

HOMEWORK: A Hazard to Family Life?

By Ruth Ettenberg Freeman, LCSW

In my work as a parenting educator over the past twenty years, homework has continued to represent a consistent challenge for parents. In many cases, parents are spending some or all of their evenings engaged in nagging and power struggles with their children as they attempt to function as “homework police” instead of connecting with their family.

The following comment arrived from a flurry of emails I received in response to a question that I sent to our national Parenting Educators listserv. Parenting education professionals from around the country were in agreement -- homework can present a host of problems for family life:

My husband is a child and family psychotherapist, and he says that no matter what the presenting problem, practically all the families he sees have battles over homework every night. Teachers don't realize the impact that their assignments have on the home life of the family.

I have found it helpful to invite parents to look at homework from the following perspectives.

Who owns this problem? When a child is struggling with homework, complaining about it, or generally not handling it, there are a few possibilities. Parents can ask themselves three questions about any problem to determine who needs to do something about it:

- Is my child too young to handle this problem?
- Will this problem result in any harm to person or property?
- Are my rights being violated?

In most cases regarding homework, the answer is NO to all three questions, which means that the child owns the problem. Exceptions might occur when children have behavioral health issues or other disabilities or when the homework is clearly inappropriate to the child's development stage.

Once we are clear about who owns a problem, we can then explore the parent's role. When a child owns a problem, some of the options that parents might consider are:

- Do nothing and allow child to handle the problem.
- Use reflective listening to let your child know that you have compassion for what he or she is experiencing and that emotions are normal and okay with you – *You sound frustrated about getting your homework done tonight.* (This is used only if you believe the child's issue with homework is a legitimate one. If he or she is simply not in the mood to do homework, I would suggest going back to the first option -- do nothing.)
- Use exploring alternatives – a structured method of problem solving with a child to think through how they can handle this challenge if the child seems serious about wanting to solve their problem.

If parents believe their child is receiving homework that is inappropriate in terms of the child's capacities, quantity or nature, and that their child is too young to handle the problem, then I recommend they set up a meeting with parent, child and teacher to discuss the issue.

Research suggests that parent involvement in children's education is strongly associated with positive academic outcomes for students. The nature of that involvement is important. In terms of homework, the parent who wants to invite cooperation can use any of the following approaches offered by Elizabeth Pantley, author of *Kid Cooperation and Perfect Parenting*:

Encourage (don't praise) your child when you see them working at homework. Encouragement includes:

- Simply notice – *I see that you are doing a lot of math examples tonight.*
- Acknowledge effort – *Looks like you are working hard at your spelling.*
- Acknowledge progress – *You completed more of your reading tonight than you did last night.*
- Express faith in your child – *I know this is a challenging assignment, but I have seen you handle some tough challenges in the past.*
- Express appreciation – *I appreciate it when you get your homework done so we have time to play checkers together tonight.*

Encouragement is a special gift because unlike praise it can bring about extraordinary outcomes. One parenting class participant had seven-year-old male triplets, two of whom had been diagnosed with ADHD. She was feeling desperate because one of her sons was a year and a half behind in his reading level. She fought with him every night to read for 20 minutes together. It rarely happened, but there was plenty of conflict.

She decided to experiment with encouragement only – showing appreciation for the slightest effort – such as just bringing home the book or reading for two minutes. She used all of the encouraging language described above. She refrained from all criticism, nagging, and power struggles. In one semester he reached his age level for reading and began asking her to read with him every night. Encouragement can be magical indeed.

In consultation with the child, set some boundaries and negotiate agreements about the time and place where homework will be done. Stick to those boundaries in a firm and friendly way. If homework time is from 5:30 to 6:00, then consider it “quiet time” or “no technology time.” The child does not have to do homework, but he or she does have to refrain from watching TV, playing electronic games, or computer games.

Avoid using rewards and punishment with homework. It is, remember, not a parent's problem. Exceptions to this may occur with children who have a diagnosis of ADHD or Oppositional Defiant Disorder who need behavioral plans that usually require professional consultation to be effective.

When children come to you for help, offer assistance only in the following ways:

- Review homework instructions and check for understanding.
- Offer an example of how to do the problem.
- Review the completed work if the child requests it.

Homework assistance should be brief and positive. It needs to be okay with parents if their child does not do their homework perfectly. In order to develop an “internal locus of control” children need the opportunity to make mistakes, use poor judgment, and even fail. Typical parental interventions with homework such as nagging, reminding, coaxing, yelling, shaming, and punishing are simply ineffective and worst of all may hurt the child's self concept and/or the parent-child relationship.

Recent research strongly indicated that the most significant protective factor for adolescents who refrained from harmful behaviors was their perception that they had a positive relationship with one caregiver. Nightly bouts of homework power struggles will most likely not help with the development of that essential relationship.

I asked some education professors what teachers are taught about effective homework. It appears that most teachers receive little, if any, training on how to design effective homework. The Harvard Graduate School of Education sponsored a forum in September 2004 called “The Homework Wars.” The panel included Etta Kralovec and John Buell who authored a book called: *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*. These authors argue that the research on the value of homework is poorly designed and they question its academic value, especially in elementary years.

Experts are currently debating the importance and outcome of after school assignments. One way for parents to become more involved in their children's education is to develop working committees with teachers and parents to evaluate the way homework is designed, the appropriate amount, the role of parents in homework, and the effectiveness of this sometimes family-challenging activity in terms of academic outcomes for children.

Most importantly, however, parents must consider the significance of a positive parent-child relationship and find ways to influence good homework habits that are based on parents expressing interest in their child's work, using encouragement to invite cooperation, and celebrating accomplishments -- even the small ones like getting started on that much dreaded assignment!

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