

Teaching Study Skills

A guide for parents from the National Association of School Psychologists

<http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/parent/homework1.cfm>

Many capable children at all grade levels experience frustration and failure in school. It's not because they lack ability, but because they do not have adequate study skills. Good study habits are important for success in school. Knowing how to study effectively fosters feelings of competence, develops positive attitudes, and helps children realize they can control how well they do in school and in life. Good study habits also lay the groundwork for successful work habits as an adult.

Teachers and parents must work together to help children learn good study skills. Preferred learning styles vary from child to child. Children need to discover how they learn best, work out a study system that fits their learning style, and use that system regularly. Parents of elementary students usually help their children more than parents of adolescents. However, older students also need parental support and encouragement throughout high school.

Four Basic Principles to Enhance Study Skills

1. Make doing homework a positive experience: associate it with love and affection, freedom, fun and self-control.
2. Make homework a high priority.
3. Use homework to teach organization skills and improve learning skills. Remember that the primary purpose of homework is to improve learning and foster work habits.
4. Set expectations for homework, then provide and enforce logical, meaningful consequences if those expectations are not met.

Make Doing Homework a Positive Experience

- Provide support and praise for homework completion.
- Be available to provide non-critical assistance.
- Give children choice in when, where, and how they complete homework assignments.
- Encourage your children to complete homework well enough that they have a sense of pride and control over their own learning and levels of competence.
- Maintain a positive and helpful attitude: avoid criticism and anger.
- Help children understand what types of homework they enjoy, and encourage them to choose assignments accordingly. When given a choice, some students prefer written reports; others prefer hands-on projects.
- Use homework preferences in developing a homework schedule. Some children prefer to complete the assignments they like least first, while others prefer to do their easier or favorite work first.
- If a child dislikes a subject, find ways to make it less frustrating. For example, set a goal of doing five math problems and then taking a stretch, listening briefly to music, or playing with a preferred game or toy.
- Encourage your children to participate in study groups with friends. Research shows that children who form study groups perform better than children who

always study alone. This is particularly appropriate with middle school and high school students.

- Encourage your child to have fun, such as eating a snack, calling friends, starting an activity, playing a computer game, or watching a favorite show when homework is finished.
 - Never use homework as a punishment.
 - Be a good listener, and encourage your child to ask questions about things that are hard to understand.
 - Set aside time for your children to share the skills and information they are acquiring with you.
 - Help children study for tests by quizzing them on the material in a friendly manner. "Drive time" in the car is a great setting for this.
 - Have your children imagine themselves as excellent students. Then brainstorm what needs to be done to make that a reality.
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- Make Homework a High Priority
 - Make clear that you expect your children to complete homework well.
 - Establish a study routine. Children should be in the habit of studying at the same time and in the same place each day. Children and parents should decide on the study routine together, taking into account other activities, family commitments, and favorite TV shows. Also, consider the child's ability to concentrate at different times of the day. Many elementary school children are too tired after dinner. They have trouble concentrating, are easily frustrated, and are slow to complete tasks. Ideally, the family should agree upon a study hour when the television and stereo are off, there are no phone calls, and the entire family studies, reads, or completes paperwork.
 - Establish a place to study with good lighting and a table or desk. Some children prefer to study in their own room. Others do better if they are studying at the kitchen table or other location near parental help. A computer may be helpful, or even required for some schoolwork.
 - Some children are able to study with a little background noise such as music. Few students can study effectively in front of the TV, and most need uninterrupted quiet. Other children may prefer to work at the library, and will need transportation.
 - Have supplies/equipment on hand including binders, notebooks, paper, pencils, pens, assignment books, erasers, dictionaries, a calculator, ruler, computer, tape, glue, reference books and/or software programs. Parents can avoid last-minute panic by asking before dinner whether their child has all the supplies she needs for that night's assignments.
 - Demonstrate, and enforce, that completing homework is a higher priority than other activities. A child should not watch TV and talk with friends before completing homework, unless time later in the day has been set aside upon for homework completion.
 - Reduce activities if a child has so many commitments that there is insufficient time or energy for homework.
 - Have help available for every subject. This might be a parent, neighbor, friend, teacher hot line, an on-line homework service, or a tutor. The helper needs to be someone who is knowledgeable about the subject and who can help the child without becoming frustrated or angry.

- Establish a family expectation that studying for exams is expected and takes priority over other activities.

