

Helping with Homework



Wondering how to help your children with homework — or how to get them to do it without a struggle? Here's how.

What's the point of homework? “Homework is designed to help students reinforce key concepts, process and solidify new information, provide time for extra practice of skills, and reflect on how much they've learned,” notes teacher Susan Becker, M. Ed. However, approaches to homework vary from district to district, school to school and teacher to teacher. Some schools don't give children homework until the 2nd grade, others start in kindergarten. Some teachers create original homework, while other use or modify prepared work sheets.

Don't do the homework for your child. Most teachers use homework to find out what the child knows. They do not want parents doing their children's homework but do want parents to make sure homework is completed and review any mistakes to see what can be learned from them.

Don't take over your child's projects. Teachers do not want parents doing their kids' projects. Instead, they want parents to support their kids' learning and make sure they have what they need to accomplish a task. Check with your child's teacher for his policy and review it with your child. Set up a good space to work. All children need the same thing: a clean, well-lit space. But keep in mind that each child may work differently; some will do their work at the kitchen table and others at their desks in their rooms.

Pay attention to your child's rhythms and help him find the right time to begin his work. Some children will work best by doing homework right after school; others need a longer break and must run around before tackling the work. Most will need a snack. If your child does after-school activities, set a homework time before or after the activity, or after dinner. Whatever routine you choose, help your child stick to it.

Find out how your child studies best. “You should find the ways your child likes to study. For example, some kids will learn spelling words by writing them out, others by closing their eyes and picturing them and saying them aloud,” advises teacher Susan Becker, M. Ed. “The sound environment is also important,” adds Michael Thompson, Ph.D. “Some kids may want to listen to music, some are helped by being in the middle of noise, others need absolute quiet.”

Don't hover — but stay close by. Keep in mind that it's their homework, not yours, but remain available in case you are needed. “The ideal set up would be for a parent to be reading nearby while the child is studying because then you both are doing your educational work together, but that's not always possible,” says Michael Thompson, Ph.D. “A parent may be working out of the home, or need to be working in the home and cooking dinner. So if you are home, stay close, and if you are not there, have another adult check to make sure it's going OK. And remember that all homework is not equal, so not everything will need your rapt attention.”

Limit media exposure. Turn off the TV and the iPod when your child does homework and the computer too, unless it's being used for research. You might start by asking how much time he thinks he should spend on this, and negotiate from there. Remember, you have the final word. And keep in mind that if you watch TV when your child can't, the plan may backfire.

Let the teacher know if you gave your child a lot of homework help. “If your child needs extra help or truly doesn't understand something, let the teacher know. Write on the assignment, ‘done with parental help,’ or write a separate note,” advises Michael Thompson, Ph.D. If your child resists, explain that homework is used to practice what you know and to show the teacher what you need help learning more about — so it's a parent's job to let the teacher know.