

Helping Kids Become Self-Starters



By Joanna Nesbit

Some kids are naturally independent, while others seem to need more assistance staying on track. But with the right kind of help, almost all kids can develop the self-reliance necessary to manage their own homework. Here's how to jump-start your child without getting in the way.

Age-by-age Guide: Cultivating Self-reliance

Grades K-2

Early on, kids are learning the business of school, and they need plenty of help to develop homework routines. They don't have a sense of time, don't understand time management, and may not work well independently, which is normal for this age. According to Dr. Fran Walfish, psychotherapist and author of *The Self-Aware Parent*, children this age typically have not developed the emotional maturity for working autonomously, and experts agree parents should plan to sit down with their youngsters to get them started on homework if needed.

"But even the littlest students can develop independence," Walfish says, "if parents begin to cultivate it." For homework, she suggests getting children started and then leaving for a few minutes so kids experience working independently.

Routine is also important for promoting independence. Establish everyday routines, including a place to do homework, a place to store supplies, and a regular homework time before dinner, so kids know what to expect each day. Involve your kids in the planning, but also consider your children's temperaments and tailor their routines accordingly, such as whether they work in a busy or quiet location and when they start homework. "Some kids have to come home from school, have a snack and get to work," says Betsy Brown Braun, child development specialist and author of *You're Not the Boss of Me: Brat-Proofing Your 4- to 12-Year-Old Child*. "Other kids have to go outside first and have some run-around time."

She also recommends asking kids about their homework for that day so they repeat it aloud to

you and frame it in their own minds. For more independent kids, you can ask them what their plan is for getting it done, which might include laying out the work in piles and choosing which to work on first. Brown Braun advises parents to keep in mind that homework is not a product, but a process that builds self-reliance and self-discipline with age and experience.

As such, the goal is to get your child working independently by increments. "By the end of the first year of school, you should be able to help your child get started and then leave him to it, but also plan to return and check in," says Ann Dolin, author of *Homework Made Simple: Tips, Tools, and Solutions for Stress-Free Homework*.

Should you check your child's work? Yes, in the early years, experts agree, but primarily for completion, rather than to correct it — unless the teacher wants you to correct it (check in with your child's teacher for expectations at the beginning of each year). "However, the consequences for sloppy or unfinished homework should come from the teacher," says Walfish. "It's not a parent's job to serve as homework cop." Collaborate with the teacher on expectations.

Grades 3-4

In third and fourth grade, kids have a better sense of time management, and routines have been established for several years, but academic expectations take a leap and some kids are not quite ready for complete independence with certain assignments, Dolin says. Kids this age should be able to independently manage recurring tasks, such as weekly spelling, but may need help with time management for long-term projects.

"This is kind of a 'between' age," say Dolin. "It's not unusual for a child to not read the homework directions and then start doing it all wrong. Even in third grade, it's better for you to have an idea of what they need to do and then just make sure they can do it independently."

But providing help doesn't mean hovering. Be available for her to bounce ideas off you if she's brainstorming, but don't answer her math questions. Instead, ask her to explain her math to you to see if she can answer her own question.

Grades 5-6

By these grades, parents can look forward to much more independence and expect that kids will seek out help as needed, says Dolin. "You may say to your child, 'I'm going to be paying bills for the next hour. Come and get me if you need me.' You're putting the ball in the child's court." However, Dolin says, it's still appropriate at this age to check for homework completion, because some kids will try to get away with the least amount of work possible and will either finish it hastily or not at all. At this age, though, it's not appropriate to check each problem.

Keep in mind that if your child has transitioned to middle school for sixth grade, he may need help with organization for managing multiple classes, PE clothes and lockers. A child may be independent at this age but overwhelmed by all the additional adjustments and struggling with organization. Dolin says parents need to be willing to provide help with organization to ensure a smoother transition; for instance providing a "launching pad" for all school and sports-related items.

How Parents Sabotage Self-reliance

They nag. Parents may believe, especially for a disorganized child, that staying on top of Mr. Scattered is the only way he'll ever get anything done. But nagging creates a climate of dependency, says Brown Braun, sending the message that kids need parents to get things done. That's why the consequences for unfinished homework should come from the teacher, even if that involves the parent writing a note to explain the child chose not to do his homework. She also recommends that parents establish a no-electronics rule until after homework is done to help kids stay on track. Consider blocking out a segment of time so kids don't rush their homework to play Wii.

Dolin says nagging also pushes kids away from parents. "When they do need help with something, they're less likely to come to us because they feel judged," she says. Instead, help kids develop homework routines and plans for independence. For older kids, try reviewing at the beginning of each week what they need to get done. Then during the week, ask your child how she prepared for her upcoming test, rather than "Did you prepare?" The "Did you?" comes across as nagging, says Dolin. Framing your questions differently sends the message that you assume your child is capable.

They hover. Dolin says that sitting with a child for too long during homework also undermines self-reliance. Children develop a dependence on parents being ever-present to keep them on task, but kids need to learn to be comfortable with working alone for periods of time, which should lengthen as kids mature.

They give answers too quickly. "Parents often experience discomfort when kids wrestle with unpleasant feelings," says Walfish, "so they rescue kids from struggling with homework. You need to teach your child how to kick-start and bump up against his own resistance and push through it." Also, she suggests, "Praise with phrases such as 'That must feel so good when you do it yourself,' as opposed to 'Good job,' which implies the child did the job for the parent and earned Mom and Dad's approval."

When Kids Need Extra Help

If kids are coping with learning issues or a condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), it may be more difficult for them to manage tasks independently. Signs to watch for include homework taking much longer than it should, failure to complete one's work or chronic disorganization. In these instances, parents will need to help the child with organization and may want to consult an educational therapist for extra insight.

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