

Homework Problems

Is my child having homework problems?

Your child is having homework problems when he or she:

- Performs below his or her potential at school.
- Has average or better intelligence, with no learning disabilities.
- Doesn't finish schoolwork or homework.
- "Forgets" to bring homework home.
- "Forgets," loses, or doesn't turn in finished homework.
- "Doesn't remember" what parents have taught.
- Gets poor report card.
- Doesn't want any help.

What is the cause?

Some children get into bad habits with their homework because they become preoccupied with TV programs or video games. Some middle school children become sidetracked by their hormones or by sports. Other children who find schoolwork difficult would simply rather play. If parents help these children cut back other activities to reasonable amounts and count on the teacher to grade the child's efforts on schoolwork and homework, most of these children will improve. Motivation for good grades eventually comes from a desire to please the teacher and be admired by peers, enjoyment in knowing things, ability to see studying as a pathway to a future career, knowledge that she needs a 3-point grade average to get into college, and her own self-reproach when she falls short of her goals.

When parents over respond to this behavior and exert pressure for better performance, they can start a power struggle around schoolwork. "Forgetfulness" becomes a game. The child sees the parents' pressure as a threat to his independence. More pressure brings more resistance. Poor grades become the child's best way of proving that he is independent of his parents and that he can't be pushed. Good evidence for this is the child does worse in the areas where he receives the most help. If parental interference with a child's schoolwork continues for several years, the child becomes a school "underachiever".

How can I help my child regain responsibility for schoolwork?

- **Get out of the middle regarding homework.**

Clarify that completing and turning in homework is between your child and the teacher. Remember that the purpose of homework is to teach your child to work on his own. Don't ask your child if he has any homework. Don't help with homework except at your child's request. Allow the school to apply natural consequences for poor performance. Walk away from any power struggles. Your child can learn the lesson of schoolwork accountability only through personal experience. If possible, apologize to your youngster, saying, for example, "After thinking about it, we have decided you are old enough to manage your own affairs. Schoolwork is your business and we will try to stay out of it. We are confident you will do what's best for you."

The result of this "sink or swim" approach is that arguments will stop, but your child's

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schoolwork may temporarily worsen. Your child may throw caution to the wind to see if you really mean what you have said. This period of doing nothing but waiting for your child to find her own reason for doing well in school may be very agonizing. However, children need to learn from their mistakes. If you can avoid "rescuing" your child, her grades will show a dramatic upsurge in anywhere from 2 to 9 months. This planned withdrawal of parental pressure is best done in the early grades, when marks are of minimal importance but the development of the child's own personal reason for learning is critical.

- **Avoid reminders about schoolwork.**

Repeatedly reminding your child about schoolwork promotes rebellion. So do criticizing, lecturing, and threatening your child. Pressure is different from parental interest and encouragement. If pressure works at all, it works only temporarily. We can never force children to learn or to be productive. Learning is a process of self-fulfillment. It is an area that belongs to the child and one that we as parents should try to stay out of, despite our yearnings for our children's success.

- **Coordinate your plan with your child's teacher.**

Schedule a parent-teacher conference. Discuss your views on schoolwork and homework responsibility. Tell your child's teacher you want your child to be responsible to the teacher for homework. Clarify that you would prefer not to check or correct the work, because this has not been helpful in the past. Tell them you want to be supportive of the school and could do this best if the teacher sent home a brief, weekly progress report. If the teacher thinks your youngster needs extra help, encourage her to suggest a tutoring program. In middle school, peer tutoring is often a powerful motivator.

- **Limit TV until schoolwork improves.**

While you can't make your child study, you can increase the potential study time. Eliminate all TV and video game time on school nights. Explain to your child that these privileges will be reinstated after the teacher's weekly report confirms that all homework was handed in and the overall quality of work (or grades) are improving. Explain that you are doing this to help him better structure his time.

- **Consider adding incentives for improved school work.**

Most children respond better to incentives than disincentives. Ask your youngster what he thinks would help. Some good incentives are taking your child to a favorite restaurant, amusement park, video-arcade, sports event, or the movies. Sometimes earning "spending money" by working hard on studies will interest your child. The payments can be made weekly based on the teacher's progress reports. A's, B's and C's can receive a different cash value. What your child buys with this money should be his business (for example, music and toys). Rewarding hard work is how the adult marketplace works.

- **Consider removing other privileges for falloff in school work.**

You have already eliminated school-night TV viewing because it obviously interferes with studying. If the school reports continue to be poor, you may need to eliminate all TV and video games. Other privileges that may need to be temporarily limited should be those that matter to your child (for example, telephone, bike, outside play, or visiting friends). If your teenager drives a car, this privilege may need to be curtailed until his grades are at least a 3-point (B) average. For youngsters who have fallen behind in their work, grounding (that is, no peer contact) for 1 to 2 weeks may be required until they catch up. Avoid severe punishment, however, because it will leave your youngster angry and resentful. Canceling something important (like membership in Scouts or an athletic team) or taking away

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something they care about (like a pet) because of poor marks is unfair and ineffective. Being part of a team is also good for motivation.

When should I call my child's teacher?

Call your child's teacher for a conference if:

- Your child's schoolwork and grades do not improve within 2 months.
- Homework is still an issue between you and your child after 2 months.
- You think your child has a learning problem that makes school difficult.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call if:

- You think your child is preoccupied with some stresses in his life.
- You think your child is depressed.
- You have other questions or concerns.

NOTE: If these attempts to motivate your child fail, he may need an evaluation by a child psychologist or psychiatrist.

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