**End Homework Hassles**

If homework time is always a headache, these strategies will make life easier for your child—and you.

by June Allan Corrigan

**Homework.** It may be the least favored compound word in a kid’s vocabulary and one sure to elicit groans. “But Mom, school’s over. I’m home. Why do I have to do more work?” Sound familiar? Your child hates doing homework, and you hate the nightly test of wills when you push him to complete it. But there is a better way. It starts with understanding what’s keeping your child from doing his work: a lack of motivation or a lack of skills.

“There’s a principle in psychology that states if you want somebody to like something they don’t like, you need to make all of the surrounding conditions as positive as you can,” says Sydney S. Zentall, a professor of educational studies at Purdue University and coauthor of Seven Steps to Homework Success: A Family Guide to Solving Common Homework Problems. Fortunately, striving to create a pleasant homework environment for your child involves using techniques that can motivate him as well as address some specific skill problems.

**Set It to Music**

Research has shown that music is a great motivator. Teens complete more homework with background accompaniment and children with ADHD show markedly better performance when they’re listening to music. Since so much of homework is rote or simply completing unfinished classwork, music can help relieve the tedium, and in the case of kids with ADHD even help them focus. But skip tunes with lyrics, Zentall suggests. ***It’s best to limit kids’ choices to music that’s mostly instrumental so the words won’t interfere with their thoughts.***

**Define a Work Space**

Although a desk is nice, younger children may do better at the kitchen table, closer to you while you’re preparing dinner. Just make sure it’s clear of clutter, including the daily newspaper, junk mail, or any other distraction.

Zentall takes it a step further and suggests constructing a learning station. A trifold cardboard such as the kind used for science project displays would do the trick. On the right side of the panel hang a folder for pending homework; on the left side hang a folder for completed assignments. In the middle, post a list of activities your child can enjoy in five-minute breaks after completing a designated amount of work. That could be five minutes of her favorite prerecorded TV show or a chance to roll around on the floor with the dog after she’s worked steadily on her spelling words for 20 minutes. Once assembled, this kind of learning station can really help center a child who has difficulty completing homework.

**Make Homework a Game**

There are plenty of ways to teach various skills using games. Flash cards are a reliable and fun way to reinforce sight words and multiplication tables. Geography games can help commit all those state capitals to memory, and as for the computer, there’s no shortage of educational software available. Give children choices, Zentall says. Maybe they do have to write each spelling word three times for homework and that’s boring, but try following it up with an entertaining game of Scrabble Junior. Hand them a new set of magic markers to liven up an otherwise mundane social studies report.

Create a bar graph and post it in the center of that trifold learning station. Use it to illustrate to a child the progress he’s making on an assignment by coloring in little squares with one of the magic markers. If there are 10 math problems to do that night, make each one a square. Five colored squares later, he’ll get a sense of accomplishment and most likely make it through to the end.

**Stay the Course**

Eventually there comes a time when kids have to face up to the fact homework is just that—work to be done at home. Nobody likes it, but in reality, everybody gains something. For a teacher, homework extends instructional time; for a parent, it provides a window into the classroom; and for a child, it’s an opportunity to acquire real organizational and study skills that will serve him over a lifetime.

That’s why it’s so important to maintain a firm, serious attitude about homework, says Michele Borba, an educational consultant and parenting expert. Sure, it’s fun to mix it up with games and even rewards, but ultimately your child needs to know that homework has to be done well—no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

**Encourage Independence**

Parents also need to fight the temptation to fill in those last remaining answers themselves just because it’s late and everybody’s tired. “Never do for your child what your child can do for himself,” Borba says. In fact, it’s her mantra for most things child-related and it certainly serves a purpose here. You’re definitely not doing yourself or your child any favors by doing the homework for her. She’ll only come to expect it on a regular basis, and you may come to resent your involvement.

If he’s really stumped by an assignment, demystify directions by having him pretend to be the teacher and explain to you how it should be done, Zentall suggests. This role reversal often yields surprising results as the objective of an assignment suddenly becomes crystal clear. Other ways to help your child include pointing out resources on the Internet or at the library and creating checklists for both long- and short-term assignments.

**Keep Communication Lines Open**

Picture a triangle, with the sides representing your child, his teacher, and you, the parent. Zentall refers to this configuration as a homework alliance. In specific terms, it’s the maintenance of good relationships between parent and child, parent and teacher, and child and teacher. Your monitoring of homework communicates to your daughter an interest in what she’s learning. Don’t let homework disputes come between you and your child. Consider hiring a tutor if things reach an impasse.

Getting and staying in touch with teachers is important, too. Send them an introductory email and don’t hesitate to express concerns as the term progresses. If you think homework assignments are too hard or even too easy for your child, discuss it with the teacher so adjustments can be made. Encourage your child to speak up in class, as well. He needs to ask questions and tell his teacher when he doesn’t understand something. Keeping these three lines of communication open will smooth the whole homework process.

Try a number of different approaches to homework. It may take a while before you hit upon the solution that works best for your child. Of course, if you suspect a particular problem, always seek advice from an appropriate professional, be it a pediatrician, optometrist, school psychologist, or similar. Homework doesn’t have to be a drag for all concerned. Mix some creative problem solving with a little bit of effort, and your family will reap the benefits.