

Homework Strategies for Busy Families

by: Sharon Marshall Lockett

Today's families are busier than ever. Meal preparation and clean-up; music lessons; sports practices; and games, chores, and more often squeeze "quality time" for relationship building to a couple of hours or less each evening. Helping your children with their homework may seem like another task that takes up too much time. Fortunately, homework is something that can be managed creatively, reducing the amount of time spent on it while increasing its effectiveness and the sense of connection you have with your children.

Make homework a shared activity People often describe the same experience very differently. The same is true of learning. One child will read and remember story details. Another child may not focus on the story's names, dates, and places, but will see relationships and themes instead. Others will see possibilities, practical applications, or outcomes. When these children study together, they can see their assignments from different viewpoints. It encourages them to seek understanding rather than just get through the assignment. It empowers them to ask questions in class if they know other children are confused, too.

Studying with others sends a message that learning is important—that individually, our children want to succeed and that collectively, we support one another.

Friends as study partners. Invite your child's friends over so they can do homework together. Don't be afraid to join in these study sessions from time to time. When you do, ask the students to explain their answers—encouraging them to explore their reasoning helps them learn their assignments more thoroughly. It's all right to let them digress periodically, as long as they get their work done. It makes learning more enjoyable.

Family members as study partners. Two-parent households can optimize their total "together" time by sharing responsibilities for homework, evening chores, and child care. Older brothers and sisters can tutor younger children. The sooner homework and chores are done, the more time the entire family can spend together in conversation or recreational activities.

Networking with other families. Single-parent households can join forces; while one parent helps the children with homework, another can take care of meals, chores, and child care for younger children. These arrangements can provide all parents with a little more time to spend getting involved in their children's education, and a lot more moral support.

Use alternative sites School. Some schools have realized they need to provide homework and tutoring centers. If your school does not provide after-school study halls and tutoring, let them know you need help during the gap between the end of school and the end of your work day. Programs exist to help schools provide trained helpers to students on campus.

Day care centers. Day care providers also should be approached about setting aside time for children to do their homework. Request that they have staff available to help.

Tutoring in the community. Community centers, libraries, and places of worship are among the community-based groups that have begun to offer tutoring. Often, college students who are interested in the helping professions volunteer their time at these locations. Contact your town government to find out whether these programs are offered and how to sign up.

Make the most of homework time The time your children spend on homework can be reduced drastically by applying the following proven principles of learning:

Use senses to increase learning. Research confirms that using all the senses can enhance learning. As psychologist Rosemary Boon puts it, "Sensations may be thought of as 'food for the brain,' and when they flow in an integrated manner, the brain can use those sensations to form perceptions, behaviors, and learning." Reading aloud, drawing pictures, and using mental imagery can help students learn and retain lessons more quickly and thoroughly.

Break lessons into manageable chunks. Children can grow frustrated by studying too much material at one time. Limit new material (spelling words, vocabulary, dates, names) to between 15 and 25 items. Review 20 items and add five new ones during a study session.

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Study the unknown. Students often spend hours studying from a textbook, but most of their time is spent reviewing what they already know rather than studying what they don't know. Divide material to be learned into two stacks: that which they already know, and that which they need to learn. Have them study only what they don't know for 5–15 minutes. Wait 2–24 hours; mix the material up, and divide it again.

Ask questions. Have your child create a question and/or read the questions at the end of a chapter before he or she begins to read a textbook assignment. Tell your child to say the answer out loud when he or she comes across it while reading. This exercise will help your child understand and retain the information.

Associate. Alphabetizing, sequencing, and categorizing make learning easier. Singing information to the tune of a familiar song can also enhance learning and retention.

Personalize. Substitute your child's name for characters in a story. Relate a math problem to a child's allowance. Transfer something learned to an everyday event.

Know your child How do you help your child tackle the homework in a way that makes sense to him or her? Every child is different, so it's important to begin by learning what works best for each one. Pay special attention to the following items:

Food. A child experiencing either low or high blood sugar levels will have short-term memory impairment. Never insist that homework be completed before dinner. Provide healthy snacks during study sessions.

Energy level. Is your child a morning person or an evening person? Evening people need to stay up late to finish homework; morning people will be more productive if they get a good night's sleep and get up early to do homework.

Personality. Is your child quiet and reflective or outgoing and always in motion? A quiet child will sit at a table to read or complete assignments; a child in motion might need to talk through an assignment with you or discuss homework over a game of catch before writing.

Strengths. At what activities does your child excel? Use his or her strengths to help compensate for weaknesses. An artistic child will benefit from drawing a picture about an essay topic before writing. A mathematically inclined child may become more engaged in an art project by drawing and coloring numbers.

Patterns. Observe and record your child's study patterns. Include times of the day and various reactions to food or stimuli. These observations may help your school and healthcare professionals find solutions to learning difficulties.

Busy families often feel overwhelmed by the demands of modern life. Homework may seem like just another obstacle to quality family time. The best strategy for tackling homework is to use study time efficiently and, most importantly, get help from available resources. There is a whole world out there waiting to support us in educating our children.

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