

Homework Tips for Parents

Homework has been a part of students' lives since the beginning of formal schooling in the United States. However, the practice has sometimes been accepted and other times rejected, both by educators and parents. This has happened because homework can have both positive and negative effects on children's learning and attitudes toward school.

100 Years of Homework

In the early 20th century, the mind was viewed as a muscle that could be strengthened through mental exercise. Since exercise could be done at home, homework was viewed favorably. During the 1940s, schools began shifting their emphasis from memorization to problem solving. Homework fell out of favor because it was closely associated with the repetition of material. In the 1950s, Americans worried that education lacked rigor and left children unprepared for the new technologies, such as computers. Homework, it was believed, could speed up learning.

In the 1960s, educators and parents became concerned that homework was crowding out social experience, outdoor recreation and creative activities. Two decades later, in the 1980s, homework again came back into favor as it came to be viewed as one way to stem a rising tide of mediocrity in American education. The push for more homework continued into the 1990s, fueled by rising academic standards.

To Do or Not To Do Homework?

Homework can have many benefits for young children. It can improve remembering and understanding of schoolwork. Homework can help students develop study skills that will be of value even after they leave school. It can teach them that learning takes place anywhere, not just in the classroom. Homework can benefit children in more general ways as well. It can foster positive character traits such as independence and responsibility. Homework can teach children how to manage time.

Homework, if not properly assigned and monitored, can also have negative effects on children. Educators and parents worry that students will grow bored if they are required to spend too much time on schoolwork. Homework can prevent children from taking part in leisure-time and community activities that also teach important life skills. Homework can lead to undesirable character traits if it promotes cheating, either through the copying of assignments or help with homework that goes beyond tutoring.

The issue for educators and parents is not which list of effects, the positive or negative, is correct. To a degree, both are. It is the job of parents and educators to maximize the benefit of homework and minimize the costs.

Is It Enough Homework?

The most critical question about homework is "How much homework should students do?" Experts agree that the amount of homework should depend on the age and skills of the student. Many national groups of teachers and parents, including the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), suggest that homework for children in kindergarten through second grade is most effective when it does not exceed 10-20 minutes each day. In third through sixth grade, children can benefit from 30-60 minutes of homework per day. Junior

high and high school students can benefit from more time on homework, and the amount may vary from night to night.

Reading at home is especially important for young children. High-interest reading assignments might push the time on homework a bit beyond the minutes suggested above.

These recommendations are consistent with the conclusions reached by many studies on the effectiveness of homework. For young children, research shows that shorter and more frequent assignments may be more effective than longer but fewer assignments. This is because young children have short spans of attention and need to feel they have successfully completed a task.

Types of Homework

Homework assignments typically have one or more purposes. The most common purpose is to have students practice material already presented in class. **Practice** homework is meant to reinforce learning and help the student master specific skills. **Preparation** homework introduces material that will be presented in future lessons. These assignments aim to help students learn new material better when it is covered in class. **Extension** homework asks students to apply skills they already have to new situations. **Integration** homework requires the student to apply many different skills to a single task, such as book reports, science projects or creative writing.

In particular, math homework has been shown to be more important in the middle to high school grades and less important in the elementary grades. It starts to become important in the fourth grade and is increasingly important in the upper grades.

How Parents Can Help with Homework

Research also shows that parent involvement can have either a positive or negative impact on the value of homework. Parent involvement can be used to speed up a child's learning. Homework can involve parents in the school process. It can enhance parents' appreciation of education. It can give them an opportunity to express positive attitudes about the value of success in school.

But parent involvement may also interfere with learning. For example, parents can confuse children if the teaching techniques they use differ from those used in the classroom. Parent involvement in homework can turn into parent interference if parents complete tasks that the child is capable of completing alone.

When mothers and fathers get involved with their children's homework, communication between the school and family can improve. It can clarify for parents what is expected of students. It can give parents a firsthand idea of what students are learning and how well their child is doing in school.

Research shows that if a child is having difficulty with homework, parents should become involved by paying close attention. They should expect more requests from teachers for their help. If a child is doing well in school, parents should consider shifting their efforts to providing support for their child's own choices about how to do homework. Parents should avoid interfering in the independent completion of assignments.

