

Let the Homework Battles End

9/1/2020

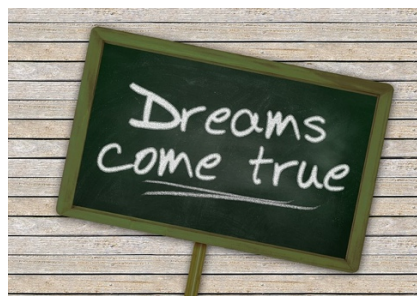
Welcome back! Lisa here. Hopefully Sarah's post last week helped you find some bright spots in our current situation, or at least have a good laugh. Now that the school year is underway in many places, your kids are likely starting to be assigned homework. Yes, the dreaded homework time is back. If your kids are doing virtual school or homeschooling, the "homework hour" may have become the homework day.

Are you expecting (or already experiencing) tears, yelling, begging, storming out of the room? Or maybe you anticipate homework stretching into an all-night affair due to dragging feet and off task behavior?



Every year, Sarah and I talk with parents and their kids about the battles that occur at home over homework. Instead of homework being used to practice skills and cement knowledge, it becomes a source of frustration, anger, and conflict that leaves both parents and kids feeling demoralized.

But what if homework time could be different?



Here are some useful strategies that you can adapt for homework time at your house.

Set up a dedicated homework area: This one might seem obvious, but there are some important features that need to be present. Having an area that is dedicated to homework signals your child's brain that it's time to work. So, an area that is also used for other things, especially for fun things, sends the opposite message. If the homework spot is at the kitchen table, don't be surprised if you see more snack breaks and socializing.

Find a spot in your home that you can use solely for homework. This can be a desk, a table, etc. that is not used for anything else. If you're doing virtual school or homeschooling this year, having a room set up for "class" is very helpful. If space is an issue, it may be helpful to have a homework space that can be put up and taken down daily (e.g., set up a folding table for the day's schooling and then putting it and school materials away neatly at the end of the school day so that the room can be used for other purposes).

Once you've selected your homework space, make sure you set it up with all the necessary materials to complete work- pens/pencils, paper, folders, staplers, crayons, markers, etc.- anything your kids may need to complete homework for each subject. If you're anything like Sarah, this is a great time to indulge in your love for back-to-school supply shopping. It's okay to buy duplicates of items you already have elsewhere in the house and keep the new items in the homework area. If the supplies are right at hand, less time will be spent roaming around the house looking for a pen or a piece of scrap paper and your kids can get right to work.

Minimize distractions: Having a dedicated homework spot is important. To be effective, this location also needs to be in an area with minimal distractions. This means it should be out of sight of the television and is ideally in a low traffic area. For some kids, this may be in their bedrooms. For others, this may be at a table set up in a room that is infrequently used. For homes that are short on space, homework may be done in the family room, but the television remains turned off (and sometimes unplugged 😊). In families with siblings it's often helpful for

each sibling to have their own homework space where they can't distract one another. It's also really important that electronic devices are turned off or put away unless they are being used to complete an assignment.



Routine, routine, routine: Having a set homework time and schedule helps kids start their homework and stay on task. If your kids get into the habit of starting homework at a certain time or after a certain activity (e.g., after practice, after an afternoon snack), there will be less resistance to getting started. They will also be less likely to get involved in a fun activity that they won't want to stop.

If your kids have trouble getting started even with a set homework time, it's often helpful to sit with them to help them figure out the order in which they will complete their assignments. Some kids like to tackle each subject in the same order each day, while others like to vary the order day to day. But many kids, and not just those in elementary school, benefit from help with getting organized and figuring out the best order in which to complete assignments. This has the added benefit of ensuring that they don't forget to complete a particular assignment. As a side note, giving your kids some choice here is important. In most cases, the order they do their assignments in doesn't really matter, so let them choose. Over time, they'll figure out the order that works best for them.

