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Homework Hang-ups? Here's Help!

by Ann Dolin, M.Ed.

Another school year is beginning. Are your hopes high that this year will be less stressful than the last one? Were homework battles common in your household? Help is on the way! This year can be different if simple routines and structures are implemented starting the very first day of school.

Research in *The Journal of Family Psychology* shows that all children, even infants and preschoolers, demonstrate better behavior when there are predictable routines in the family. Believe it or not, children *want* and *need* routines. A predictable schedule allows them to know what to expect and, in turn, they feel safe and secure. Routines also reduce parents' stress. When there is less drama in the household, parents are able to spend more time developing healthy parent/child bonds and less time arguing.

So how can parents develop structure in order to dissipate power struggles and homework battles? The first thing that we must do is to make homework completion a priority. There must be a set time for homework each and every day and, to do this, children cannot be overscheduled. I see so many students in my practice who are involved in as many as four or five different extracurricular activities. They are harried and stressed out, and their parents are, too. Children need to have enough time each day to realistically complete their work. Twenty minutes squeezed in between soccer practice and piano lessons and a half-hour after dinner is scattered and usually not sufficient. When children are overscheduled, they do not have time to devote to their school work or unstructured time to "just play."

Most children need a short break after school before getting started on their work; usually not more than 30 minutes. However, before your child runs out of the house to play with friends, have her take the binder, books and assignment notebook out of the backpack. One of the greatest study skills we can teach our children is time management. Work with your child to prioritize assignments; 1,2,3, etc. The first assignment to be done should be the most difficult while the student is still fresh, followed by the second most difficult. The last assignment should be the easiest. Have your child pull out everything that will be needed to begin assignment #1 and lay it out in the predetermined homework area. Now it's playtime, but agree upon the return time. When your child returns, she will know just where to begin without an argument.

Timers are great learning tools and can be used to break homework up into manageable pieces. If a writing project seems overwhelming to your child, set the timer for 15 minutes with the goal of completing the first step. Stay close by.

Many children work much better when an adult is nearby to help if questions arise. When the buzzer goes off, and the goal has been met, provide lots of praise and possibly a reward. Then set the timer for the next step until the work is done. Many students have difficulty just getting started, but once they get going, they can complete the task. Timers often provide that "jumpstart" needed in the beginning.

Rewards do not have to be elaborate. Many children respond to earning tokens that can be traded in for something they desire: a visit to a favorite restaurant, the latest Game Boy cartridge, a movie with a friend or time with Mom or Dad. If you're not sure what would motivate your child, just ask, but be sure to put a financial limit on the reward!

Most children thoroughly enjoy watching television, playing video games and instant messaging. For many of these kids, there is no greater incentive. It is my belief that this "screen time" should be earned. If a student is allowed to engage in these activities before homework, it can be very difficult to get her refocused on educational work. However, most children will do almost anything to have these luxuries, including homework. Children should earn these activities, not be entitled to them.

What if your child has no homework? Still insist on doing something educational during the designated homework time. Young children can always spend this block of time improving their reading skills (see studydog.com, scholastic.com) or working on math facts (see aaamath.com, multiplication.com). Older students benefit from reviewing their notes or working on parts of a long-term assignment that may be due in the coming weeks. In addition, a lull in the homework load is a great time to organize current assignments in the three-ring binder and archive old ones. The more kids become accustomed to an official study time, the easier it will be to establish and sustain a routine. This process also helps when older students untruthfully insist that they have no homework. If we parents designate one hour each day for school work (depending on age), then our children will know that no matter what, they have work to do.

The key to establishing and maintaining routines is consistency. If schedules are followed each and every day, then children will know what to expect and will likely follow through without procrastinating. We are at a perfect time of the year to take charge in a positive way. Follow the tips below, and you'll be on your way to a successful, and less stressful, school year:

1. Schedule homework time each day, just as you would soccer practice, piano lessons or an after-school club.
2. Try to stick with the same time each day.
3. Allow for downtime before beginning homework, but not more than 30 minutes.
4. Before downtime, help your child prioritize her assignments for the day, beginning with the most difficult one.
5. Open the book and mark the starting point.
6. Break assignments into incremental portions if work becomes overwhelming; allow frequent breaks.
7. Stick with it! Remember, a routine is not just a behavioral strategy, but a way of life.
8. If outside support is needed, seek out an educational coach. An

educational coach teaches students organization, planning, time management and study skills.

9. Read up on the subject now so that you have a definite plan in place when school begins. A great book for kids is *How To Do Homework Without Throwing Up*, by Trevor Romain. Parents will learn a lot from *Ending the Homework Hassle*, by John Rosemond and *Overcoming Underachieving: A Simple Plan to Boost Your Kids' Grades and End the Homework Hassles*, by Ruth Peters.

Don't forget that it is important for children to associate hard work and completion of a task with a pleasurable activity. Children are more likely to apply themselves if they know that a fun activity follows. Above all, don't give up. It may be easier to give in to your child at any one moment, but insisting on a schedule and making homework a priority will make life a lot less stressful in the long run.

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