



by Karen Stephens

Procrastination: Responding When Children Delay Chores or Homework

When it comes to meeting expectations and deadlines, energetic children can quickly turn lethargic. They drag their feet doing chores, mope toward homework, and dilly-dally their way to piano practice. Just like grown-ups, sometimes kids can be undisciplined and, well, downright lazy.

Children develop some creative procrastination tactics, too. During homework, they escape by “all of a sudden” remembering to groom the kitty. And when they should be brushing the cat, they loll around in front of the television.

Procrastination is a nasty habit that adds unnecessary pressure to daily life. For a small few, the stress of procrastination may lead to inspiration; but for most of us, it just leads to desperation.

When children procrastinate, they undermine their performance. For instance, homework assignments begun too late don't allow school-age children adequate time to gather and review information before combining it with their own creative ideas. Time to review assignments flies out the window, too. Thus, smart kids can get poor grades just because they procrastinate.

Shedding light on the causes of procrastination helps children conquer the habit. For instance, do children feel confused about expectations? Do they feel overwhelmed or unprepared to start? Are they clueless as to why a task is important and needs to be done? Do children fear failure because they think adults expect immediate perfection?

Facing the answers to these questions can help you coach your child past the impulse to procrastinate. Following are other strategies. They'll help children acquire a good work ethic to sustain them throughout adult life — whether at home or in the workplace.

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Tips to Help Children Avoid Procrastination

- You are a role model, so use time well in front of your kids. Do chores together. During kids' homework time, do your own desk work, such as writing letters.
- Confront the myth of moods. Some kids (and adults!), evade a task by saying: “I'm not in the mood to do that now. I'll wait until the urge strikes.” Don't let kids get by with it. Self-discipline is important. Character is built when kid learn that things need to be done even when we don't “feel like it.” In reality, inspiration is motivated when concrete steps are taken toward a goal.
- Help children set and prioritize goals and determine what needs to be done to achieve them. Assist kids in estimating how much time and what resources they'll need. Keep expectations realistic for children's age and abilities.
- Help children create a calendar or “to do” list that identifies daily expectations. Crossing off completed items gives kids a sense of achievement and confidence. For young children it can be a “picture” showing items to accomplish.

- Suggest children tackle distasteful tasks first so they feel a sense of relief. Starting is the biggest hurdle; help children take small steps to get the ball rolling.
- Help children break tasks down into manageable “can do” parts. Cleaning a room includes steps such as picking up toys or clothing, then dusting, followed by vacuuming.
- So chores are completed thoroughly, provide a checklist for steps to accomplish. This avoids children “forgetting” steps or feigning confusion.

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- Set up a “reward” for making gradual progress. Make leisure enjoyments dependent on accomplishing required tasks or chores: “Once you finish your spelling assignment, you can play a video game for 15 minutes.”
- Help kids think and approach life positively by giving them mottos to live by, such as “You can do it!” “Where there’s a will there’s a way!” “Do it now!” or as name-brand Nike® says it, “Just do it!”
- Make homework and chore time a regular routine. Decide if everyone will clean house together Friday night or Saturday morning. Or assign chores to different days of the week.
- Encourage organization. Chore supplies should be stored together and easy to carry. Homework supplies should be stocked so kids don’t procrastinate by getting up and down looking for a pencil, paper, or book.
- Set the right atmosphere. When physical labor is needed, lively music can rev up everyone’s tempo. However, music or television during homework is a distraction to be avoided.
- Even if it’s hard to watch, *consistently* require children to endure the *real* consequences of their procrastination. Keep a strong backbone, put pity aside, and avoid taking over children’s chore responsibilities or homework assignments. Those practices undermine children’s confidence, honesty, as well as sense of responsibility and accountability. It’s short-term help that leads to big long-term problems.
- Praise the positive whenever possible. Comment when kids successfully meet expectations and deadlines. Draw attention to how good it feels NOT to be stressed and feeling “under the gun.” Whenever possible, voice your admiration and remind children they can be proud of themselves for not giving in to procrastination. And remember to pat yourself on the back, too!

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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