot of your time and help each night? Do you question why your child has to do homework at all? If your child has learning or attention problems, it's likely you and your child have faced such challenges. Understanding the purpose of homework — and learning strategies for managing assignments effectively — can be of great help to you and your child.

What Is the Purpose of Homework?

Homework gives your child a chance to practice what she's learned in school. It's not supposed to teach new concepts or skills. Practice is important because it helps your child master important skills. All too often, however, the kids who need the most practice are those who find homework to be harder, take longer, and raise negative feelings. Start by making sure your child understands what the assignment is and the directions for completing it. Next, find out if she has learned enough at school to do the assignment on her own. If your child has problems in either of these areas, schedule a conference with her teacher to develop a home-school communication system. One example would be an assignment sheet that the teacher reviews with the child and sends home for the parent to read and sign off on.

Where Is It Done?

For some kids, a small desk where supplies can be stored is the best place to do homework. In other homes, the kitchen table may be the best place. Wherever your child works, you should be able to check to see if she's sticking to the task, especially if she has problems with concentration, and be able to offer encouragement.

When Is It Done?

For some kids, right after school is the perfect time to do the work because the assignment is fresh in their minds. Others need a break before they can tackle more school work. Sometimes team sports, a parent's work schedule, or other activities interfere with doing homework immediately after school. With your child's input, you may need to develop two plans: one for the usual day and one for unusual events. When you agree on the plans, write them down.

If your child usually resists homework, make sure it doesn't immediately follow an interesting, rewarding activity (e.g., skateboarding with friends, playing a computer game). That can make the task look even more distasteful. Instead, transition her from fun activities to activities less enjoyable but also less difficult than homework. For example, ask her to bring in the mail, then ask her to set the table, and follow that with a request to help you tear lettuce for the salad. This is called "behavioral momentum," getting your child to do tasks that are not hard and are rarely resisted before you ask her to do something challenging. The idea is to create a distance from the fun activity to the more difficult one by inserting small, neutral tasks. Resistance is less likely if the momentum of compliance is built first.

How Much Time Should It Take?

If your child has problems focusing on a task, writes slowly, or needs more time to understand concepts, homework can take a lot longer. No wonder she protests, tries to delay, hides the work, or doesn't turn it in at school! Sometimes just your sympathy can help.

Be sure the amount of time she's expected to work at home is appropriate for her age. Some schools, for example, expect 30-45 minutes per night in the early grades, increasing to one hour in late elementary school and two hours by middle school. Learn about your school's homework policy for each grade level.

By keeping track of how long it really takes your child to do her homework, you'll have specific information to share with her teachers. If the amount of time exceeds the school's homework policy, meet with her teacher to discuss what accommodations might be made to help your child succeed with homework.

How Can Parents Help?

- Remember that homework is a form of practice, so don't expect your child to do all the assignments perfectly. Reassure her that everyone makes mistakes and that mistakes help guide the next steps in the learning process.
- Encourage your child to talk to you about what she finds hard or confusing. Listen to her ideas on what would make homework easier.
- Model and help your child learn good organization and time management skills.
- If assignments seem endless, break them into smaller parts. For a young child, fold worksheets into two or three parts to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed. For older students, have them highlight sections of the assignment in different colors, green — first part, yellow — second part, red — last.
- Visually communicate progress towards completion. Take a small strip of paper and divide it into four to eight parts. Periodically, come by with an encouraging word and draw a star or make a check in one of the sections. The chart and homework should be completed at the same time. Then give her a reward, such as a "high 5" or a hug.
- Let her choose a pleasurable activity she can do immediately following homework, e.g., playing a game with the family, listening to a favorite story or CD, talking to a friend on the phone. Make sure the activity is one she's chosen so it motivates her to finish the work.
- Above all, try to keep negative emotions out of interactions around homework. If you're feeling challenged by your child's frustrating behavior, try to find out the causes.



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