

Solutions to Five Common Homework Challenges

By Jeanne Shay Schumm and Yvonne D. Perry

I'm sure you've heard it before:

- "Mom, Dad, I didn't do my homework because you forgot to remind me."
- "I left my assignment at school."
- "The teacher didn't give me any homework."
- "I can't do my homework because it's too hard."

Are you pulling your hair out yet? Wait. Before you become follically challenged, you should know that there are answers to your homework headaches.

The home-school relationship

The relationship between the home and the school is important. If you want your child to achieve academic success, you must become involved in the educational process. Here are some ways to develop a good attitude toward homework in your child and a high-quality relationship with your child's school:

- Talk to your child about school. Does your child understand why he goes to school? Discuss how school is one way that children discover who they are and who they may become. Talk to your child about what he likes and dislikes about school and why. Let him know that he can always come to you with problems.
- Communicate with your child's teacher. Plan to meet with the teacher at least three times a year to discuss your child's progress. Once a relationship is established, it is easier to examine difficult issues, if they arise.
- Learn about the curriculum at your child's school. The more you know about what will be taught in the classroom, the better you will be able to help your child with homework.
- Find out what the school or district homework policy is. It will take the guesswork out of determining whether or not your child has homework.

Homework challenges

Following are five challenges parents frequently face when working with their children to complete homework assignments, as well as suggested responses.

1) "My daughter forgets her homework on purpose so she won't have to do it."

This is a fairly common problem. What you choose to do depends on the reason your daughter is "forgetting" her homework:

- Your daughter may not understand the importance of homework assignments. Quite often, children don't understand why homework is assigned or how doing it (or not doing it) affects their understanding of the material and their grades. Arrange for a meeting with your daughter, her teacher, and you. Ask the teacher to explain the purpose for homework in his or her class, how it is scored, and how it factors into the final grade.
- The homework may be too difficult. Confer with the teacher to determine whether your daughter is capable of handling the assignments. If she isn't, try to find out why. Is she

having trouble paying attention in class or grasping new concepts? Does she need extra help? Let the teacher make suggestions, and don't hesitate to contribute suggestions of your own.

- She may be seeking attention. Even negative attention-including displeasure and scolding-qualifies as attention. Let her know that if she brings her homework home, you will work with her to complete it. If she doesn't bring her homework home, you will be forced to take away some of the privileges she enjoys.
- Your daughter may be just plain lazy. It's not very flattering, but it may be true. Start by requiring your daughter to record all of her assignments on an assignment sheet. Ask the teacher to initial the sheet daily to show that an assignment has been given, and also to initial it whenever homework is handed in. Insist on seeing the sheet every evening.

2) "My 5th-grader reads stories at home to prepare for reading tests, but he fails the tests every time."

A casual reading of a story may not be sufficient preparation for a reading test in the upper grades. Meet with your son's teacher to ask about the test format and to find out what types of errors your son is making. It may be that the test is based on skills learned in class rather than mastery of the content of the story.

3) "I work with my son on spelling words for at least an hour every Thursday night for the test on Friday. Yet he still fails his spelling tests! Our study sessions are tiring, tension producing, and obviously nonproductive."

Setting up a study schedule may help improve your son's test scores and make the study experience more enjoyable for both of you. Remember to keep sessions short-no more than 15 to 20 minutes. On Monday night, give your son a pretest of the entire list. Teach one-third of the words missed on the pretest. On Tuesday, test all the words learned to date, and teach the second one-third of the words missed on Monday's pretest. At the end of the session, test all the words learned so far. Repeat Tuesday's session on Wednesday, teaching the last third. On Thursday, test all the words learned to date. Practice the most difficult words, and test one last time.

As you work with your child and study his behavior, you will find that he learns information best in certain ways. Does he learn best by seeing information, hearing information, or perhaps hearing information set to music or a beat? Does he need to touch, feel, or move as he learns? Once you know, you can use this information to help your child learn.

4) "My child knows how to form letters correctly, yet his papers are still a mess. He refuses to slow down and write neatly."

Tell your son that legible handwriting is a form of good manners. Let him know that tidy, readable writing makes a good first impression that lasts.

Try letting your son use a stopwatch or kitchen timer during his practice sessions. Encourage him to work quickly but neatly. Emphasize that it is possible to write rapidly yet legibly. When all else fails, have him rewrite messy homework. After doing this for a time, he'll probably come around.

5) "My daughter isn't in the highest reading group in her class, but she still has to use the same science book those students use. There is no way she can complete her assignments by herself; her reading skills aren't up to it."

If the text really is too difficult for your daughter, talk to the teacher. If the teacher insists that your

daughter participate (and in most cases the teacher will), your daughter will need assistance to at least understand the concepts in the chapters. In this case, you will need to read the chapters to her.

No child functions well when she knows that her parents are disappointed in her. When feelings of anger and frustration overwhelm you when you are working with your child, take a break. Get a favorite book and read it aloud to your child. Your child can sense your mood, and your mood will affect her attitude and self-esteem. In the end, it is vital that our children understand that we love them and want the best for them.

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