



by Karen Stephens

Homework-Friendly Homes Help Children Learn

Modern technology's ability to shed new light on old information is advancing at an incredible pace. Living in such times influences how children should be educated. I'm all for kids learning new facts and knowledge. But a child's education should not focus primarily on spouting facts learned through rote memorization.

We can't fathom what children will need to know in the future. What I do feel sure of is this: Children will be best prepared to survive and succeed if they are taught to be competent learners.

Children who "learn how to learn" will have skills needed to respond wisely and logically to whatever set of facts or conditions they will face in the future. Preparing children to explore, discover, change, modify, and adapt is a blessing that will last a lifetime.

For children to reach their learning potential, parents must be active partners with children *and* teachers throughout the education process. Supporting school-age children's efforts in homework is a great strategy to put into practice. Regular and reasonable homework geared to your child's abilities can be very productive. Here are a few reasons why.

Homework:

- requires children to be an active partner in their own education
- helps children master class information and skills, especially through practice and varied applications
- encourages students to preview class material to become acquainted with basic information
- engages children's interests so they can formulate questions about topics to be covered the next day
- motivates young learners to explore subjects more deeply than class-time allows
- requires students to combine learning strategies; for instance, reading, writing, perspective-taking, and analytical thinking required to prepare and then orally present a book review
- helps children discover that "learning" is lifelong and doesn't only take place within school walls
- creates opportunities for children to master "tools" of learning, such as reference books, web sites, or interviewing knowledgeable or skilled others
- promotes children's organization and time management skills
- fosters personal traits, such as independence, self-discipline, responsibility, accountability, reliability, and self-starter initiatives.

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That list should convince you that homework is an important part of your child's education. Below are things you can do to help your child succeed at homework.

- Make sure kids are well fed; get regular sleep and exercise, and experience child care and a home environment in which *everyone's* mental health is ensured. Stressed brains literally impair ability to learn. To allow "learning connections" to link up in a child's brain, overall health fundamentals must be established.

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- Give your child's homework attention *daily*. Provide a way for them to be organized, such as a folder or backpack. Each night ask about homework. Before a spelling quiz or math test, ask if they want some practice during breakfast.
- Make "homework time" a regular routine in your daily schedule. Some children are freshest right after school; others need some play time. Decide together on a homework routine.
- Create a "can do" atmosphere by eliminating distractions. Establish a quiet time. Television and video games should be off during study-time. Limit calls, or better yet, put the cell phone on vibrate rather than ring.
- A space that says, "My workplace," helps children shift into study-mode. It should be well-lit and have a comfortable table or work desk. Have study supplies organized within reach to help kids avoid procrastination. Supplies will vary with your child's age and can run the gamut from paper and pencils to calculators and maps. Ask your child's teacher for recommendations.
- You are a prime role model. Use homework time as an opportunity to balance your checkbook or make the grocery list. This shows a child how school learning is used in "real" daily life.
- Avoid taking over children's responsibilities, "touching up", or completing their assignments. Those practices undermine children's confidence, honesty, and sense of responsibility.
- Guide children through the steps of homework completion. Checklists of what needs to be done are rewarding as well as good reminders. Just as adults do, kids love "seeing" their progress by checking off their "to do" list.
- Provide a simple snack or glass of water if your child's concentration fails.
- Help children learn to problem solve by breaking down homework into manageable steps. Ask questions according to your child's age. Examples: Do you understand what the assignment requires you to do? Which assignment has the earliest deadline? What materials will you need to review or prepare to complete the homework?
- When homework is complete, or when a child makes a learning "break-through", voice your admiration and remind them they can be proud of themselves, too.
- If your child has an especially hard time with homework, call or e-mail his/her teacher. Teachers can give you insight and tips to your child's individual learning style and study needs.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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