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## ***Winning the Homework Wars: Practical Suggestions for Parents***

**By Sally G. Hoyle, Ph.D.**

Why has homework become a battle in some families? Well, there is more of it and kids have more things to do. Plus, some children have subtle, unidentified learning problems. As a veteran homework monitor and child psychologist, I believe it is possible to get homework done without nagging and screaming. Lets talk about some of the obstacles to homework completion first.

- **Your son/daughter is lazy.** I am always suspicious when I am told a child is a lazy student. One example of a problem mistaken for laziness is difficulty with “executive function.” A deficit in executive functioning means the student has trouble processing complex, meaningful information and lacks effective methods for analyzing and synthesizing information. They may process information slowly, miss details, and lack organizational skills. With the increased demands on children’s time today, this type of problem can snowball quickly. If you think your child should be doing better in school, you need to arrange a teacher conference, request a psychological evaluation, or find a psychologist in private practice to do the assessment.
- **Increased homework, sophisticated technology and proficiency tests.** Children have larger quantities of homework today. The first thing parents can do to support their son or daughter is to brush up on homework strategies. Here are some common homework tips:
  - Pick a consistent time and place for homework completion.
  - Help your child with short-term and long-term planning if needed.

- Establish a working relationship with teachers.
- Eliminate distractions in the home.
- Praise your child.

Computers have revolutionized homework in a manner that is more demanding for your child. Parents who are not computer literate are at a disadvantage. Finally, trends in education dictate that our children take more tests than in the past. Schools experience pressure to produce good scores on state proficiency and other tests. This results in added pressure and work for our children.

- **More distractions.** When I was growing up, we had three or four T.V. channels and spent a lot of time playing outside. Now televisions, electronic games, VCRs and DVDs compete for children's time. Shopping, movies, sports, music lessons, and other activities have increased for children. If there is trouble with homework, scrutinize your family schedule. Parents should establish guidelines regarding activities and electronic devices. That being said, what incentives could induce parents to be more involved in homework?

### ***Feeling Good About Homework: What's in it for Me?***

- **Learning about your child's day.** If you want to know what is going on with your child, show an interest in homework. As you supervise the homework, you will learn all kinds of things you won't find out by asking, "How was your day?"
- **Teaching him/her organizational skills.** Opportunities to teach your child organizational skills abound when you get involved in homework. Look at each assignment and ask, "How long do you think it will take to do this?" You may need to negotiate break taking. Some kids need many, shorter breaks; other kids need fewer, longer breaks. Tip: teach your child to use the kitchen timer. When there is a report or project, ask about his or her plan for completion. If there is no plan, develop one together.

- **Patting your child on the back.** If parents check to see if homework is done, (Yes, you have to check. More often if your child has trouble.) then you have the pleasurable task of praising him/her on a job well done.
- **Learning about your child's teacher(s).** Teachers spend a big chunk of time with your children and yet, you see them only a few times a year. Parents who monitor homework hear about the day the teacher threw up, how the teacher handles conflicts and about the teacher's dog. This may sound trivial, but I can guarantee it isn't to your child. Remember that part of "Homework 101" is establishing a relationship with your child's teacher.
- **Finding out about how your child thinks. Learning your child's academic strengths and weaknesses.** Is your child more of a visual learner? Does she do better on a test if she makes flash cards or says it out loud? Does he have trouble with a quiz when a map is involved? Does it take him forever to copy something neatly? As homework monitor, this information will be at your fingertips. You can use it to find shortcuts, consult with the teacher, and to maximize learning.
- **Teaching your child to manage stress.** Let's face it, homework can be stressful for parents and children. This is a golden opportunity to teach your child to manage stress. Most adults are used to managing stress and we can pass on our *good* habits to our children. For example, teach your child to decompress at the end of a demanding school day.
- **Making positive contributions to your child's social growth and development.** Talking to children about seemingly trivial things that occur during the school day is extremely important to their social growth and development. In the homework trenches, you will find out about the bullies, the crybabies and the know-it-alls. Your child will benefit from discussions about everyday things, or spending time figuring out how to do a math problem with you.

So, you've signed on as a homework monitor, now what do you do? Here are a few pointers.

### ***Practical Suggestions for Parents***

- **Where does your child do homework?** Does your child need quiet or can he/she work at the kitchen table? You need to figure out which place is best for *each* of your children and develop a regular routine. Some kids require *no* distractions. It can be a challenge in some homes to find the right spot.
- **Things you need to do daily.** You need to look at your child's school assignment notebook. If he or she does not have one, you need a notebook or spot in his/her binder for this purpose. Tip: For a child who has trouble recording assignments, parents can request that teachers initial the assignment book daily. If your child does better with an auditory reminder, Radio Shack sells a pen that records two, 10-second messages.
- **Things you need to do weekly.** Plan long-term assignments. Does your child need to do work on the weekend in order to have a sane week? On music or soccer day, he or she may get less work done and need to spend more time on another day. Some parents need to have weekly contact with teachers.
- **Things you need to do monthly.** Parents should have contact with the teacher at least monthly if the child is having problems. Some teachers like to use voice mail, others request a note, or an email. Some teachers don't mind if you drop by before or after school. Tip: Don't overdue it.