Something that often gets overlooked during homework time is breaks. Yes, that's right, breaks. It's really hard for kids of all ages to sit down and do all their homework in one long block of time. When you're helping your kids come up with their homework schedule for the day, make sure to help them decide when they will take breaks. This may be after completing a particular

assignment or it may be after a set amount of time, or even a combination of the two. Over time, you and your kids will figure out what works best. Here's the key- *breaks should not be long and should not involve preferred activities*. A 5-minute break where your kids get up and move around, maybe go to the bathroom or get a drink of water are great. So are movement breaks where they get up and stretch or do a brief physical activity. Your kids shouldn't stray too far away from the homework area and should avoid too much interaction with the rest of the family as this will make it harder for them to get back to work. Your kids, especially those who are more easily distracted or resistant to homework, may need reminders to end breaks.

Now, if you're not home during homework time, you're going to have to get a little creative. You may do phone or text check-ins, or your kids may send you a message if they need help setting their homework schedule. You may set up the schedule the night before and talk with your kids about how they will adjust it based on the assignments they get. You may even need to get other people involved- maybe a relative or family friend can help with homework duty.

Check in, but don't micromanage: Kids vary in the amount of assistance they need with homework. Some may need you to sit with them while they complete tasks and others may just need you to check their work once they finish. For most kids, they at least need periodic check-ins to ensure that they are staying on task. For those attending school virtually, they will likely require more frequent check-ins if you are not the one providing their instruction. However, and this is important, give only as much oversight/monitoring as is necessary. No one likes to be micromanaged, especially kids. Give your kids a chance to monitor their own progress- if they struggle, then step in and provide just enough support to get them back on track. Avoid the urge to rescue them by stepping in and taking over.

Provide support and encouragement but let them do their own work: If your kids struggle with homework, it can be tempting to walk them through it step-by-step. Some kids may need this for particular assignments or problems/questions, but most do not. I know it's hard to see them struggle and it's even harder to allow them to turn in homework that is not 100% correct.

But, *an important part of the learning process is your kids learning how they learn.* If they struggle and you tell them how to do it, they don't actually learn very much. However, if you guide them in figuring out the answer, they learn a lot more- not just the information required by the task, but the best ways for them to learn and understand new information. They also learn that they are capable of figuring things out either on their own or with minimal help.

Rewards and celebrations: It would be great if kids immediately saw the usefulness of homework and were internally motivated to complete it.



Ok, you can stop laughing now. In the real world, most kids are not fans of homework. You may get some traction with reminders that homework is important to their grades, but many kids will need more than that to keep them motivated. Now, you don't need to throw a parade every time your kids do their homework. But, rewards and incentives for homework completion can be helpful. This is a good time to check in with your kids' teachers, since many teachers set up classroom reward systems that include homework completion. If that's the case for your kids, you can use reminders of the teacher's system as an incentive. Otherwise, you can come up with your own reward system. This does not need to be complicated. You know your kids- they may respond to small daily rewards, like being able to stay up an extra 15 minutes or they may be great at working toward longer-term goals, like a trip to the pool for completing the week's homework. The rewards don't need to be huge and it's better if they are things that don't cost you money- that can get very expensive very quickly. Also, whatever system you set up needs to be sustainable and you have to be willing to make adjustments as needed.



Communication is key: Communication with your kids and with their teachers is important. Communication with teachers ensures that you understand their requirements for homework, including grading and how they use homework to support learning. This is especially important for younger kids- high school students can usually (but not always) be more independent. It's also great to make sure you understand how each teacher informs students about assignments (e.g., assignments written on the board, where assignments are posted in the classroom online portal). The other vital part of communication is with your kids. A common complaint Sarah and I hear from kids is that their parents don't listen to them about their homework. Ask your kids to explain their homework assignments to you. If something doesn't sound right to you, avoid jumping right in and correcting them- this sends kids over the edge and they are a lot less likely to listen to your input. Instead, ask clarifying questions. If you have information that seems different from what they tell you, let them know that and ask them to help you understand. This is a more effective way to get them to listen to your input. Many times, parents learn that their information is outdated or that the teacher gave the students additional information during class. If the two of you can't come to an agreement, it can be helpful for you or your kids to reach out to their teacher or to a classmate to clarify the assignment.

Find what works: Now that you're armed with some ideas, try one or two at a time and see what works for you and your kids. Homework may be unavoidable, but homework time doesn't have to be miserable. Having a plan and working with your kids to figure out what works makes life a whole lot easier and homework a whole lot less stressful.