

Psst! What teachers wish you'd do at home

SEPTEMBER 2011

parenting

school years

School Rocks!

Homework helpers, cool clothes + more!

Hey, Mr. President!
We've got some ideas for you
p. 116

Improve your kid's school in 5 minutes

**Texting
Tweeting
Friending**
How modern fams handle it all

Brain-boosting breakfasts

Fun & fresh lunch ideas

CALLING ALL GLEEKS!
p. 100



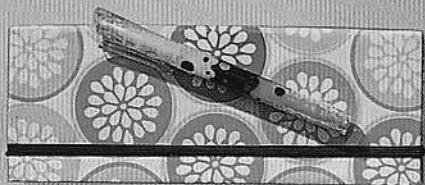
The Homework Survival Guide

The nagging, the battles, the lost papers—do you dread homework as much as the kids do? You came to the right place.

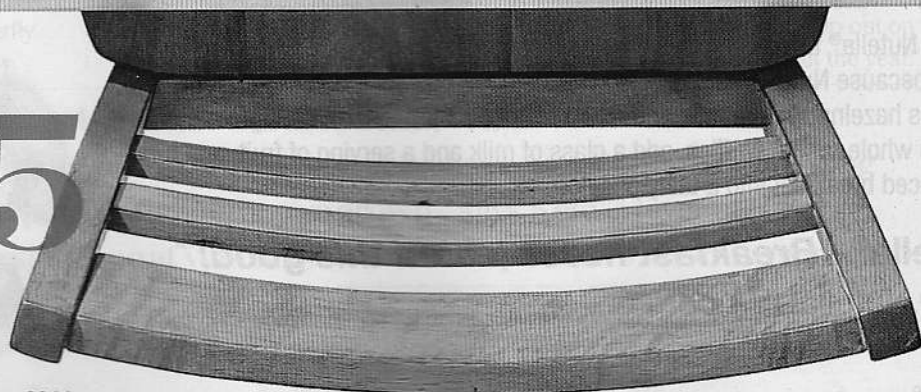
BY TERI CETTINA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL KRAUS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CARLO STANGA



5



STEP 1

Ya Gotta Have a Plan

Sit down with your kids and lay out expectations now, when the school year is starting, rather than waiting until problems arise. "Two or three goals is plenty, and you'll get better results if your child helps decide them," says Alexandra Mayzler, director of New York City-based Thinking

Caps Tutoring and author of *Tutor in a Book: Better Grades as Easy as 1-2-3*.

Ask: What were your child's stumbling blocks last year? Maybe homework time was running into bedtime, so agree on an earlier start time. Did your child resist reading? Work on ways to make it fun—maybe set up a reading tent under your dining room

table. Review your child's homework goals again in October, and perhaps once more in January, says Mayzler. Adjust your plan as you go, letting your child take as much ownership of the process as possible.



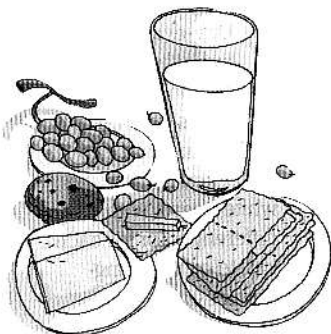
STEP 2

Get in the Groove

"All the research says the single best way to improve your child's homework performance—and bring more peace to your home—is to insist on a daily schedule or routine," says Ann Dolin, who is also the author of *Homework Made Simple: Tips, Tools, and Solutions for Stress-Free Homework*. In some homes, that means doing it right after school; for others, it can mean waiting until after dinner if your child is the type who needs to expend some energy before he dives back into the books.

Dolin recommends giving all kids at least 30 minutes to have a snack and unwind, with one caveat: "That half-hour break really shouldn't involve anything with a screen—television, e-mail, or video games—or you may have trouble getting kids off," she adds.

Giving kids a half-hour break between after-school



BACK-TO-SCHOOL RULES

We know just what you're up to: Along with sharpening pencils, packing crisp folders and notebooks in still-unscuffed backpacks, and labeling shiny lunch sacks, you and your family are making New School Year resolutions. They usually start off something like this:

1 We'll stock up on plenty of supplies while they're cheap. No more tearing apart Mom's home office looking for pencils.

2 We'll work out in advance an ideal time for our children to do homework every day—and always stick to it.

3 We will, somehow, teach our scattered kids to get organized. No more mid-morning calls from the school secretary that a spelling assignment has been left at home.

Like most well-intentioned goals, these homework resolutions will be quickly forgotten without solid underlying strategies for helping your children accomplish them. So get out some wide-ruled paper and take notes.

activities and homework is a smart idea, too. "Sports or after-school care isn't really a break. Kids need to let down a little at home before launching into homework," she says. If your child goes to a babysitter or aftercare program, make a deal that while he's there he'll work on one assignment—something easy he can do even with distractions—every day before he gets home so he has less work later.

The key is to be consistent about the routine. Take a few weeks before homework

gets heavy to try different approaches and see what works best, then stick to it.

What about weekends? Everyone deserves a break on Fridays, of course. But pick a regular time during the weekend for homework. After some experimenting, D'nece Webster of Portland, OR, found that her son Alex, 7, is at his best on Sunday mornings. "He can finish in thirty minutes what might take him two hours on a weekend afternoon," says Webster.

