



How to help with Homework: 7 Common Parent Questions from FamilyFun.com



As a parent, you may already be hearing these lines

I forgot
I'm too busy
You're nagging me
I want a reward
I can't find it
It's too hard
I need books



Here are some helpful reminders of what's been valuable from other parents.

1. **"I Forgot"** How can I keep my child from forgetting (or "losing") the assignment?

As any parent knows, many strange things can befall homework between school and home. Assignments may be left on the bus or copied from the blackboard in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Your child may tell you she has no homework, then panic later in the evening as she remembers she has an essay on Abraham Lincoln due in the morning.

What's needed? Constant parental vigilance.

- Equip a forgetful child with a special notebook or folder for transporting homework between school and home. You might buy a cheap, lightweight cardboard folder with fasteners and pockets to which you can attach a plastic pouch filled with pens, pencils, and other supplies. Current assignments can go on top or in the front pocket.
- Keep a class list with phone numbers and names in a prominent place. When a homework assignment is forgotten or misplaced, your child can telephone another student for it.
- Enlist the teacher as your ally. Have your child write homework in a special notebook and have the teacher read it and sign off on it every day.
- Work with the teacher to develop a contingency plan in case a key assignment disappears. Agree on a few alternative assignments, such as interviewing Joan of Arc, writing a letter to Thomas Edison, or finding all the prime numbers between 0 and 100. The idea is to let the child know that forgetting a work sheet doesn't mean getting out of doing homework.
- Help your child load his backpack and put it by the door.

2. **"I'm Too Busy"** How can I drag my child away from. . . (the skateboard, the video game, the TV, the telephone, etc)?

Left to his / her own devices, your child would probably rather be skateboarding, so it's up to you to make homework a priority. If you don't want to spend all evening negotiating or nagging, establish a regular homework time. Just make sure it's not too late in the evening or homework will become "too hard."

Some parents write out a homework schedule assigning times for work and for play. Others ask the child to sign a Homework Contract ("I will do my homework at such-and-such a time..."). Other parents employ kitchen timers and beat-the-clock games. But don't do this if it makes your child nervous. And don't feel as if you have to create a "Jeopardy"-esque game show just to get your child to do his subtraction.

HOMEWORK ZONE

Where children do their homework is as important as when they do it. A designated place to study helps establish a routine. This "homework zone," be it a desk or a corner of the kitchen table, should have all the things your child needs within easy reach (to avoid cries of "I can't find my eraser!"). Ideally, children should work in a bona fide "home study center" that is quiet, well lit, and stocked with a Homework Survival Kit. The kindergarten-to-third-grade version of this kit would include crayons, pencils, erasers and construction paper, which families can shop for together so the child has a say in how to personalize her study area.

It's helpful to use something to keep all the papers in. A file folder or a couple office trays are often useful for in/out boxes.

3. **"You're Nagging Me"** My son/daughter views me as the homework police. How can I be an ally?

Ever notice how kids don't appreciate it when you stand over them and comment on their work? A little praise is always appreciated, but be careful about how you criticize.

I've come to see my role concerning homework as similar to that of a flight attendant. I'm not actually flying the plane, but I'm a friendly, unflappable, ever-helpful presence, a kind of homework hostess, available for consultation on questions like "What's the capital of South America?" or "Do we have any didgeridoos?"

Here are more tips:

- For some, it may still be a good idea to be in the room while your child does his homework. Your presence (or that of a caretaker), encourages him to stay on track and offers support.
- Some parents work or read alongside their child, thus making homework a shared ritual instead of a private ordeal.
- Don't correct homework. When the teacher does it, they see the child's mistakes and can determine the areas of study in which the student may need extra help.

4. **"I Want a Reward"** Is it okay to bribe my child to do homework?

Some parents think that bribes, or "incentives," can motivate an unmotivated child. I've heard of stars, stickers, TV or Nintendo time, an hour of roller-blading, ice cream, and even a fishing trip being used as the little bit of honey that makes the medicine go down. One mother I know has established a ritual of mailing her son's best work to his grandparents and finds that this intangible prize inspires him to spend more time on his essays.

