

Homework: Be a Stage Manager

*When it comes to homework, your role is to create a situation where your child can succeed, **not to do his work for him**. This expert advice tells you how.*

by Lani Harac

The last bell of the day rings and classroom doors bang open. Kids crowd the hallways in their hurry to get home. School's out, after all—they're finally free!

But they've forgotten one thing, at least for the moment: Those backpacks they carry are heavy for a reason. There are math problems to solve and essays to write. In short, there's homework to do. But though it may be the last thing your student wants to do, spending time on homework doesn't have to be a chore—or worse, a battle.

Dr. Harris Cooper, a psychology professor and director of the Program in Education at Duke University, has spent more than two decades researching the issues surrounding homework. He has plenty of advice for parents.

"There are lots of things a parent can do that don't necessarily tell a child what to do but help them study," he says. Think of yourself as a stage manager, Cooper recommends: providing a well-lit space, making sure there's a dedicated time for homework, having all the necessary materials gathered in advance.

And as much as possible, he adds, do complementary activities of your own when your child is tackling homework. For example, if your 10-year-old needs to read three chapters for English class, you could say, "Let's turn off the TV. I want to read"—then pick up your novel or catch up with a professional journal. Likewise, math homework is the perfect time to balance the family budget.

Once your child gets started on homework, monitor him to make sure he doesn't start feeling frustrated. Let him know it's OK to ask for help. "If they walk away from the work, if they're fidgeting, they're verbalizing frustration," Cooper says. "Ask questions of your child while they're doing the homework. Not frequently, but enough so the child knows you're available."

Sometimes it might seem like your child is spending too much time and effort on homework based on the assignment he's been given. If it does not happen often, Cooper suggests having the student walk away for a quick break or work on something else for a while.

But sometimes when it seems like an assignment is taking hours, the child has only spent 30 minutes of dedicated time on his work. The rest may have been lost to instant-messaging with friends, getting up repeatedly for a forgotten tool, or other distractions and time-wasters. If it's more serious than that—if a child has spent two hours trying to work out a single math problem—there may be more at play.

"In the best of all possible worlds, before it got to that point the parent would call the teacher and talk about what's going on in their house," Cooper says.

When you call, he adds, “the first thing is to not be confrontational and to make sure that the problem your child is having with the homework doesn’t relate to something other than the assignment itself. If parents do that, if they then go to their teacher and say ‘We’ve looked at these issues, and we don’t think the problems lie in how our own lives are structured or how the homework is done, but it seems to be more to do with the difficulty of the assignment’—if you do that, I think educators will respond.”

Whenever homework troubles arise, guard against the desire to avoid your child’s frustration altogether. Cooper stresses that helping kids with homework is different from doing the work for them. “Parents have to recognize that the only thing that kids learn when parents do projects for them is that when the going gets tough, Mom gets going. And that’s not a lesson we want our kids to learn.”

Instead, he recommends helping your child work through the steps of a problem. Give guidance, Cooper says—don’t give the answer. That’s the best way to help your child learn.

Dr. Cooper’s Homework Tips for Parents

Be a stage manager. Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to do homework. Make sure necessary materials (paper, pencils, dictionary) are available.

Be a motivator. Homework provides a great opportunity for you to tell your child how important school is. Be positive about homework. The attitude you express will be the attitude your child acquires.

Be a role model. When your child does homework, don’t sit and watch TV. If your child is reading, you read, too. If your child is doing math, balance your checkbook. Help your child see that the skills he is practicing are related to things you do as an adult.

Be a monitor. Watch your child for signs of failure and frustration. If your child asks for help, provide guidance, not answers. If frustration sets in, suggest a short break.

Be a mentor. When the teacher asks that you play a role in homework, do it. If homework is meant to be done alone, stay away. Homework is a great way for kids to develop lifelong learning skills. Overinvolvement can be a bad thing.

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