



## Help Parents Deal with Homework

Excerpted from *A Survival Kit for the Special Education Teacher*

Every night in millions of homes across the country you can imagine the scenario: the age-old story of children and their homework. The scene may have different characters, but the script is usually the same. Parents have always attempted to help their children with homework. This help ranges from a short occasional explanation to total completion of the task by the parent. Whatever the case, numerous problems exist. In an attempt to cope, parents will use trial and error, bribery, threats, reasoning, and anything they hope will work.

There seems to be little doubt that the motives of the parents are genuine. Who could find fault with the motive of concern? However, it is not the motive that creates the anxiety and tension for both parents and children, but the techniques employed.

For some children, school can be a stressful place. When one takes into account work demands, social pressures, concern over parental approval, fear of failure, and so much more, children may need the home as a haven to unwind. If they encounter stress in the form of parental agitation during homework, then where can they "hang their hat?" For those of us who work, it might be comparable to working all day at a job that has its share of stresses and coming home to a tense environment. Think of how long you might be able to handle such a situation. Also keep in mind the alternatives that we have as adults if the pressure gets to be too great. Children do not have the same options.

The following techniques are provided to facilitate the process of homework and prevent frustration, anger, and disappointment:

**Homework Schedule** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=2#schedule>)

**Rank the Assignments** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=2#assignments>)

**Don't Hover** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=2#hover>)

**Check Correct Problems First** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=2#correct>)

**Never Let Homework Drag On All Night** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=3#allnight>)

**Success Strategies for Textbook Assignments** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=3#first>)

**Be Aware of Negative Messages** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=3#aware>)

**Avoid Finishing Assignments for Your Child** (</teacher-parent-conferences/homework/5144.html?page=3#finishing>)

## SET UP A HOMEWORK SCHEDULE

Many children benefit from a set homework schedule. For some, the responsibility of deciding when to sit down and do home work is too difficult. These children may decide to do their homework after school or after dinner. This is a personal choice and has to do with *learning style*. However, once the time is determined, the schedule should be adhered to as realistically as possible. This will also relieve the problem of having to "hunt down" or "corral" children to get them to do their homework. After a while, this will become a natural part of their schedule. It should be noted that during this time, no interruptions should be allowed. Phone calls, TV, and everything else can wait until the work is completed.

Check homework assignments at the end of the night. Anxiety is exhibited by some children over the thought of possibly bringing incorrect homework to school. Therefore, it is very important for parents to take time each night to check home work. This offers children a feeling of accomplishment, a source of positive attention, and a sense of security that the work is correct. This sense of academic security may carry over to the classroom and offer children a greater sense of confidence with classwork. However, if it is clear that the child did not understand a particular concept, the teacher should be made aware of it.

## RANK THE ASSIGNMENTS

For some children, the decision about what to do first becomes a major chore. They may dwell over this choice for a long time. Other children use *horizontal perspective*. This occurs when everything takes on the same level of importance and no priority is seen.

If you choose to rank order, suggest which assignment to do first and so on. Many children tend to use a *quantity orientation* (number of assignments left) rather than a *qualitative orientation* (difficulty of assignment). This means that if they have five things to do, have them finish the four easy ones first. In their eyes, they have only one assignment left even though it may be a more difficult task.

## DON'T HOVER NEXT TO YOUR CHILD DURING THE HOMEWORK SESSION

This is usually a very big problem for some parents. All I can say is that parents employing this technique are not only setting themselves up for tremendous frustration and anger, but they are also creating "learned helplessness."

Many parents will say that their children cannot work unless they are sitting next to them. It is not that many children are unable to work, but that they choose not to work. The work stoppage on the part of children occurs when a parent attempts to break away and no longer provides them with undivided attention. This "dependency" is very unhealthy because it is not imitated in the classroom. Consequently, such children may put off doing their classwork and bring the unfinished work home. In this way they may gain mommy or daddy's full attention. After a hard day's work, parents are tired, and the thought of sitting down with children for up to three hours doing homework can only lead to problems.

If you are already locked into this type of situation, you should not break away all at once. You should *desensitize* children a little at a time. Sit at the end of the table for a few days. Then slowly increase the distance between yourself and the child's work until he or she is working alone.

