

Keeping Kids on Track With Their Homework



By Joanna Nesbit

As a general rule, kids are supposed to have 10 minutes' worth of homework per year they are in school. That's 10 minutes in kindergarten, 30 in second grade and one hour in sixth. But often, it seems as if your child is at the kitchen table for much longer.

Why Children Procrastinate

Who doesn't have a child who gets distracted? Kids procrastinate on homework for all the same reasons adults procrastinate. They find it boring or unpleasant, they feel overwhelmed, they're tired, they'd rather be doing something else, or they don't understand the instructions the teacher gave them. They'll stare out the window, skip reading directions or forget to gather necessary supplies — anything to delay the inevitable.

Or they might put off homework because home life doesn't provide the structure for regular habits. Mike Martin recalls his own elementary years during his parents' divorce, when his schoolwork suffered because his parents were arguing. Because his older brothers had never had a problem buckling down, his parents had no strategies in place for their young procrastinator. Now a parent himself, Martin consciously promotes structured habits and ensures the TV is off until the last child has finished homework.

Sometimes the reasons a child procrastinates may be more complex than simply a lack of structure. Timothy Pynchyl, professor of psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, and an expert on procrastination, has conducted studies that indicate a link between identity and procrastination. What he and colleague Matthew Shanahan found in their study was that young people with a stronger sense of identity were less likely to procrastinate.

"The stronger the sense of identity, the more able the youth is to self-regulate his or her behavior," Pynchyl explains. Parents can teach competency, he says, as well as delayed

gratification, a volitional skill necessary for long-term rewards such as good grades.

Pychyl has also completed research that shows a link between authoritarian parenting, notably from fathers, and higher levels of procrastination. His research of young adolescents indicates that an authoritarian parenting style (i.e., critical, cold and demanding) contributes to kids, especially daughters, putting off tasks, possibly out of fear of failure or as a silent rebellion.

The "helicopter" parenting style also contributes to procrastination. "We learn in life by doing things, by failing and succeeding," Pychyl says. "When parents are the 'doers,' children don't learn how to make plans, make the effort, or try again when faced with failure." While parents obtain an easy short-term outcome by doing something for their child, Pychyl says the long-term consequences come back to haunt them.

"The art of parenting here is learning how much to help and when to let go. Letting go also means letting go of seeing your child's failures as your own failures," Pychyl advises.

Letting go doesn't mean opting out of supervision, however. To help them succeed, children need "scaffolded" challenges as they mature. Young children require lots of assistance, and even much older kids, especially boys, need parents to check in regularly on their homework without nagging them in a negative way.

Strategies to Keep Kids on Track

- **Consider your child's age.** Very young children don't have a developed sense of time management and don't recognize procrastination. Most need visual clues to help them, such as putting their backpack on the chair they will use to complete homework, says Laura Davis, owner of three learning and tutoring centers. Experts agree kids also need some feeling of control and recommend that parents allow kids to choose which homework task comes first. Moving from hardest to easiest or alternating hard/easy/hard works well for kids.
- **Timing is everything.** Like adults, kids have their best and worst times of day for tackling problems. Help your child determine what time works best for her, and whether she works well in shorter or longer sessions (most young kids prefer shorter). Giving children the choice of when to start homework (in a timely fashion) communicates your respect for their decisions, says Davis.
- **Help them recharge.** After school, kids hit their afternoon low, and they need some free time. Set aside time for active or outdoor play to burn off excess energy.
- **Create structure.** Often, half the battle is simply creating a predictable routine. With kids involved in myriad activities, family dinners are interrupted and parents sometimes serve as taxi drivers well into the evening. Parents may not be aware how rushed and chaotic an evening can feel to a child. Establish a regular homework time and place, such as the kitchen table, and ensure the TV is off until everyone is finished.
- **Help kids break it down.** Even for adults, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Until kids learn

effective time and task management, they don't know how to break down homework into discreet elements. It's a skill that must be taught. Help your child break his tasks into manageable chunks of time — 10-15 minutes for a young child, as much as 20-25 minutes for an older child — and then let him have a break. Try setting a timer to make the timeframe tangible.

- **Keep kids company.** Youngsters don't like feeling as if they're missing out, and having parents in the vicinity can help them stay focused. "We sit at the kitchen table together," says Wendy Fanello, mother of two elementary schoolers. "I might be reading the paper or working on my laptop, but they don't feel like they're being left out of anything while they work on their homework."

Bedrooms are the worst place for easily distracted kids, plus they're difficult to monitor. And computers in bedrooms are the worst offenders of all. Have children use a computer in a central space so you can pass by to ensure homework is on the screen.

- **Eliminate electronics.** It's also critical to have kids put away cell phones and other electronics. Kids have trouble not responding to incoming texts. Put phones in a designated spot until homework is finished. You also may want to establish guidelines for gaming systems, such as a weekends-only rule, since children often find the transition from gaming to homework very difficult. In addition, they may rush homework to play a favorite game.

- **Avoid rescuing.** It's tempting to step in when homework takes too long, but you may be communicating the message that you believe your child can't do it herself. "One of the biggest problems we see these days is parents growing exasperated and finishing a child's homework for them," says Dr. Maureen Taylor, fifth-grade teacher. "Students develop a 'learned helplessness' and find themselves unable to listen to directions, knowing that Mom, Dad or older siblings will fill in the details." If homework seems excessive, talk to your child's teacher.

- **Watch the praise.** Be mindful of praising a child for being smart or having natural "talent," which can backfire when the child hits a bump and wants to quit rather than risk a mistake. Instead, compliment effort and a willingness to stick with it, and remind your child that mistakes are a necessary part of learning.

- **Reward good habits.** Some kids need extra incentive to develop new habits, but even organized kids will appreciate recognition for a job well done. Try short-term rewards as well as long-term ones, such as a gift certificate to a favorite store for making the honor roll.

It's not easy to know when you're doing enough or too much. But with some adjustment, you can find the right balance to help your kids develop self-sufficiency with their study routines.

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