

HOMEWORK WITHOUT BATTLES

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It's the beginning of the school year, and parents and children and teachers are grateful for the start of a new year. Routines are back in place, parents have a little more time to themselves, and we remember why we were so happy at the end of last school year –lunches, busy schedules and homework battles! Sound familiar?

Since I'm writing this article to parents, I will not address my thoughts on homework for younger students (Hint - I'm a long-time Montessori educator), and will keep this discussion to creating a home environment where homework does not have to become a power struggle. To begin with, it's really important to remember that homework is our children's responsibility, not ours. The more that parents inject themselves into managing homework, other than occasional skill/content help, the less likely children are to assume the responsibility themselves.

Objections from parents are often sparked when we begin to assign the responsibility for homework squarely on the shoulders of the student. They often object, saying something like, "But I can't just let them not do it, it affects their grades and their future. Giving them all the responsibility carries too much risk for a child to carry." However, it should be noted, that if assuming or even sharing the responsibility for children's homework produced solid long-term positive results, those of us in the field of education would be recommending strongly, as it would make our life a lot easier! If it worked, then there wouldn't be any homework battles at home. Yet, we adults keep trying what is obviously not working (and I count myself in that group that has kept trying).

So, what can we do? How can we approach the situation with dignity and respect for our children and ourselves? How can we show confidence in our children's abilities, eliminate power struggles, and support them in a way that will allow them to develop responsibility and ownership in their own work? Before we get into concrete suggestions, take a moment to create three short lists to take stock of where you are now and where you'd like to go with homework:

1. Make a list of your biggest stressors around homework. Your list might look something like this: power struggles, lack of completion, child doesn't own his own work, his work is incomplete, child doesn't seem to care, lack of interest, etc.
2. Now, here's the hard part. Make a list of behaviors on your end that may be inviting the some of the above stressors. Your list might look something like this: nag, do it for him, give up, don't provide a consistent time, talk to the teacher for my child, argue, etc.
3. Next, get clear on what characteristics you would like to build in your child, as a student. Make another short list. It might look something like this: independence, responsibility, lifelong learning, time-management, delayed gratification, honesty, integrity, etc.

Now, here are some concrete suggestions:

1. Clarify roles and expectations for adults and students:
 - a. Adults
 - i. Maintaining routine
 - ii. Creating the time and place for homework to be done
 - iii. Helping with content/skill work when asked
 - iv. Communicating home philosophy to teachers so they know what to expect
 - b. Students

- i. Doing the work
 - ii. Asking for help when it's needed
 - iii. Knowing what their assignments are
 - iv. Informing parents in advance what is needed to complete assignments (resources and materials)
 - v. Bringing home their work (binders, assignments, books, etc.)
 - vi. Knowing and keeping track of due-dates
2. Create a "time and place" for homework with your child. For instance, every night from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. is quiet time. Adults and children decide together where this is to take place. It is agreed that that is the time that learning takes place for all the children, even the youngest, and is the time that parents are available for help. During this time there is no media, and your child may or may not decide to do their homework. However, it is important for them to understand that after the time is up, that you are no longer available to help. This is a long-term solution that takes patience.
3. Observe what happens for a few weeks to see what you notice about your child's work habits or ability to make choices for themselves, without adult intervention.
4. Be available for help if your child asks during the agreed upon time, and be in close proximity.
5. If materials or resources are needed for homework, schedule that in advance, and if possible make it part of a weekly routine. For instance, Wednesdays is library day.
6. If your child forgets their work, materials, assignments, etc., avoid lecturing. First of all it doesn't help (they're not listening), and secondly it's disrespectful because it assumes that the child didn't or can't figure out a solution to their problem. Instead ask reflective questions like, "What happened?", "What can you do to resolve this?", or "What's your plan?"
7. Try solving problems together when they come up:
 - a. Listen to their issues without judgment
 - b. Tell them what's going on for you
 - c. Brainstorm solutions that work for both of you
8. If your student needs support in organization, managing time or other executive functioning skills, then try the following:
 - a. Observe and allow them to struggle at first (it is important to really observe without jumping in so you can really see what your child may be struggling with)
 - b. Share your observations
 - c. Check in to see how they are feeling, and what they notice about themselves
 - d. Ask if they would like help
 - e. If they would like help, then brainstorm some ideas to help support their skill development in these areas
 - f. Help without rescuing. Here's a good guide:
 - i. Show your child how (organizing, prioritizing, breaking things down into manageable pieces, etc.)
 - ii. Work with them, while they do it, and helping only when truly needed
 - iii. Work near them as they develop more ability and independence, and encourage them to ask for help when needed (avoid jumping in and helping without being prompted)
 - iv. Work in relative proximity, and help only when asked
9. Finally, facilitate direct communication between your student and their teacher, no matter how old. Avoid talking for your child. Let their teacher know that you are taking this approach, and then be sure to have your child present and engaged for all parent-teacher communication. During that communication, talk directly to your child vs. talking about your child with him/her present. If a teacher calls your house, put your child on the phone with them.

Personal testimonial

I am the Head of School for the Montessori school which my children attend. My oldest child had a rough year last year with homework. In our school, children don't have homework unless they are unproductive in class. The rule of the road is, "If you work during work time, you play during play time. If you play during work time then you'll work during play time (homework)." As a result, my wife and I set up an elaborate plan with his teacher that included, among other things, checking in with the teacher every day, monitoring homework assignments, checking homework for completeness, implementing consequences and taking away privileges if work piled up.

It was a hard year for everyone, and it didn't work, even though we were very involved. The following year we followed the above suggestions, in particular limiting our involvement to maintaining a time and place. Every night, whether he had homework or not, we maintained a quiet time from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. We didn't check in with his teacher on his homework situation, and we established the fact that he was responsible for his homework. His teacher agreed that she would hold him accountable for his work within the classroom. Something magical happened. He made the decision by himself that he would do his homework during the quiet time. It occurred to me afterwards that all we did is prepare the environment where he was most likely to make the best decisions and be most successful. It was up to him to make those decisions. The power struggles were gone, and home once again became a peaceful place for all of us!