Use Homework to Teach Organization Skills

- Encourage your child to use an assignment book, write all assignments into the book daily, and check them off when completed. Your child should also break down long-term assignments and projects into smaller parts, writing each part into the assignment book. Many children also find it helpful to put other commitments into the assignment book as well, including music lessons, sports, and jobs.
- Encourage your children to estimate how long it will take to complete each assignment and help them plan their schedule accordingly.
- Help your children set performance goals for their assignments and estimate how much effort it will take to do that well. This will help them learn to divide study time effectively.
- Help your children learn to plan ahead. They should start working on major assignments or reviewing for major tests well ahead.
- Help your children increase their concentration time. At first they may be able to concentrate for only 10 minutes. Parents can help their children build up this length of time gradually, so that homework takes less time. Even high school students should take a 10 to 15-minute break after studying for 45 or 50 minutes. Otherwise, they lose the ability to concentrate.
- Encourage your child to circle the verbs in directions.
- Encourage your child to review class notes and add details, make corrections, and highlight the most important information.
- Help your children to improve reading skills by having them pre-read non-fiction reading assignments (reviewing the headings, picture captions, reviewing tables, charts, and graphs). Children can pre-read fiction by reading the front cover, back cover, and introduction, and skimming the first quarter to determine setting, character, and plot.
- Encourage your child to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words by using the context or by looking them up in a dictionary and writing them down.
- Help your child learn effective reading techniques such as SQ3R, where the reader:
 - Surveys: Looks over the material before beginning to read to obtain a general orientation.
 - Questions: Writes down questions about the material before beginning to read.
 - Reads through the material in the normal way.
 - Recites and Writes: Writes down or gives the answers to another person.
 - Reviews: Goes over the material several times before being tested.
- Encourage your child to outline or "map" reading material for better understanding. To "map," a child places the main topic in the middle of a blank sheet of paper. He then draws a branch for each subheading, and places supporting details on smaller branches going out from the subheadings. This creates a visual aid that increases organization and comprehension.
- Make sure your children understand their textbooks. Children should be able to read 9 out of 10 words accurately and answer a least 3 out of 4 questions correctly.
- Help your child predict outcomes, distinguish fact from opinion, discern emotional appeals, recognize bias, and discern inference as they read.

- Encourage your children to organize their thoughts before beginning a written assignment, and write at least two drafts.
- Have your child proofread and check for success or failure in answering the purpose of the assignment, legibility, neatness, spelling, complete sentences, and punctuation errors.
- Help your child to see tests as an opportunity to "show off" what they have learned, rather than something to be feared.
- Help your children predict test questions as they study for tests.
- Encourage your child to space studying over several sessions instead of cramming the night before. Five hours of study spread over a week is better than studying five hours the night before the test. Cramming for tests increases anxiety and causes lower grades.
- Avoid acting as a tutor for your child. If a child needs a tutor in a particular subject, call the local high school and ask for a student tutor through the Honor Society. It will Provide and Enforce Logical and Meaningful Consequences
- Have your children assess their own homework completion each week by reviewing returned papers, tests and quizzes, and current grades. With your children, note their progress, improvements, areas of need, and jointly plan how to solve any problems.
- Display well done work in a prominent place, such as on the refrigerator door.
- With their help, graph your child's grades. Include the grades for each class, the average grade for all classes, and an agreed upon target line. The target line should be the grades that you and your children agree are reasonable and obtainable (if your child is now receiving D's, a reasonable goal is grades of C. Setting the first goal at A's will lead to frustration). Discuss the graph with your children, help them identify any patterns of poor performance, and work with them to develop solutions.
- Teach your children to bring all necessary materials home. If your children get in the habit of "forgetting" homework materials, have them spend time on reading or working on other academic activities during the agreed-upon study time. Your children could also walk back to school to pick up forgotten materials, or be charged, "gas money" out of their allowance for car trips back to school. Or, with the help of a school psychologist or counselor, set up a system that rewards them for bringing everything home.
- Sometimes children "lose" completed homework in their books or backpack. Placing all completed homework in one folder in the backpack can solve this problem. Packing the backpack for the next day should be part of the evening routine, not a task left for morning.
- If homework becomes a chronic problem for your child, reduce his freedom until grades improve and his teacher indicates that the problem is solved. Methods of reducing freedom might be (a) giving your child less control about where and when homework is completed, (b) checking homework every evening, (c) parents and teachers maintaining ongoing communication in the assignment book, or (d) the child not being able to participate in a planned activity such as a field trip.
- Reward your child for good grades and for improving grades. Consider your child's preferences in determining the reward, but the rewards need not be expensive. Going out together for an ice cream cone, or telephoning a grandparent to tell them of the child's success, are examples of inexpensive but effective rewards.

- Provide support and genuine praise for homework completion and good study habits.

Resources

- Backpack Basics - TeachersAndFamilies' snapshot guide to keeping your elementary student organized.
<http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/backpack.html>
- Study Skills for High School - A primer on ways to meet the new academic expectations that high school demands. (Members only)
<http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/member/parent/hs-study1.cfm>
- Mack, A. (1997). A+ Parents: Help your child learn and succeed in school. McBooks.
- Rimm, S. (1996). Dr. Sylvia Rimm's smart parenting: How to raise a happy, achieving child. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Rosemond, J. (1990). Ending the homework hassle: Understanding, preventing and solving school performance problems. Andrews & McMeel.