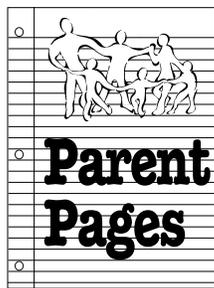


Helping Children with Homework



Some experts argue that a child's homework is a private affair between the child and the school, and advise parents to encourage direct communication between child and teacher but to avoid forcing, bribing, or cajoling the child into doing homework. Children who fail to do their work are expected to learn from the "natural or logical consequences" that occur in school.

On the other hand, parents are bombarded with requests to "play an active part" in their children's education, and teachers react with anger or despair when parents resist becoming involved.

What is the parent's role?

Common sense suggests that the most effective approach for parents of elementary school-aged children probably lies somewhere between the two extremes. It is not helpful to children if parents do homework for them or tell them step by step exactly what to do. It is also not helpful to let a child struggle with schoolwork without success and without support. One way parents can be helpful is to provide space and time for study. If it is not possible to provide the young student with a desk, parents can promise that the child will be undisturbed at the kitchen table at a certain time each night. This communicates that the parent considers homework an important activity. Parents can also turn off the TV, keep younger children away from the study area and minimize distractions during homework time.



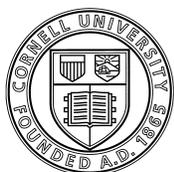
If a teacher calls to enlist parental help in getting children to do their homework, the parent can say, "Thanks for calling. I appreciate your concern, and I'll talk with him tonight about ways to get the work in on time." To the child, a parent might say, "Your teacher called this afternoon because she is concerned about you. Apparently you are not turning in the homework she expects. I told her we'd try to come up with a plan that will make it possible for you to do your work. What kind of a plan can you suggest?" Children can sometimes come up with unexpected suggestions. One girl suggested that she not be allowed to watch TV until her homework is done, and a boy said he would set his alarm for an hour earlier in the morning so he could "work while he was fresh."

Parents can provide support to their students in the following ways:

- ◆ Establish a comfortable study environment place.
- ◆ Create comfortable homework routines and a flexible schedule.
- ◆ Discuss assignments with the child.
- ◆ Save articles from magazines, newspapers or websites that are relevant to study topics.
- ◆ Take the child to a library or museum.
- ◆ Introduce the child to people who are knowledgeable about a subject.

Encouragement of this kind should, in the long run, be more effective than a system of specific rewards and punishments.

~Continued~



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Children need a special place to do homework

Children need space to be alone, to read and think. They need a place of their own, a consistent place, a place that provides privacy and order. While having a place in the home that provides a feeling of privacy is important for children for many reasons, that place is especially important for helping children do well with their homework and their education in general. Having a private place in the home reduces anxious behavior and increases educational achievement for the child.

Creating such a place for each child does not require private bedrooms. Space in other areas of the home can be adapted to suit a child's educational needs. It's important to identify space as the child's space, the place where homework is done.

If the child does have a private bedroom, the room should contain a desk and bookshelves specifically for homework. If the room is shared with a sibling, the child's desk or worktable might be screened off with a curtain or bookcase placed to create visual privacy to enhance concentration. Make sure work areas are well lit and that the child has pencils, pens, dictionaries and other tools needed for successful completion of homework projects.

If bedrooms are too small, a kitchen table or dining table can be used as the homework place. Set a time each day when homework is to be done, and make sure the table is cleared of all objects except those the child needs for homework. Make the rest of the family understand that this space, for a certain amount of time, is the child's and it is to be used only for homework. Encourage the rest of the family to avoid causing distractions.

If the workplace is dual functional, such as a dining table, also be certain the space includes a storage area where the child can keep personal work tools such as pens and rulers and books. A shelf can be installed over the table or a drawer in the table can be used for this private storage.

It's important that children have this private place where they can leave school things to enhance the feeling that it is their own homework place. It also saves time if they can store things, rather than having to find and collect them each night before they sit down to do their homework.

If space is so tight that the only place children can do homework is in the living room, then the family should establish a quiet time each night, when the television is NOT turned on and people using the room are limited to reading or other quiet activities. Again, make sure the area in the room set aside for homework also contains a permanent storage space for the child's school things.

Parents as role models for learning

Parents may also find it helpful to remind themselves that children are great imitators. If they live with adults who read and talk about what they read, if they are encouraged to join discussions in which each person's ideas are listened to with respect, and if they can be with adults who can say "I don't know" and then demonstrate ways to find answers to questions, children usually grow up with the skills they have observed.

Finally, parents can remind themselves that a love of books can be very contagious. Making regular family visits to the public library, reading aloud to children as often as possible, encouraging questions and discussions, reading books your children enjoy, and recommending your own favorites will not only help your children in school but will establish them as life-long learners.

Source: Jennifer Birckmayer, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, and Lorraine Maxwell Department of Design and Environmental Analysis, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

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