STEP 3

Know When to Get Your Child Extra Help

If your kid is truly stuck on a homework assignment, don't make the common mistake of trying to reteach the information. Your goal is not to become your child's study buddy. Plus, your approach might be too different from the teacher's. "Imagine being a kid learning long division for the first time. You don't understand what your teacher is saying, and your parents teach you another method. When you get back to school, you're bound to be even more confused," says mom and former teacher Laura Laing of Baltimore.

Instead, send an e-mail or note to the teacher asking her to please explain the material to your child again. If your child is a fourth-grader or older, have him write the note or talk to the teacher. It's important that he learns how to speak up for himself. The teacher will likely have office hours earmarked for those who need help. Also ask her about specific websites (many school textbooks now have practice sites kids can use in conjunction with the material in the book) or check out an online tutoring site like growingstars.com or tutor.com, which also has apps for the iPad, iPhone, and iPod Touch.

STEP 4

Pick the Right Spot

Some kids do best with a desk set up in their bedroom so they can work independently; others want to be smack in the middle of the kitchen while you cook dinner. Mayzler recommends letting kids choose their preferred study spot. If your child focuses better lounging on a couch or the floor, "I say let them do it,"

she notes. Wherever your child does homework, keep it distraction-free—no TV, video games, or loud siblings playing nearby. “It’s ideal if you can set a quiet family work time, when younger kids color or do other ‘homework-like’ tasks and you do paperwork or reading of your own,” Mayzler adds.



STEP 5

Try Not to Be So Freaking Helpful!

Of course, it’s okay—and actually necessary—to sit with 5- or 6-year-olds while they do homework. However, your goal should be to help less over time and move physically farther from where your child works. Laura Laing and her partner, Gina Foringer, make a point of staying out of the room where their daughter, Zoe, 11, does homework. That way, Zoe is encouraged to think through her work on her own before asking a parent for help. Even when Zoe

asks a question, Laing often responds with more questions instead of answers. “I’ll ask ‘What do you think?’ or ‘How do you think you can come to the answer?’” says Laing. Zoe often works out her own solution by talking it through with her mom.

When it comes to proofing a homework assignment, less is definitely better. Check a few answers to ensure that your child understands what’s she’s doing, but don’t go over the entire page. After all, your child’s teacher needs an accurate measure of whether she really understands the work.

STEP 6

Make ‘Em Pay

Although you may feel guilty at first, it’s smart to have a one-strike rule when it comes to forgetting homework. If your child leaves her assignment (or lunch, gym clothes, or other items, for that matter) at home and calls, begging you to bring it to school, bail her out,

say, only once each grading period. For many kids, just one missed recess (or whatever the teacher’s policy is for not turning in homework) usually improves their memory, says Cathy Vatterott, Ph.D., associate professor of education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and author of *Rethinking Homework*. But chronically disorganized kids may need more hand-

holding. “Help your child figure out what part of his ‘return homework’ chain is broken,” says Vatterott. “Does he routinely leave homework on the dining room table? Does he forget some assignments because they’re in a different folder?” Create a “Homework Checklist” on the computer and post it near his usual study space.



STEP 7

Push Back on Busywork

Vatterott and other educators are now advocating for changes in the way homework is assigned and used in the United States (requiring teachers to prove the usefulness of assignments, discouraging teachers from grading homework, and more). She encourages parents to do so, too. “Good homework helps kids cement what they’ve learned, but it isn’t busywork, isn’t given in extreme amounts, and definitely doesn’t require parents to become substitute teachers at home,” Vatterott says. A few caveats:

■ Mom and Dad shouldn’t do homework.

If work comes home with “directions for parents,” Vatterott suggests letting the teacher and possibly the principal know that you, unfortunately, aren’t in class this year (some gentle humor helps!), so you won’t be building a replica of a human cell or a California mission, or whatever is required. A project can be a fun way for parents and kids to bond, but if you feel like it’s taking up too much of your time, it probably is.

■ **Watch for overload.** If your third-grader is spending an hour and a half on

just her math homework, for instance, that’s way too much. “Keep track of her time for several days, then talk to the teacher,” suggests Dolin. Sometimes teachers honestly underestimate how long an assignment will take. If your child routinely works long hours because she’s struggling, also talk to the teacher. But if she seems to be slaving over homework because she’s a perfectionist, you may need to discuss a reasonable amount of time to devote to an assignment and then clock her.

Your Kid’s Digital Tool Kit

Then: You went to the library to scan *The World Book Encyclopedia*.

Now: Your child boots up the laptop and has a world of homework resources at his fingertips. Some reliable study sites to bookmark:

- free.ed.gov More than 1,600 resources organized by subject—from history to the arts to science—from the U.S. Department of Education
- familyeducation.com Printable kids’ games, worksheets, and activities; articles for parents
- math-and-reading-help-for-kids.org Homework how-to tips for parents and kids
- readingrockets.com For younger kids who struggle with reading
- studygs.net Study strategy guides to help with time management (and procrastination)
- teachervision.fen.com/graphic-organizers/printable/6293.html Free printable graphic organizers to help kids organize ideas
- vmathlive.com A stimulating interactive site that allows kids to play math games with their peers around the world
- funbrain.com Interactive math and reading games (K-8)
- mathplayground.com Math games and worksheets for elementary and middle school

Teri Cettina is a Parenting contributing editor and mom of two daughters in Portland, OR.