

Powering Into the Homework

by Maria Gill

It is a weekday afternoon and nine year old Peter's eyes are glued to the TV set. Rather than thinking about his homework project that is due tomorrow he is wondering how many programmes he will watch before his mum notices.

For many families homework time is a battlefield. If you can persuade your children to start, you have only won half the battle. They often have to be nagged to complete it and to put in the best effort they can. Sound familiar?

Matakana School Principal, Neville Johnson, says all parents have difficulties with their children over homework.

"Homework needs to be relevant to what they are doing in class and marked straight away or children will not be motivated to do it."

While most parents realise homework is essential to their children's learning and know they should be monitoring it they have little idea of how to actually help them do it.

Homework helps children to take information they have in their short-term memory into their long-term memory. It is an opportunity to do projects and finish work when there is not enough time in class. It teaches children to be independent workers and to time manage.

So how do you get rid of the homework blues?

The first important step is to provide a supportive learning environment. When they get home from school, let them wind down and provide a snack and drink. Let them tell you about their day. About 4.00pm you need to round them up giving them a five minute warning that it will soon be homework time. Provide a homework kit (pencils, rubbers, pens, rulers, paper, glue) so they do not spend time looking for equipment.

Encourage them to sit at a table and have few distractions around them. Turn off the television and radio and do not allow toys in their reach. If your child hates sitting then set them up at a bench so they can stand, let them lie on the floor or give them a special desk.

Next, with one child at a time look over the set homework. Underline all the key words i.e. describe, explain, draw, report. Break the homework into chunks. If they have to write a report get your child to brainstorm, mind map, research, note take, draft and lastly write a final copy with illustrations. Decide which tasks need to be done today and divide the other tasks up over the week.

If you are juggling activities after school or work you need to find a system that works for you but still gives them quality time. You can ask your child to read to you while you are driving. Call out the spelling while you are peeling the potatoes. Help with the mathematics while the vegetables are cooking.

If the homework is too difficult, irrelevant or too much then you need to have a meeting with the teacher. If the work is not getting marked, mark it at home. Talk to their teacher about how you can best help your child.

So what about a child who is struggling with their homework?

Children will make mistakes with their homework. Instead of telling them the answer: ask them to re-check it, do it back-wards, use a calculator, or read it out loud to check its fluency and meaning. Ask them questions to steer them in the right direction. For example, 'Have you remembered to do your proofreading?' or 'What could you do to give it the 'wow' factor?' Resist all temptations to do it for them.

Children who do not persevere with their homework often find it over-whelming. As soon as they come to something they are unsure of they give up. Chunk it down into smaller manageable steps so that it does not seem insurmountable. Guide your child through the process using questions rather than a critical tone. At all times you need to be encouraging and affirm what they are achieving.

Offer incentives like: you can watch television once you have finished; you can have a friend over to play on Friday if you do your homework every night. Talk to your child to see what they would like as an incentive.

You could also use a Homework Incentive Chart. For each night they: start their homework without grumbles, do it in the allotted time, write it neatly and complete all tasks give a tick. At the end of the week reward them with an activity (avoid food rewards) like going to the park after school, the beach, play a family board game or go bike riding.

When memorising spelling or time tables encourage them to use a strategy that will suit their learning style. With visual learners; children who read and draw a lot, write up the material they need to learn and place it on the fridge, on the mirror in their bedroom/bathroom, on the car seats – places they are going to continually see it.

With audio learners; children who sing and talk a lot, tell them to record it on a tape, make up a rap, chant it while doing the dishes or walking to school.

With tactile learners; energetic children who fiddle and move around a lot – encourage them to write it in chalk outside, do it on the computer, or shape the answers in play dough.

Encourage them to use all three learning styles when they are studying for a test. The more ways their senses can learn information the more likely it will go into their long term memory.

When listening to your child read let them finish the whole page before asking them to repeat a word they have mis-read. They can get clues from the pictures, by reading the whole sentence out and thinking about which word would suit best, looking at the word and sounding it out chunk by chunk. Chunking involves splitting the prefixes, middle word and suffixes i.e. pre-fix-es.

After they have guessed the word ask one or two questions to see if they have understood what they are reading. For example, 'How many dogs ran after the pig?' (explicit in text), 'How do you think the pig is feeling?' (implied or judging).

With regards to helping with mathematics, you might have noticed that your school has changed their approach to teaching it. This is happening throughout the country. If your school has begun the new programme ask them to put on an educational evening for parents.

The new method encourages children to use different strategies to solve sums. It might not be the way you solve a sum but it is important you accept their strategy as a valid approach. If you wish to help them learn more strategies talk to the teacher about how you can best help. Every child will have completed an individual test and their teacher will know exactly what strategies they are using now and how you can help them move to the next step.

So how can you extend your children and bring the curriculum into the home environment?

Instead of asking teachers for extra work find out what they are learning in school and integrate it into your home life. For example, if they are learning geometry send them on a shape hunt. How many circles, squares, rectangles, hexagons, and ovals can they find in the room?

It can be as easy as getting them to count how many visitors that are coming for dinner and setting out the table with the correct number of knives and forks, to sitting with your child while they look through the web to find more information about their topic, to going to the museum so they can read, listen and touch a real dinosaur.

By bringing their school work into your everyday lives you are making it relevant and therefore giving purpose to what they are learning. It is also helping the information go into the long term memory.

By helping your children with their homework you are giving your child quality time and guiding them to reach their fullest potential.

By encouraging your child to complete and time manage their homework you are providing a supportive learning environment and setting them up for life.

With these new strategies to power into the homework you will not have such a big challenge to convince little Peter that his homework is more important than watching television.

If you wish to know more about helping your children with their homework read Maria Gill's new book 'Homework Powerpack' out in all book shops now.

Maria Gill writes books for children and parents. Maria is a Primary school teacher, has two children and lives in idyllic Matakana.