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Healthy homework habits start early

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It would be nice if our children could go to school then have the remainder of the day to do only fun activities, play and be free from responsibility. However, the reality is that everyone has responsibilities and everyone who goes to school has to do homework. It may take a few minutes or a few hours, it may be easy or difficult, it may be something your child willingly does or it may feel like a nightly battle.

If the homework process in your home is smooth sailing, you may not have any questions or feel a need to read any further. However, as school psychologists at elementary schools, we often encounter parents who have questions and are searching for effective ideas of how to make homework a better experience.

Here are some of the most frequent questions we are asked to address.

Why do children need to do homework?

Homework provides students with practice of newly learned skills and an opportunity for reinforcement of already learned concepts. In addition, homework is a tool for helping students establish good study habits and time management skills that allow them to plan ahead and meet deadlines. Homework is also used as a means of helping students catch up on missed work due to an absence.

How do I make homework time go more smoothly?

1. Establish a routine

One of the best things you can do to help homework go more smoothly is to establish a predictable daily homework routine. Pick a time of day that generally works best for your family's schedule and your child's individual needs.

Try to plan ahead for events that may interfere with your regular schedule such as doctor appointments, family gatherings, sports practice, etc. Some children prefer to start homework immediately after school while still in the "school mode." For most others, it is best to re-energize first by taking a short break (15 to 30 minutes or so) or having a snack before starting homework. Think about who will be present to help answer questions during homework sessions if your child needs this type of support.

Whatever your schedule is, keep in mind that the later in the evening it is, the more tired your child will be. A tired child is often irritable and less able to focus and remember information, causing the homework session to be longer and more difficult.

2. Designate a homework place

Find a designated homework place that will work for your family. Involve your child in this process. Generally speaking, it's best to find a place that is quiet and free from distractions, as much as possible, to allow for better concentration. Television, music and even other siblings can be distracting.

Consider whether your child works best alone, or whether your child needs others, such as an older sibling or an adult nearby for support. If help is needed, many families find the kitchen table to be the best place so an adult can offer occasional support or reminders to stay on-task, all while getting dinner ready or doing other chores. Be sure that whatever workspace you choose has good lighting.

3. Make homework supplies easily accessible

We know that children can waste a lot of time tracking down needed materials for homework, so have homework supplies ready in advance. Try putting the most commonly used supplies in a handy homework bin

or box that can be stored near their workspace or easily brought to the workspace. Such supplies might include extra paper, pencils, a dictionary, highlighters, a calculator, a ruler, scissors, or a stapler. Some parents even equip their child's workspace with a set of earplugs to help reduce distracting noises. Many children enjoy helping to prepare this "homework supply kit."

4. Create a game plan

At the start of each homework session, come up with a game plan:

- Have your child refer to their assignment calendar or homework packet to see what needs to be done.
- Figure out what books and supplies are needed.
- Prioritize and pick the order of the assignments. It may be helpful to begin and end with easier assignments, and sandwich difficult assignments in the middle.
- Build in short breaks (5-10 minutes) if the homework session is expected to be lengthy or you know your child has difficulty sustaining attention.

How much time should my child spend on homework?

Many teachers use the general guideline of 10 minutes per grade (10 minutes for first grade, 20 for second, etc.). Researchers find that average students will have approximately 10-45 minutes per day of homework in grades one through three, and 45-90 minutes per day in grades four through six (Zeith, T.Z. & DeGraff, M., 1997). Of course, homework time can vary greatly depending on the teacher (even within the same grade level), grade level and individual student. It is important to note that there can be wide variability within a classroom for the time it takes each student to complete the same assignment. What takes one child 20 minutes may take another child an hour.

What can I do to support my children with their homework?

The ultimate goal is to get children to do their work independently; however, this is a behavior that takes time to be developed. As parents, your role is to nurture this skill by encouraging your children from the first time they receive homework or as early as possible. Following are suggestions you may wish to employ:

- Remain in close proximity to assist your child when a question or problem arises.
- You may need to help your child get started on their assignment by reviewing the task and making sure they understand the directions.
- If needed, work through the first few problems together.
- Be sure to review your child's work when completed for accuracy.
- Refrain from making negative statements during homework sessions. Your child will respond more positively to statements such as, "You are showing great improvement," or "I can tell you are trying really hard on this assignment."

Natural consequences, such as grades, are sufficient motivators for some children, but not for others. Some children may need extra support and incentives, in addition to verbal praise, to maintain momentum with their homework. It is important to keep in mind that what motivates one child may not motivate another. Be sure to choose incentives that are meaningful to *your* child. Incentives also need to be reasonable; therefore, do not offer a reward unless you are certain you can provide it. Explicitly state what the child needs to accomplish to earn a specific pre-determined reward. Once your child is working independently, phase out the rewards but always continue with verbal praise and encouragement.

Additional strategies that may be helpful when homework time becomes a battle include the following:

- Build in breaks. This may be set for a specific time interval, such as every 15 minutes, or may follow the completion of a particular activity.
- Build in choices, such as the order in which they complete the assignments.
- Chunk assignments into smaller parts so that it is less overwhelming.

- Make homework time into a game. Set a timer for a reasonable amount of time, and see if the student can correctly finish the homework before the timer goes off.

Lastly, teach your children that once their homework is completed, it needs to be put away and ready for the next day. It should be in the appropriate folder or binder, packed up, in the backpack, near the door and ready to grab in the morning. Be sure to include all necessary materials for a successful school day including any eye glasses, special projects or supplies, homework planner and school books.

Where do I go if I have questions or concerns?

Many teachers provide weekly newsletters with information about upcoming assignments or tests. Some teachers have their own Web sites that you can access and often provide links to additional Web sites that may be helpful. Have your child exchange phone numbers with a classmate so there is someone to call if your child has a question during the evening or on a weekend.

You should contact your child's teacher directly if you are concerned about the amount of homework, the level of difficulty or the length of time it takes to complete the homework. You should also contact the teacher if your child has a habit of not bringing home necessary materials, does not know what to do, or does a poor job and has many errors on the homework. The teacher is your partner in educating your child and will often have very simple and practical suggestions that may alleviate homework difficulties. Teachers welcome parent support and will work with you to help your child be successful and have a great learning day, at school and at home.

Additional Resources for more information:

Canter, L. (1993). "Homework without Tears." New York: Harper Perennial.

Keith, T.Z., & DeGraff, M. (1997). "Homework in G." Bear, K. Minke & A. Thomas (Eds.)

"Children's Needs II: Development, Problems, and Alternatives," (pp. 477-487). Washington, D.C.: The National Association of School Psychologists.

Romain, T. (1997). "How to Do Homework without Throwing Up." Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.