

How to Say It: Homework Hassles

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(The

Help Your Child Develop Good Study Skills

following is a chapter from *How to Say It to Your Kids*, by Dr. Paul Coleman.)

Joshua hovered over his math homework, writing furiously. He had five minutes to finish before his bus arrived.

"Mom!" he called. "Will you help me? I can't do this problem!"

"You told me you finished your math last night," Mom said.

"It was mostly finished. Will you do this problem for me? I'm going to miss my bus."

"No. You know how to do that-"

"Please!" Josh said. "I don't have the time!"

"You should have thought of that last night when-"

"Mom, you're not helping me!"

Helping your child to develop proper study skills will save you and him lots of needless aggravation.

Things to Consider

There is no accepted standard for the amount of homework a child can reasonably expect to do on a daily basis. However, a common formula is to allow ten to twenty minutes a night for a first-grader, and ten minutes per night added for each grade level. Thus, a fifth-grader might average nearly an hour a day of homework while an eighth-grader may average ninety minutes or more. (Note: Children watch between three and four hours of TV per day. Something is wrong.)

Children often try to do other things while studying, such as watch television or talk on the phone. If so, they may spend double or triple the time it would take them if they simply sat at a desk and quietly did their homework.

Unless you know what the homework assignments are and when they are due, you cannot help your child organize his time. One fourth-grade boy -- with good intentions -- began reading a book the night before his written book report was due. He completely underestimated the amount of time required to do the assignment.

If your child rarely has homework or is able to complete it in school, she is not being challenged. You are doing your child a disservice to allow that to continue.

Spelling words, historical facts, geography, etc., can be reviewed in the car when driving to a store. It's a great idea to use words or facts that the child has already been tested on to demonstrate how material can be forgotten unless it is reviewed. This technique is especially helpful for students who take comprehensive exams at the end of a quarter.

Your children will eventually discipline themselves to do homework if you value such discipline. Do you do your work on time? Do the kids see you postponing necessary work and wasting time? Do they see you reading books and eager to learn new things? You will have made a huge, positive step when your children ask permission to watch television instead of your asking them to turn it off. TV should be an infrequent privilege, not a daily right.

How to Say It

The most important thing to teach (repeatedly) is that you value education and you value homework as an essential tool for educating your child. Of course, most kids would rather play than do homework. You can empathize without losing sight of your values. "I know that you'd rather not have any homework. I remember feeling that way, too. But I want you to learn as much as possible because I know you will have more choices when you get older if you do the best you can in school."

Children need help persevering when assignments get difficult. For that to happen, they need to believe they have what it takes to succeed. At least they need to believe that solid effort will most often yield solid results. Praise specific study skills and praise effort. "You came right home from school and immediately went to your desk to do homework. That was smart. I noticed that you reviewed your chapter when you didn't know how to answer the homework problem. That was a smart idea, too."

"I can see that you tried to figure this problem out yourself before you asked me for help. That shows good effort."

When assisting a frustrated child with her homework, parents make one of three mistakes: They, too, get frustrated and therefore aggravate the situation; they do most of the work for the child (big mistake -- it rewards whining and procrastination); or they pull away and offer less help. The better approach: "I can see that this is frustrating for you. I can do the first part of the problem for you and you can finish it, or you can do the first part and I will finish it. Which do you prefer?"

"It seems as if no matter how I try to help, you are still frustrated. Maybe we both could use a five-minute break. Consider a snack or a walk outside, but do not let this become a habit to stall what really needs to be accomplished.

Have your child speak aloud his thinking process as he works through a problem. That can help you detect where his confusion might lie. "Let me show you what I mean. I'll talk out loud while I do this addition problem. Six plus four is ten, so I put down the zero and carry the one..."

Don't make overseeing homework a chore. If it's an aggravation for you, then your child will be less likely to enjoy it or less likely to ask for help when needed. "Oh, good. It's time to look over your homework. Let me finish drying my hands, and I'll be right over."

"If you have a homework question, you can always come to me. If I am busy, I'll quickly stop what I'm doing and answer your questions." Show by your actions that homework issues are very important to you as a parent.

How Not to Say It

"Did you do your homework? Good." Ask what the homework was and then check it over. Show an interest. It's an opportunity to catch mistakes or praise good effort.

"You didn't have any homework today? Oh." Be more curious. Did your child have homework but finish it in school? Is not having homework typical? Unless your child is an extremely efficient worker, in most situations, there may be a small amount of work to finish up, or even an entire subject's assignment depending on your child's grade.

"Okay, I'll do it for you this time. But next time you'd better have your assignment finished the day before it's due!" The problem here may be as much yours as the child's. It is not your job to do it for your child "just this time." That would be a form of rescuing him that would enable that pattern to continue. Rather, help your child understand the consequences of procrastination. Catching up on homework at the last minute is sometimes inevitable but should occur very infrequently.

"Why didn't you tell me you had a science project due on Monday? Now we'll have to spend the entire weekend working on it!" Get your child into the habit of telling you what his assignments are daily. Some students must write their assignments in an assignment notebook which would be very helpful for you to access so you are aware of long term assignments and other expectations. If you don't inquire regularly, some assignments will slip through the cracks. Even bright children may not organize their time well and may underestimate how long a project takes to complete.

Smart Talk

Homework is even more of a hassle when parents disagree on how much help to give their child. Be careful about spousal power struggles. The husband who thinks his wife is too lenient may oversee homework in a strict, harsh way in order to compensate for his wife's leniency. But the wife may overindulge her child as a way of overcompensating for her husband's military style of teaching. In neither case is the child being truly helped. If this describes your marriage, begin with the premise that the best approach is what works for your particular child.

Ideally, you want your child to be able to do as much of the work on her own but be able to ask for help when needed. Homework should be challenging but not too frustrating or overwhelming.