

Homework Help for Kids with Special Needs

Maximize learning, minimize frustration

It's normal for a child to hate doing homework, but for children with special learning, motor or developmental needs, that hatred can blow up into tantrums, meltdowns, and endless nag-a-thons. It doesn't have to be that way. There are ways to make the homework experience less painful for all involved. You may have to insert some of these things into your child's IEP to get full cooperation from teachers, but it's worth it. Done right, homework can provide good reinforcement both for facts learned in school and for parent-child relationships.

Find the right place. It's good for your child to have a regular spot to do his or her homework -- anything that adds a layer of routine to a disruptive task will be helpful. However, it doesn't have to be a desk. Maybe the kitchen table works better, because it's easy for Mom and Dad to keep the motivation up while they prepare dinner.

Maybe lying down on the floor to do homework works best for kids who have a hard time sitting. Even a place in front of the TV can be a decent homework spot if it keeps the distractible part of your child's brain occupied so the rest can concentrate on schoolwork. Adopt a "whatever works" approach to your child's homework workspace. And be prepared to change when it stops working.

Organize your technology. There's a host of items that can assist your child in completing homework with less stress, ranging from low-tech -- a piece of paper with a hole cut out so your child sees only one math problem at a time -- to high -- an Alphasmart lightweight word processor or Inspiration software for outlining and graphic organizing. And don't shut out those other technological marvels your kids are addicted to. Wearing an iPod while working can help your child filter out distractions, and a little bit of GameBoy time can make a good reward for completing small portions of work.



Stay involved. You want to avoid actually doing the work for your child, but that doesn't mean you can't be his or her biggest cheerleader. Some kids benefit from small rewards after very small amounts of work done -- a cracker as a reward for finishing a row of problems, for example. Others may need constant prompting and refocusing to get through their work. Reading or rephrasing questions for your child can sometimes help the right answer to pop out. There may be times when you will have to walk away to avoid becoming a distraction yourself, but for the most part, it will be beneficial for your child to see that homework is something you value enough to invest your time in as well.

Make adjustments. Being involved with your child's homework has another benefit: You can see what's easy and what's hard, what's quick and what's too time-consuming. Then, work with your child's teacher to better tailor nightly assignments to his or her particular abilities. Teachers may feel strongly about the benefits of homework, but they usually don't want it to be a nightly family battleground. Ask your child's teacher if you can cut assignments short if they're causing a problem, or skip them on nights when your child is upset or unable to focus. You may also want to have the option of writing down answers for a fine-motor-impaired child if writing becomes too frustrating. Send a note with the homework detailing your input.

Help your child's teacher understand. Explain to the teacher that your child is often exhausted just getting through the school day, and that homework can take much longer than it does for the average child. What the teacher expects will take 20 minutes can turn into a frustrating hour. Work out regular communications to ensure your child's stress level stays at a reasonable level.

Get the straight story. If your child isn't bringing home an accurate list of the homework he or she needs to do, work with the teacher to improve the situation. Perhaps your child can carry a homework pad and the teacher or aide can check it at the end of the class or the day. The teacher may have a website that lists homework, or be willing to give you an e-mail address so you can make contact after hours if necessary. If your child has a friend in class, get a phone number and introduce yourself to his or her parents so you'll have someone to call to double-check assignment details. You may also be able to get a set of textbooks to keep at home so your child will always have the materials needed.

Ensure delivery. The best homework in the world doesn't do your child any good if it doesn't get into the teacher's hands. Kids with special needs often seem to have a special talent for losing, misplacing or forgetting their assignments, and that can send a grade rolling downhill fast. Check for yourself that the homework is in the backpack each day before sending your child off to school. Then check with the teacher on a regular basis to make sure it's reaching its destination. A chart on which the teacher can check off whether homework was done or not might be a useful option. Use the chart as part of your home behavior plan, giving points or a reward if it's checked, withholding points or privileges if it's not.