

## Homework

By Dr Robert Needlman

Homework does not have to be war. If you can see your role as a coach rather than a taskmaster, homework can teach your child the value of hard work, as well as teaching you a lot about your child. In order to be an effective coach, though, you have to know the rules of the game. And that means understanding homework from the teacher's point of view.

### Why homework?

Teachers assign homework for three basic reasons:

- to get children to practise skills or concepts they have learned in class (for example, practising certain maths fundamentals)
- to prepare children for the next class (perhaps by reading a chapter in a book that the class will later discuss)
- to give children the chance to work on a project that is time-consuming or requires outside resources (such as the library, the internet, or you, the parent).

Early on, the main point of homework is to get children used to the idea of working outside the classroom, as well as helping them develop time-management and organisation skills. Later in primary school, and particularly in high school, children who do more homework score better on standardised tests. It stands to reason that when teachers set high expectations for learning, including relatively high homework demands, children learn more.

### How much is enough?

There are no hard and fast rules about how much homework should be assigned. But the Victorian Government recommends that children from prep/kinder up to fourth grade do no more than 30 minutes homework a day, with no homework on weekends or holidays.

Some schools tend to assign much more than others, but this doesn't always guarantee higher achievement, especially in primary school. Beyond a certain point, homework not only can become overwhelming, but it squeezes out other valuable activities, such as play, sports, music lessons, hobbies and relaxation. More is not always better.

### Working with the teacher

It's a good idea to get on friendly terms with your child's teachers. You want to feel like members of the same team working on behalf of your child's education. If your child is having difficulty in class, you'd expect the teacher to let you know about it sooner rather than later. By the same token, if you have concerns about homework, you should talk with the teacher early on, rather than waiting for the

### did you know ?

Clear communication between parents and teachers about homework helps. Talk with your teacher, or explore the possibility of setting up a communication book that can travel between school and home.

problem to grow.

### What are some of the concerns that teachers need to know about?

Too much homework. If your child is spending considerably more time than suggested in the guidelines above, talk with the teacher. Find out if she is truly taking much longer than her classmates, or if the volume of work is larger than the teacher intended. If it seems to be your child's individual problem, it could be a warning sign of a learning disability; some bright and highly motivated students who have learning disabilities manage to keep up with homework by devoting extra long hours to the work. While this is admirable, it may not be necessary. A lighter homework load might teach just as much with less pain. Also, earlier recognition of the learning issues often can lead to effective treatments. So, if your child seems to have more trouble than her peers in handling the homework load, consider having her tested for a learning disability. And if one indeed is identified, make sure that her teacher is aware of the disability and try to work together to devise a personalised homework plan.

Your child doesn't understand the work. For the most part, children should learn new concepts in the classroom and practise them at home. If your child doesn't seem to understand a lot of the concepts in the homework, it might be because she is missing the ideas in class, or it might be that the teacher is using the homework to introduce new concepts. If this system isn't working for your child, you can assume that it probably also isn't working for other children and that the teacher will want to receive this feedback.

Your child seems unable to maintain her concentration. Again, it will help you to know if this is just a problem at home (perhaps because she is overtired) or if it seems to be consistent throughout the school day.

Your child is struggling with homework in one particular subject. Talk with the teacher about how that subject is being taught. It may be that there is a mismatch between your child's learning style (visual/verbal/hands-on) and the way the teacher tends to explain things. You may be able to help by taking another approach – for example, using small lollies for addition and subtraction practice, or slicing up a pizza to help understand how division works. You also might decide to find extra tutoring help for your child. The teacher is likely to be able to point you in the right direction. Often, teachers think more positively about a child who is struggling with a problem once it's clear that there is a cooperative parent on the team.

### Making homework work

When it comes to homework, it helps to take a positive approach, even if your own childhood memories of toiling away after school aren't all that happy. Few children actually like doing homework, but they can learn a lot from it. In addition to mastering the actual school material, they can learn to work independently and efficiently, to plan their time and organise their work, and to take responsibility for creating a product on a deadline. They also figure out how to set priorities and strike a balance between work and play.

As a parent, you can help your children learn these important life lessons. Homework is your best opportunity to observe your child in action as a learner, which is, after all, her main job for most of the day. Although children behave differently at school and at home, you can still tell a lot by watching how your child goes about homework:

- How long can she focus on the work?
- Is she easily distracted?

- Does she dive in or try to avoid the challenge?
- Does she plan ahead or leave everything to the last moment?
- Does she really understand the concepts on which the homework is based?
- How long, on average, does the homework take her?
- If she's struggling with a particular assignment, how does she handle the frustration of not getting it immediately?

### Setting expectations

It's helpful to be clear about your homework expectations. If you feel that homework is valuable, tell your child. Even better, show your child by helping her gather supplies, set up a study space, and allow for sufficient time to do her homework. Most important, try to be available to offer assistance when she needs it.

In setting expectations, it's wise to focus on the effort your child puts in, rather than on the results. A child who does her best and gets a 'C' should feel proud of her accomplishment; it's not fair to criticise her for a lack of academic ability over which she has no control. By the same token, a child who easily zips through her homework and gets 'A's shouldn't feel unduly proud. Let her take on a real challenge – many good teachers are happy to devise worthwhile and rewarding extracurricular projects for advanced students – and take pride in that.

### The coach approach

Many parents take an authoritarian approach to homework, mainly because that's what they remember from their own childhood. They tell their children, 'You have to do your homework! Do it now!' When the homework isn't done, they become angry, and think of punishments such as 'No TV for a month!' Homework becomes a battleground, and children become even more turned off by it.

It doesn't have to be that way, however. A more positive approach is to see yourself as your child's coach. Like a coach, you want to get the very best performance you can from your 'athlete', but, at the end of the day, she's the one running the race. Rather than laying down the law about homework, talk to your child about the realities: it's important that she does well in school and feels good about her accomplishments. Homework is an important part of school. You expect your child to give it her best effort. You'll help as best you can (including reminding her of her duties when she gets wrapped up in playing and forgets), but the homework is hers to do.

Here's the hard part for many tenderhearted parents: part of your role as coach is to allow your child to fail from time to time. This may seem the opposite of what a responsible parent should do. But children learn from failure as well as from success, and how you approach those failures is what counts. When your child does stumble, rather than rehashing what she did wrong, talk with her about what she can do better next time. Help her focus on a positive goal. What you're teaching her – about working hard and staying optimistic – is much more important in the long run than the particulars of the test or project at which she failed.

### More suggestions

- Allow time for play and unwinding after school before encouraging your child to do homework.
- You can support your child by making a space for homework that will help her learn. It should have a table or desk and good lighting, and be far away from distractions like TV.
- If your child has a big assignment, show her how she can break it down into smaller tasks –

say, one per night – so she doesn't get overwhelmed and leave it all until the last night.

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- ▶ Problem-solving strategies for parents and teachers

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References

The State of Queensland (Department of Education & the Arts). (2004). *Homework Literature Review: Summary of key research findings*. Retrieved 3 May, 2006 from <http://education.qld.gov.au/review/pdfs/homework-text-for-web.pdf>.