## CHECK CORRECT PROBLEMS FIRST

Parents sometimes have a habit of "zeroing in" on the incorrect problems. Next time your child brings you a paper to check, focus first on how well he or she did on the correct problems, spelling words, and so on. For the answers that are incorrect say, "I bet if you go back and check these over you may get a different answer." Now the child will go back and redo the problems without any animosity or feelings of inadequacy. If you focus first on the incorrect problems and become angry, when the child returns to the work area he or she will likely be more involved in dealing with the loss of parental approval rather than finishing the task.

You may want to check small groups of problems at a time. Many children benefit from immediate gratification. Have your child do five problems and then come back to you for checking. Zero in on the correct ones, and after they are checked send the child back to do the next group. In this way the child gets immediate feedback and approval and the necessary motivation for the next assignment. Additionally, if the child is doing the assignment incorrectly, the error can be detected and explained, preventing the child from having to redo the entire assignment.

## NEVER LET HOMEWORK DRAG ON ALL NIGHT

Sometimes parents will allow a child to work on homework for several hours or until they finish. This is fine if the performance of the child is consistent or the assignment realistically calls for such a commitment of time. However, in the event that a child is no farther along after one or two hours than after ten minutes into the assignment, you should stop the homework activity. The only thing accomplished by allowing a child to linger on hour after hour with very little performance is increased feelings of inadequacy. The parent may choose to end the work period after a reasonable amount of time and write the teacher a note explaining the circumstances. I am sure that such concerns can be worked out at a meeting with the teacher.

There may be several reasons for such a behavior pattern. First, the child may not have understood the concept in class and therefore will not be able to finish the assignment at home. Second, the child may already have feelings of helplessness. Consequently, waiting long periods of time may result in the completion of the assignment by the parents. Third, the child may have serious learning difficulties, especially if this is a pattern, and may be overwhelmed by a series of assignments.

## SUCCESS STRATEGIES FOR TEXTBOOK ASSIGNMENTS

Most text books have the chapter questions at the end. When this procedure occurs, many children are not aware of what they should be looking for while reading. Discuss and talk about the questions before children begin reading. By using this strategy, they will know what important information to look for in the chapter.

Some children have a tendency of trying to remember everything. You may want to give them a pencil and suggest that they lightly note a passage or word that sounds like something in one of the questions. This will help many children when they have to skim back over the many pages in the chapter.

Consider placing textbook chapters on tape. Research indicates that the more sensory input children receive, the greater the chance the information will be retained. Therefore, tape record some science or social studies chapters so that children can listen while they read along. This will allow both auditory and visual input of information. From time to time you may want to add a joke, a song, or a message to keep the interest of the child.

## BE AWARE OF NEGATIVE NONVERBAL MESSAGES

Parents will often say to me that they never get frustrated or yell while working with their children on homework. However, if all communication were verbal, then these parents would have a good case. But as we know, nonverbal communication is a large part of overall communication. Since this is possible, many messages, especially negative ones, can be communicated easily without your awareness. Grimaces, body stiffness, sighs, raised eyebrows, and other types of body language are all nonverbal responses. If children are sensitive, they will pick up these messages, which can only add to the tension of the homework relationship. This is extremely important with younger children who cannot distinguish between loss of parental approval and loss of love. Such a state can only add stress to their ability to perform.

## AVOID FINISHING ASSIGNMENTS FOR YOUR CHILD

Some parents will complete an entire assignment for their children. While the parents' motivation may be helping their child finish a difficult assignment, the end result may be very destructive. Children tend to feel inadequate when a parent finishes homework. First, they feel a sense of failure. Second, they feel a sense of inadequacy since they can never hope to do the assignment as well as mommy or daddy. I have seen parents do an entire social studies term paper. This can only foster increased dependency and feelings of helplessness on the part of children.

If children cannot complete an assignment, and they have honestly tried, write the teacher a note explaining the circumstances. Most teachers will understand the situation.

To recap, before you sit down to work with your children, make sure that they are not exhibiting symptoms that may reflect more serious concerns. When parents attempt to work with children who have severe learning problems or a high tension level, they may be faced with tremendous frustration, anger, and disappointment. Following basic guidelines when helping with homework can result in a more rewarding situation for both parents and children.

