



# Homework Tips for Parents

by Evelyn Beck

Parents who want to help their children succeed in school must strike the proper balance. They should be involved—but not too involved. They should set limits—but allow freedom. They should encourage their kids to excel—but not expect perfection. However, it's not as hard as it might sound to help your kids enjoy their academic experience. Here are 10 tips from experts on how to make this year a great one for your family.

## 1. Create a routine.

"Kids benefit from having structure in their home life," says Michael Popkin, PhD, author of *Helping Your Child Succeed in School* and founder of Active Parenting Publishers. He recommends getting up at the same time each morning, eating a nutritious breakfast, and instituting a positive bedtime ritual that includes 20 minutes of reading (up to middle school). "As the kids get older, they can take turns reading with you," he says. "Let it be interaction time. They can ask questions and discuss what they're reading and talk about other ways a story might end."

## 2. Prepare for the morning the night before.

Avoid morning chaos by eliminating the need for last-minute decisions. A bad morning practically ensures a difficult day at school. So accomplish as much as possible before bedtime, such as helping your child choose what clothes to wear and gathering all needed school materials in the same "launching spot." Having a backpack prepared with all essentials also helps foster self-confidence. "Teachers view our kids as poor students if they always forget critical items they need to bring," says Stacy DeBroff, author of *The Mom Book Goes to School* and founder of the website [Mom Central](#). "It affects teachers' perceptions of our kids as dedicated learners." And those attitudes in turn influence student performance.

## 3. Help your child get organized.

Organization extends beyond assembling the next day's materials. Kids need help developing a system for storing and retrieving items so that they feel in control of their success. DeBroff suggests using color-coded folders each year so that a child can easily connect a color with a subject and thus find material quickly. Helping children keep backpacks uncluttered and storing all school items in a safe place can also train children to develop organizational habits that will serve them well throughout their lives.

## 4. Provide a quiet place for homework, but let your child work alone.

A regular time and a good workspace to complete homework are essential, and homework should be a household priority. On the other hand, remember that the work is your child's responsibility, not yours. "Keep the house quiet during homework time, but don't stand over your child while he or she is doing homework," Popkin says. "Be available to help. But you don't want to make it a 'Let's sit down and do our homework' process." Remember that homework provides important information about student comprehension to teachers, so you do your child a disservice if you correct answers. If you feel that you must help, point out mistakes but let your child figure out how to fix them.

## 5. Limit distractions.

Television, computers, and video games can be a huge competitor for your child's attention, especially when it comes to homework, so limit these activities, at least on school nights. But the problem with these kinds of diversions extends beyond the way they waste time because they also create a mindset in children that makes school seem boring. "TV encourages children to be passive recipients of information and trains their brain to pay attention to rapidly changing, highly stimulating information," says Robert Needlman, a developmental and behavioral pediatrician at MetroHealth Medical Center in Cleveland. "As a result, kids tend to turn off and tune out from less highly stimulating information, such as someone reading to them or a teacher talking to them."

## 6. Encourage intellectual curiosity.

Engage your child in dinner-table conversations. Share your own interests, such as what you've learned recently about gardening or playing the piano. Talk about current events. Nourish your child's curiosity about the world, and you will instill a love of learning. "When my child was young, we would take family walks and play a game in which one of us would be a legislator and one of us would be the president and one of us would be a representative from the other house," Needleman says. "Somebody would propose legislation such as 'I propose we should have extra dessert.' Then we'd debate it."

## 7. Allow free time.

Every child needs time to unwind, so be sure that at least part of each day is free of responsibilities. In particular, don't overschedule your child with too many afternoon activities. "After a long day at school, if you're zipping off for trumpet lessons or soccer practice, there's suddenly very little downtime," DeBroff says. "You have to make sure your children have pockets of time to replenish their energy." Opportunities for unstructured play, according to a report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, protect children's emotional development as it helps them manage stress and become resilient. The absence of such free time creates unnecessary anxiety.

## 8. Build relationships with teachers.

"Open the lines of communication," says DeBroff, who suggests writing a letter to the teacher at the beginning of the year about what motivates your child and possible areas of difficulty. She also suggests asking the teacher how things are going and being open to hearing about problems. And don't criticize teachers, especially in front of your child. "Make teachers more ready to put in extra effort when stumbling blocks appear," she says. "If teachers feel they are getting criticized by parents or getting disrespectful attitudes from children, it really affects how the kids are doing."

## 9. Focus on effort rather than grades.

Show confidence in your children's abilities but don't ask too much of them. "If you're always raising the bar, they never feel quite good enough," says Popkin, who advises starting with strengths. "If they get a report card and they've got A's and B's and also one C, don't just jump in on the C. Start with a focus on what they did well. Then talk about how they feel about the C and whether that represents good effort for them or if they need to work on it."

## 10. Learn how to step back.

When evaluating your child's overall performance, be careful not to let your own ambitions take over. "When parents get too involved, by definition kids are miserable," Needleman says. Resist the urge to micromanage your child's education. School is your child's job, not yours. Stop worrying about whether your child is doing well enough to get into a good college. The result of such pressure is that children feel like failures. "A child that might have been a really happy average student and would go on to be perfectly successful in life might become an unhappy average student or an unhappy above-average or excellent student struggling to deal with depression and anxiety."

