
Helping Your Gradeschooler With Homework

During grade school, kids start getting homework for the first time to reinforce and extend classroom learning and help them practice important study skills.

By doing homework, kids learn how to:

- read and follow directions independently
- manage and budget time (for long-term assignments like book reports)
- complete work neatly and to the best of their ability

It also helps them develop a sense of responsibility, pride in a job well done, and a work ethic that will benefit them well beyond the classroom.

Parents can give kids lots of homework help, primarily by making homework a priority and helping them develop good study habits.

Setting Up Shop

The kitchen or dining room table is a popular workspace for younger children; they may feel more comfortable being near you, and you can provide encouragement and assistance. Older kids might prefer to retreat to their rooms, but check in periodically and review the homework when it's completed.

Wherever kids do homework, it's important to make sure their workspace is:

- well-lit
- comfortable
- stocked with school supplies (pens, pencils, paper, stapler, calculator, ruler, etc.) and references (dictionary, thesaurus)
- quiet and free from distractions — TV, video games, phone calls, or other family members

If kids need a computer for schoolwork, try to set it up in a common space, not in a bedroom, so you can discourage playing video games, chatting with or emailing friends, or surfing the Internet for fun during study time. Also consider parental controls, available through your Internet service provider (ISP), and software that blocks and filters any inappropriate material. Find out which sites your kids' teachers recommend and bookmark them for easy access.

A Parent's Supporting Role

When it comes to homework, be there to offer support and guidance, answer questions, help interpret assignment instructions, and review the completed work. But resist the urge to provide the right answers or complete assignments.

Focus on helping kids develop the problem-solving skills they'll need to get through this assignment and any others, and offer your encouragement as they do. They'll develop confidence and a love of learning from doing it themselves.

Here are more tips to help make homework easier for kids:

- **Establish a routine.** Send the message that schoolwork is a top priority with ground rules like setting a regular time and place each day for homework to be done. And make it clear that there's no TV, phone calls, video game-playing, etc., until homework is done and checked.
- **Strategize for homework sessions.** Teach kids to take stock of how much homework there is and what it involves so they can create a strategy that fits their workloads and temperaments. Some kids might want to tackle the harder assignments first — when mental energy levels are highest — while others prefer to get the easier tasks over with. By helping them approach homework with a strategy when they're young, you'll teach your kids to do that independently later. Allow them to take a break if needed, then guide them back to the homework with fresh focus and energy.
- **Instill organization skills.** No one is born with great organizational skills — they're learned and practiced over time. Most kids first encounter multiple teachers and classrooms in middle school, when organization becomes a key to succeeding. Teach your child how to use a calendar or personal planner to help get organized.
- **Apply school to the "real world."** Talk about how what they're learning now applies outside the classroom, such as the importance of meeting deadlines — just like adults in the work world — or how the topics in history class relate to what's happening in today's news.

Homework Problems

Especially as kids get older, homework can really start to add up and become harder to manage. These strategies can help:

- **Be there.** You don't have to hover at homework time, but be around in case you're needed. If your son is frazzled by geometry problems he's been trying to solve for hours, for instance, suggest he take a break, maybe by shooting some hoops with you. A fresh mind may be all he needed, but when it's time to return to homework, ask how you can help.

- **Be in touch with teachers.** Keep in good contact with the teachers throughout the school year to stay aware of your child's progress, especially if your child is struggling. Don't miss parent-teacher conferences and maintain an ongoing dialogue. Teachers can tell you what happens in the classroom and how to help your child succeed. You can also ask to be kept in the loop about quizzes, tests, and projects.
- **Don't forget the study skills.** Study skills often aren't stressed in schools. When you're helping your child study for a test, suggest some effective study strategies, such as using flashcards, or taking notes and underlining while reading.
- **Encourage kids to reach out.** Most teachers are available for extra help before or after school, and also might be able to recommend other resources. So encourage kids to ask for help, if needed, but remember that in school kids are rewarded for knowing the right answers, and no one likes to stand out by saying that they don't have them. Praise your kids for their hard work and effort.

Don't wait for report cards to find out that there are problems at school. The sooner you intervene, the sooner you can help your child get back on track.

When Kids Struggle With Homework

Consistent complaints about homework or ongoing struggles with assignments could indicate a problem.

In some cases, kids simply need to learn and practice better study habits. Be sure your kids are writing down assignments correctly and encourage them to keep a daily homework notebook, which can help both kids and parents know exactly what assignments are due and when. If a particular assignment is giving your child more trouble than others, send a note to the teacher pointing out the difficulties.

But when a kid consistently has a hard time understanding or completing homework, there may be broader issues, such as learning disabilities, ADHD, or vision or hearing difficulties that may be interfering with academic progress.

By reviewing homework with your child and talking to your child's teacher, you can identify any learning problems and tackle them early on.

Laying the Foundation

The key to truly helping kids with homework is to know when to step in. Make sure your kids know that you're available if there's a snag, but that it's important to work independently. Encourage effort and determination — not just the grades they get.

Be a good example by showing your own love of learning. While your child does homework, do your own — read books, magazines, and newspapers; write letters, lists, and emails; use math skills to calculate expenses or balance the checkbook. By showing that learning remains important — even fun — once school's over, you'll help

your kids understand that building knowledge is something to enjoy throughout life.

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Date reviewed: September 2007

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