

# HOMWORK HASSLES

## TIPS FOR PARENTS

"How was school today?" "Fine." "Do you have any homework?" "No." End of discussion. Right? Wrong!

For many parents tired from work and driving children to activities, the news that there is no homework to supervise may be music to their ears. But we all know better than that. Remember, we live in a time of deep worry over the quality of our children's education as we enter the "Information Age" and move into a new century.

Still we wonder why kids, who have already been doing academic work for seven hours, have to do more at home? As I see it, there are at least three very good reasons for homework. First, homework is a review of things learned in school. Second, homework is an opportunity for children to practice the self-discipline of independent mental effort. In other words, homework is a good example of the kind of "maturity / independence / responsibility" activity that children need so much. Third, homework offers parents an opportunity to show their support of and interest in their children's education by monitoring the study session, going over papers, and, even, teaching.

OK, if homework time is such a good experience for everybody, why is it so often such an ordeal? To answer this question we must look at human nature in general and at the specific dynamics of each parent-child relationship. Each parent-child relationship is unique. Existing power struggles in that relationship will be triggered when parents begin exercising their authority to get their children to do homework. And, don't forget homework is "work" and most of us would usually rather play than work. You can expect some resistance and conflict over homework even if the relationship is a good one. If the relationship is a difficult one, you will surely butt heads over homework. I offer the following general tips for coping with homework hassles:

- **Prepare** for the switch from play to work. Ten minute before "Homework Time" begins, announce, "Homework in ten minutes." Let your child have time to unwind after school before starting homework – time for a snack or TV or telephone calls or playing outside. In some families homework doesn't start until after parents get home or until after dinner. I recommend this if schedules permit. That way parents are there to monitor the homework session or help if needed.
- **Redefine the goal of homework time** from "getting it done" to spending a meaningful period of time at home doing mental work. Call it "Brain Time" if you want. This means that, if the student says, "I don't have any homework", say "OK, good; then spend 30 minutes exercising your brain doing something like reading in a chapter book, writing a letter to grandparents, organizing your rock collection, or measuring ingredients for making cookies." If the child accepts the idea that they will have to spend at least 30 minutes doing something serious anyway, their reason for manipulation and rushing is gone.
- **Use a timer.** When "Homework Time" starts, enter the time for that Study Period on a microwave or kitchen timer. Mechanical timers that "BEEP" are very useful to indicate when work periods and break periods begin and end. For an elementary school student, 10 minutes "On" - 5 minutes "Off" - 10 minutes "On" -

5 minutes "Off" - 10 minutes "On" may work well. Parents should adjust the length of work and break periods to suit their child's grade and his or her capacity to stay focused. To avoid arguments, inform the child that the "timing device" is the last word about when breaks begin and end. Additional rules include: no TV, no radio, and no phone calls during work times.

- **Breaks periods** in the homework session can be used for snacks, play, or to return phone calls. A five-minute TV break might work in some homes; but I do not advise trying it. In fact, I recommend that any TVs in the house that are "on" be far away from the student. This may seem unfair to the person who wishes to watch the "Big TV" in the family room if it is right next to the breakfast nook. But, TV is a "brain magnet". No student can focus on homework while "MTV" is playing fifteen feet away.
- I recommend that **work sessions** be conducted at the dining room table or the breakfast table so that work can be closely monitored and help can be given as needed. Studying in their room may work terrifically for those children who are earning good grades and work well independently.
- A **consistent routine** should be established and maintained. If you allow bargaining and compromising, this only encourages the student to begin negotiations that will eat up a lot of time. Praise your student's effort and cooperation. Try not to set up a system where you let them off early for getting finished quicker unless you are seeing much higher grades. If they are done with only two work sessions, use the third period for reading, letter writing, packing their book bag, or even a household chore.
- **Helping.** If your child runs into an assignment that they don't understand, try to help patiently. Avoid losing your temper. Have the name and phone number of the teacher(s) and a fellow student in each class on a list. Many teachers are happy to receive brief calls at their homes in the evening from parents. Some are not. Calling a fellow student can help if an assignment is forgotten or misunderstood. If nothing seems to help, let it go, with a decision that you or the student will try to pursue it with the teacher the next day.

Some children and parents have extreme difficulty working together on homework. Children with learning disabilities or attention span problems can become frustrated and defiant when traditional methods are not succeeding. It may be beneficial to hire a tutor with experience with special needs students for a while to work through these stumbling blocks. Even when the student does not have learning difficulties, some children and their parents simply push each other's buttons so much that homework time becomes a huge battle. "Tag Team Parenting", where the struggling parent backs out and gets the fresh parent to step in, may help. Good Luck!

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