

Hints to Help Reduce Homework Stress

By Cathy Vatterott

Homework. Children and parents alike often dread the thought of it. Whether the trouble is a child's lack of homework skills, unclear parental expectations, or simply too much homework, a variety of problems may result: family squabbles, poor grades, and the hindrance of academic progress. If you're a parent whose evening stress level is directly related to how much homework "we" have tonight, there are a number of changes you can make so that homework is more manageable and productive.

If your child has trouble completing homework without help, find out why.

Homework that cannot be done without help is not good homework. Homework stress often comes from the child's frustration and avoidance of tasks that make him or her feel incompetent. If your child cannot complete homework without help, talk with him or her to determine if the assignment is too hard, if the directions are unclear, or if he or she didn't understand the information or skill when it was taught in class. If your child truly doesn't understand the assignment, send it back incomplete and ask that the child not be penalized. Simply write a note to the teacher indicating "Jason didn't understand how to do these problems. Please explain this to him again and allow him to redo the assignment." This action will give the teacher valuable feedback about your child's learning.

Staying caught up with assignments is critical. If your child consistently fails to complete homework, find out how homework is graded and how much it counts in the overall grade. Find out if homework can be turned in late, and ask the teacher to inform you weekly of missing assignments.

Talk with the teacher if you feel homework is excessive.

How much homework is too much? Both National PTA and the National Education Association endorse the 10-minute rule, which states that the maximum amount of homework (all subjects combined) should not exceed 10 minutes per grade level per night. That is, a 1st-grader should have no more than 10 minutes of homework, a 6th-grader no more than 60 minutes, and a 12th-grader no more than two hours.

Unfortunately, children differ in the amount of time it takes them to complete homework. The teacher may think he or she has given a 20-minute assignment, but one child may finish it in 20 minutes while it takes another child an hour. If homework seems excessive, let the teacher know the amount of time your child spends on each assignment.

Ask for individual adaptations for your child.

Most teachers are accustomed to modifying or shortening homework assignments for special education students. But children who take medication for attention deficit disorder, bipolar disorder, anxiety, or depression may also have trouble focusing on homework and may need adaptations. Some children without learning problems or special needs simply have no mental energy left at the end of the school day. These children are entitled to adaptations, too.

Individual children also vary from day to day in their ability to complete homework. Sometimes they are too tired or just can't concentrate. On those occasions, write a note excusing your child from homework, and expect your wishes to be honored.

Stop putting homework on your to-do list.

If your child has an appropriate amount of homework that he or she understands and is capable of doing, this next step should be possible. Weaning your child off your help isn't easy-but it can be done. Even elementary school children can learn to work independently. Start with a straightforward discussion: "It's time for me to quit helping you with your homework" or "Mom's not taking algebra this year." Let your child know you will be available for proofreading, finding simple math mistakes, or writing a note to the teacher if he or she doesn't understand an assignment.

To reinforce that homework is your child's job, not yours, allow your child some control over how, where, and when he or she will do homework (see the box above for more on these topics). Even very young children can have input in these decisions. Ask questions to encourage your child to take charge of the job: "Where would be a good place to work? What things should be there? Where should you put your homework when you are finished?"

Stand up for your right to a balanced family life.

When you add classroom time to homework time, school-age children should not be working longer than an eight-hour day. Children benefit when their time outside of school includes not only academics but play, productive hobbies, family time, and downtime. You can encourage balance in your child's life in three ways:

Allow your child some downtime. "Unproductive" activities, such as watching TV, listening to music, or taking an hour to get ready for bed, actually rest the brain while allowing it to process the day's events. Both children and adults need downtime to recharge for the next day.

Consider limiting your child's outside activities. If you feel your child has no downtime, he or she is probably overscheduled. Maybe homework wouldn't be so stressful if it weren't sandwiched between numerous outside activities. Ask your child to rank the importance of each activity in which he or she is involved and to choose at least one activity to temporarily eliminate.

Make family time a priority. Most busy parents try to plan quality family time, but often the best family time just happens. It happens when families are not rushed, when there's no agenda. Ask your child's teacher and principal to honor family time by limiting daily homework, especially on weekends and school holidays.

The Where and When of Homework

Where: Some experts caution against the kitchen table: Help is too convenient. Wherever children decide to do homework, they should have to physically move and come to you if they need help. This encourages independence. A quiet place for doing homework is not best for every child. Some children actually concentrate better with distractions. For those children, doing homework while listening to background music may actually work. Even if homework takes longer to complete this way, if your child works independently, accurately, and without a battle, it may be worthwhile.

When: Each child has different times of the day when learning is easier or harder. For instance, many children do not work well right after school but can easily focus after dinner. The main rule should be that homework must be done by a certain time in the evening so it doesn't interfere with the child's bedtime routine. Getting adequate sleep should never be compromised for homework. If homework is not completed by bedtime, write a note to the teacher asking that the assignment be excused or shortened or that extra time be allowed for your child to complete the work.

Cathy Vatterott, PhD, is a professor of education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and a nationally recognized expert on the topic of homework. She is a former teacher and principal, and the parent of a college freshman. She can be reached at vatterott@umsl.edu.

<http://www.pta.org/programs/content.cfm?ItemNumber=1411>