Ideally, every child would find "personal satisfaction" enough of a reward to finish homework, but often, particularly for younger children, this isn't the case. If you decide to use an incentive, use a small sticker or a star for completing an assignment, then gradually wean the child off such incentives when they no longer seem necessary.

Or, you could use a motivational tool such as a homemade spinner, and fill in each section with a reward or privilege your child would like, such as "stay up 15 minutes late" or "choose one dinner menu." Each time your child completes his homework according to your agreed-upon rules, let her spin the spinner.

Other educators disapprove of bribes in any form. Homework is part of a child's responsibility. Just as adults have work, so do kids. The wisest decision may be to use bribes only as a last resort, and even then judiciously.

5. **"I Can't Find It"** How do I organize a highly disorganized child?

Some kids are so disorganized that they seem to generate little typhoons of chaos wherever they go. These children require a high degree of parental monitoring.

Here are some tips on keeping your child organized:

- Check your child's homework book when she gets home and establish a homework plan together.
- If you need to help your child focus, work as a mentor. Read with her and ask her questions about the material.
- Consider using a big, color-coded calendar on the refrigerator and micromanage each step of a long project.

6. **"It's Too Hard"** What if the homework assignment is "too hard"?

The heartrending lament "It's too hard!" rings out in many households each school night. It may be that your child is too tired or the work really may be overwhelming. Obviously, you shouldn't actually be doing your child's homework but occasionally it is necessary to help.

When your second grader is staring at her work sheet in mute terror, you can start by saying, "First, let's read the directions." A mom of a mildly math-phobic eight-year-old says, "If there are 40 math problems, I suggest that she do 5, and then we take a break together. Sometimes I give her a treat when she finishes each set of five."

If homework ends in tears every night, you need to find out why. Is your child the only one in the class having trouble? Does he hate this particular teacher? Is it just a temporary problem because he's not getting the math this week?

Teachers can help with troubleshooting. If a child is having academic difficulty, many schools are willing to devise an individual educational plan. Certain homework assignments may be scaled down, your child may be given longer deadlines, or may be allowed to do alternative assignments suited to her learning style: If she's a hands-on learner, she might be able to build a paddleboat instead of writing a science paper. Clearly, much depends on the school and the teacher.

Sometimes, homework angst is the result of a teacher's high expectations. If your child is in this situation, talk to other parents to find out if their kids are also having difficulty. If you feel fairly confident that the teacher does have high expectations, talk to her and find out what the rationale is for especially ambitious assignments. If you can't get anywhere with the teacher, get together with other parents and meet with the principal.

To temper homework battles, consider someone other than yourself to coach your child. You don't always need to hire an expensive tutor; sometimes the college-age baby-sitter or the high school kid next door can help your third grader master the multiplication tables.

7. **"I Need Books"** Should we start a home reference library?

The basic home reference library should include a children's dictionary, an atlas, an almanac, and at least a good single-volume encyclopaedia with an index. A set of *ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA*s is preferable, but they can cost as much as a used car.

Sooner or later your kid is going to insist on cutting out pictures of African elephants, and you'll wish you had those *NATIONAL GEOGRAPHICS* or a good child's magazine, such as *KIDS DISCOVER* (science), *COBBLESTONE* (history), or *FACES* (people of the world). Many of these have invaluable year-end indexes.

If you own a computer with CD-ROM capability, CD-ROM encyclopaedias (many parents praise), dictionaries, atlases, and other reference materials may also be cheaper, more easily updated, more multifaceted and more visually interesting than some books.

For example, Microsoft's , which costs about \$50, includes a dictionary, a thesaurus, a book of quotations, an encyclopaedia, an atlas, a chronology, and an almanac. Using the software program , a second or third grader can click on highlighted words in the text and say, "habitat" to get a definition. He can also access dramatic video footage of a cheetah running full speed.

But despite all the bells and whistles, newfangled software can't really compete with the feeling of a warm, heavy book in your lap. As a child, I spent many rainy afternoons browsing through the gray, weighty prose of my family's 1955 *ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA*, reading about such things as the Ming Dynasty. For my money, it's best when home libraries combine classic tools (such as books) with contemporary technology.