

Why Does Homework Cause So Much Grief?

Tips for Understanding and Minimizing Homework Headaches

Does homework cause tension in your house? Is the sense of frustration becoming too much to take? If so, you are not alone. Everyday, I receive calls from parents who are fed up with the homework battles. Most parents wonder with exasperation, “Why does homework cause such a major problem!?” In order to answer that question, it is important to consider many factors.

Homework is More than *Just* Homework

For one, homework represents more than just a set of assignments that your child has to complete each night, it is an exercise in developing responsibility and problem-solving skills. Think about the “homework” you have as an adult: mail to manage, bills to pay, budgets to keep, groceries to buy, school papers to organize, meals to plan and prepare, etc. Think about the skills you need to use to do each of these tasks: reading, planning, organizing, calculating, and filing are just a few. When did you first practice each of these skills? For most people, you can trace your skill development back to homework.

Homework also represents a child’s first significant opportunity to have control. One day, when my son was 18-months old, the two of us were eating lunch at a restaurant with several relatives. As I was trying to clean him up after a messy lunch, he was much more interested in entertaining his cousins and not in cooperating with me. While I kept a straight face and did not let him see that his antics were getting a reaction from me, he still managed to push my buttons. I finally cleaned him up and then sighed in frustration, “How does he know how to get to me!?” My ever-observant and very wise cousin pointed out, “For as significant as he is in your life, you are 100 times more significant in his. You have other responsibilities to fill your days, but his only responsibility is to study and imitate you. In this process, he quickly learns how to test you.” Hmmm. Good point.

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From the day your child is born, his objective is to grow and become more and more independent of you. Every parent wants their children to grow up to be happy, successful, well-adjusted adults, yet most of us do not want to “let go.” Children who are clamoring for independence, however, quickly learn that their parents place a lot of value on homework and homework is something that they have control over. Many children quickly learn that homework is their bargaining chip and they will use it to “act out” if there are other, seemingly unrelated things that are bothering them. Of course, most of the time, children are not consciously aware of this thought pattern. They just know that they want some control and homework is a significant way to get it; “I don’t have to do my math homework tonight. You can’t make me!” or “Why do we have homework, anyway? It’s pointless! I don’t want to do it!” Sound familiar?

How Do I Overcome this ‘Control’ Issue?

The best way to overcome the ‘control’ issue is to give your child some control. Now, I don’t mean that you should let them run the house and deal with homework as they please, but give them control at appropriate times, in appropriate ways, and you will notice that homework battles will fizzle down. For example, if you are trying to decide what to make for dinner, ask your daughter, “Would you like pot roast or spaghetti for dinner?” Then, make whichever one she chooses. By giving her two options, you have ensured that she will select something appropriate and by acting upon her choice, you are communicating to her that her opinion matters and she does have some control.

Give your children lots of choices... Involve them in the process when you select a menu for the week and create a grocery list. Let them choose which television program to watch each evening. (If you have more than one child, have them take turns.) Let them decide where to go for dinner (again, give them two options so they do not select the Ritz) and what they want to wear to school. If your child is resistant to wearing a jacket, for example, say to her “Jeannie, it is cold outside and you need to wear a jacket. Would you like to wear this one or this one?” This simple concept of giving choices can prevent power struggles and can be used with children of all ages; babies to young adults.

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It really works! Going back to my 18-month old son... He was, and still is, a very independent spirit (I have no idea where he got that from!). When my husband would pick him up from daycare, Marky would refuse to hold his hand. As soon as my husband would grab his hand, Mark would instantly go limp and fall like spaghetti to the ground. After a bit of frustration, my husband finally gave him his choices. “Mark, you have to hold Daddy’s hand in the parking lot or Daddy will have to carry you.” For two days, Mark instantly collapsed to the ground so my husband scooped him up and carried him, kicking and screaming, to the car. On the third day, when Mark received his options, he decided he would rather walk to the car holding Daddy’s hand than have to be carried. It has been over a year now and he has never given us another problem about holding his hand.

Choices with Homework

If you develop the habit of giving your children some choices, and respecting their choices, at appropriate times throughout the day, homework time will soon become smoother. However, there are many ways you can give your child choices when working on homework. Some examples are:

- “You need to study for your spelling test on Friday. Would you like to study for 10 minutes every night this week, or for 20 minutes on Tuesday and Thursday?”
- “I have to make dinner tonight and then have to take your sister to dance. Would you like to work on your homework now with me, or by yourself while I drive Jennifer to dance?”
- “We have three books that fit your teacher’s criteria for a book report. Which one of these three do you like best?”
- “Which do you want to do first, your math or science homework?”
- “How much time do you think it should take you to do your language arts homework, 15 or 20 minutes? I’ll set the timer for ___ minutes. See if you can get your homework done before the time is up.”
- “Your teacher suggests that we get a magazine subscription for you because you seem to prefer reading shorter stories and articles. I was looking at some options and think that any one of these three would be good. Which one do you want?”

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More than Just Giving Choices

When you give your child a choice, and then follow through on that choice, you are not only giving him some control, you are communicating with your actions that you value his opinion. This sense of value has major implications on his sense of confidence and will help increase his motivation. When you value and respect your child (while still maintaining appropriate control), your child will value and respect you...that alone will make homework time more peaceful. The great thing is, this mutual respect will make other parts of your family life more enjoyable and can be very good foundation as your child enters the teen years. (It also works if your child is a teen now.)

Additional Causes of Homework Headaches

While fighting for control is the most common reason for homework arguments, some children may be dealing with additional problems: the work may be completely over their head, they may not know how to appropriately deal with frustration, they may not want your attention for homework, they may be disorganized and not know how to manage homework or school materials and supplies, or they may be so busy that they do not have time to focus on homework. **There are several solutions to each of these problems and you will see each featured in upcoming newsletters and can find resources at our website, www.soarstudyskills.com.**