Here are some questions you can ask your child about their reading. Choose a few questions each time you read together to help you start a conversation about reading!

### Questions to ask before reading:

- What is the title of the book?
- What does the cover tell you about the book?
- What do you think the book is about?
- What are you curious to find out about this book?
- What do you already know about this book?
- What do you want to learn?
- Why are you reading this book?

### Questions to ask during reading:

- What do you think will happen next?
- What is the problem in the book?
- Can you predict how the story will end?
- What can you tell me about the story so far? Can you tell me using sequence words? (First, second, etc.)
- Can you put what you've just read into your own words?
- Why do you think the character did that?
- As I read \_\_\_\_\_, it made me picture \_\_\_\_\_ in my head. When you were reading this part, what were you picturing in your head?
- What were you wondering as you read? What questions do you have?
- Think about predictions you made before reading: do you still think the story will go that way? Why or why not?

### Questions to ask after reading:

- Describe the setting of the story.
- Describe how a character changed throughout the book.
- Which of the characters did you like best? Why?
- What were some of the problems or situations the characters encountered? How was it solved?
- Tell about a part that you liked or disliked and tell why?
- What was your favorite part? Why?
- Why do you think the author wrote this?

# Sharpening Math Skills

Mastering math is essential for future opportunities in school and career. Your kids will need to reach a certain level of competency in math to take many advanced high-school courses, to be admitted to college, and to have a wide variety of career choices. Here's how to help them maximize their math-smarts.

**#1: Make sure your children understand mathematical concepts.**

Otherwise, math becomes a meaningless mental exercise of just memorizing rules and doing rote drills. Have your children manipulate objects to figure out basic concepts. For addition, they could add one, two, or more blocks to a pile of blocks and then tell you how many blocks are in the pile.

**#2: Help them master the basic facts.**

Mastery of a basic fact means that children can give an answer in less than three seconds. Considerable drill is required for children to give quick responses. Use flash cards to help your children learn the basic facts. When they don't know an answer, have them lay out objects to solve the problem.

**#3: Teach them to write their numbers neatly.**

Twenty-five percent of all errors in solving math problems can be traced back to sloppy number writing. Improve your children's number-writing skills by having them trace over numbers that you have written. Suggest they use graph paper to keep the numbers in problems neatly aligned.

**#4: Provide help immediately when your children need it.**

Math is one subject in which everything builds upon what has been previously learned. For example, a failure to understand the concept of percent leads to problems with decimals. If a teacher is unable to help your children, provide the help yourself or use a tutor or learning center.

**#5: Show them how to handle their math homework.**

Doing math homework reinforces the skills your children are learning in class. Teach them to begin every assignment by studying the textbook or worksheet examples. Then have them redo the examples before beginning the assignment, to make sure they understand the lesson.

**#6: Encourage your children to do more than the assigned problems.**

Considerable practice is necessary for your children to hone their math skills. If the teacher only assigns the even problems, having them do some of the odd ones will strengthen their skills. The more time your children spend practicing their skills, the sooner they will develop confidence in their abilities.

**#7: Explain how to solve word problems.**

Mathematicians have an expression: To learn to solve problems, you must solve problems. Teach your children to read a word problem several times. Also, have them draw a picture or diagram to describe it. Make it easier for them to understand the steps in a problem by teaching them to substitute smaller numbers for larger ones.

**#8: Help your children learn the vocabulary of mathematics.**

They will never get a real feeling for math or learn more advanced concepts without an understanding of its vocabulary. Check that your children can define new terms. If not,

have them use models and simple problems to show you they understand how the term is used.

**#9: Teach them how to do math "in their head."**

One of the major ways to solve problems is by using mental math. Kids should use this method frequently instead of using pencil and paper or a calculator. When helping your children with a problem, help them determine when it would be appropriate to use mental math.

**#10: Make mathematics part of your children's daily life.**

Mathematics will become more meaningful when your kids see how important it is in so many real-life situations. Encourage them to use math in practical ways. For example, ask them to space new plants a certain distance apart, double a recipe, and pay bills in stores.