### ***Some Creative Ideas for Studying:***

- Make flash cards. Tip: Xerox parts of the book and use a glue stick to put them on 3x5 cards.
- Make a generic board game out of poster board. Use the flash cards as cards for your 'game'.
- Play "game show" with your flash cards. (e.g., "Name that Conquistador".)
- Use a dry erase or black board for working with your child. Children like using them, and they are great for visual learners.

- When he or she is stuck, have your child read aloud. They can often answer their own question once they hear it.
- Make silly sentences to maintain his or her attention for studying grammar. Examples: What is the verb in the sentence, "Walt farted after Mrs. Smith left the room."?
- If you have had a bad day and you have a spouse or partner, enlist their help with homework. And don't forget an older sibling can benefit from mentoring a younger one.
- Don't complain in front of your child about the amount of homework. If you disagree, take it up with the teacher privately. You need to be on the same side as the teacher. Sympathize with your child, but support the teacher. "Mrs. Bell must think it is really important to learn this."
- Get some resource books for the home if you can afford them: a dictionary, world atlas, world almanac, and math resource book. Ask the teacher for suggestions.
- Have an extra calculator at home. It makes checking math faster. If your child has trouble with spelling, consider investing in a spell-checker from an office supply store.
- If you can afford it, have a stash of office supplies at home. Some folders, report covers, white out or corrector pen for report disasters, graph paper, and finally, crayons, colored pencils or markers.
- When your child is working on homework, support him or her by not talking loudly on the phone in his/her work area, and blasting the TV or music. Don't let a sibling watch TV or listen to music if it is near the homework area.

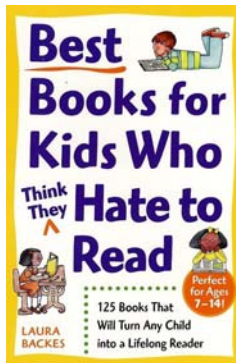
You can teach your child to work independently, with you in the role of trainer or facilitator. Fewer battles, decreased stress, and better report cards are possible rewards. It won't be as much fun as a trip to Kennywood, a museum, or the zoo, but the investment in your child's social and academic adjustment is...priceless.

## References for Homework Workshop

U.S. Department of Education: <http://k12s.phast.umass.edu/~hharg/homeworkhelp.htm>

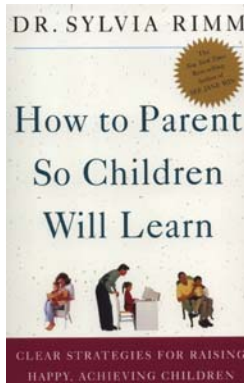
Family Education Network: <http://familyeducation.com>

Educational Resources Information Center:  
<http://www.eric.ed.gov/resources/parent/parent.html>



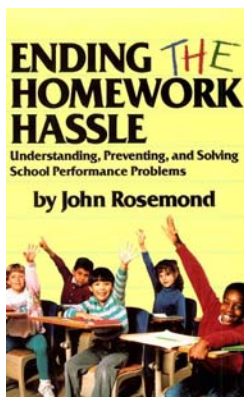
Backes, Laura (2001). Best Books For Kids Who (Think They) Hate To Read: 125 Books That Will Turn Any Child Into A Lifelong Reader. New York: Random House. (www.amazon.com: \$11.17; Barnes & Nobles: \$14.35)

Reading can become a favorite part of *any* child's life—even children who *think* they hate to read. And, with the help of this unique book, it's easy to put your reluctant reader on the path to becoming an *enthusiastic* reader. Inside are 125 books that are certain to ignite your child's interest in reading.



Rimm, Sylvia (1997). Dr. Sylvia Rimm's Smart Parenting: How To Parent So Children Will Learn. New York: Three Rivers Press. (www.amazon.com: \$11.20; Barnes & Nobles: \$12.60)

A child psychologist offers suggestions for parents coping with children with school problems, behavior problems, Attention Deficit Disorder, or single-parent problems. By the author of *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*.



Rosemond, John (1990). Ending the Homework Hassle: Understanding, Preventing, and Solving School Performance Problems. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel. (www.amazon.com: \$9.95, Barnes & Nobles: \$9.95)

Homework can be one of the most frustrating of all problem areas for children and parents. In this helpful guide, Rosemond warns against parental interference and demonstrates ways to help children learn to work on their own and to take responsibility for getting the work done themselves.

(Book descriptions taken from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), 10/02)

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