As this brief introduction suggests, homework can be an effective way for students to improve their learning and for parents to communicate their appreciation of schooling.

Because a great many things influence the impact of homework achievement, expectations for homework's effects, especially in the earlier grades, must be realistic. Homework policies and practices should give teachers and parents the flexibility to take into account the unique needs and circumstances of their students. That way, they can maximize the positive effects of homework and minimize the negative ones.

GENERAL HOMEWORK TIPS FOR PARENTS

- **Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to do homework.**
Avoid having your child do homework with the television on or in places with other distractions, such as people coming and going.
- **Make sure the materials your child needs, such as paper, pencils and a dictionary, are available.**
Ask your child if special materials will be needed for some projects and get them in advance.
- **Help your child with time management.**
Establish a set time each day for doing homework. Don't let your child leave homework until just before bedtime. Think about using a weekend morning or afternoon for working on big projects, especially if the project involves getting together with classmates.
- **Be positive about homework.**
Tell your child how important school is. The attitude you express about homework will be the attitude your child acquires.
- **When your child does homework, you do homework.**
Show your child that the skills they are learning are related to things you do as an adult. If your child is reading, you read too. If your child is doing math, balance your checkbook.
- **When your child asks for help, provide guidance, not answers.**
Giving answers means your child will not learn the material. Too much help teaches your child that when the going gets rough, someone will do the work for him or her.
- **When the teacher asks that you play a role in homework, do it.**
Cooperate with the teacher. It shows your child that the school and home are a team. Follow the directions given by the teacher.
- **If homework is meant to be done by your child alone, stay away.**
Too much parent involvement can prevent homework from having some positive effects. Homework is a great way for kids to develop independent, lifelong learning skills.
- **Stay informed.**
Talk with your child's teacher. Make sure you know the purpose of homework and what your child's class rules are.
- **Help your child figure out what is hard homework and what is easy homework.**

Have your child do the hard work first. This will mean he will be most alert when facing the biggest challenges. Easy material will seem to go fast when fatigue begins to set in.

- **Watch your child for signs of failure and frustration.**
Let your child take a short break if she is having trouble keeping her mind on an assignment.
- **Reward progress in homework.**
If your child has been successful in homework completion and is working hard, celebrate that success with a special event (e.g., pizza, a walk, a trip to the park) to reinforce the positive effort.

READING HOMEWORK TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Have your child read aloud to you every night.
- Choose a quiet place, free from distractions, for your child to do his nightly reading assignments.
- As your child reads, point out spelling and sound patterns such as *cat, pat, hat*.
- When your child reads aloud to you and makes a mistake, point out the words she has missed and help her to read the word correctly.
- After your child has stopped to correct a word he has read, have him go back and reread the entire sentence from the beginning to make sure he understands what the sentence is saying.
- Ask your child to tell you in her own words what happened in a story.
- To check your child's understanding of what he is reading, occasionally pause and ask your child questions about the characters and events in the story.
- Ask your child why she thinks a character acted in a certain way and ask your child to support her answer with information from the story.
- Before getting to the end of a story, ask your child what he thinks will happen next and why.

MATH HOMEWORK TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Encourage your child to use a daily math assignment book.
- Follow the progress your child is making in math. Check with your child daily about his homework.

- If you don't understand your child's math assignments, engage in frequent communication with his or her teacher.
- If your child is experiencing problems in math, contact the teacher to learn whether he or she is working at grade level and what can be done at home to help improve academic progress.
- Request that your child's teacher schedule after-school math tutoring sessions if your child really needs help.
- Advocate with the principal for the use of research-based peer tutoring programs for math. These tutoring programs have proven results, and students really enjoy them.
- Use household chores as opportunities for reinforcing math learning such as cooking and repair activities.
- Try to be aware of how your child is being taught math, and don't teach strategies and shortcuts that conflict with the approach the teacher is using. Check in with the teacher and ask what you can do to help. Ask the teacher about online resources that you can use with your child at home.
- At the beginning of the year, ask your child's teacher for a list of suggestions that will enable you to help your child with math homework.

May 2003

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, Educational Partnerships and Family Involvement Unit, *Homework Tips for Parents*, Washington, D.C., 2003.