

Skill-Building Opportunities

Homework

Question: Every day, my child and I seem to battle over his homework. How can I help him focus on his assignments instead of procrastinating and getting up to play?

It's a challenge for the ages: get your child to tackle his homework. This battle is frustrating and stressful for many families but you can turn it into an opportunity to teach strategies to promote Focus and Self Control.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

1

Make a plan and be a goal-setting team.

Help your child create his own strategies to resist the procrastination temptation. Rather than battling with your child, help him set goals about his schoolwork, then come up with a plan to achieve these goals. This process works best if he makes a list of all his ideas for getting homework done effectively and evaluates what will work or not work about each of these ideas. Then, with you, he can select one strategy to try. After you have time to see how this plan works, talk your son about it and, together, make changes as necessary.

The ability to work toward goals, even when it is hard, is an important part of learning Focus and Self Control. For example, he may want to try:

- taking a short break in between assignments,
- switching to a different task if he begins to feel bored or distracted, or
- setting a timer so he knows how long he has left to remain focused.

Then you can follow up with what he tried and evaluate it together.

2

Be a role model.

Parents teach by doing as much as saying.

Your child takes cues from watching you, so try to model the skills of Focus and Self Control in your daily life. One of the most important ways is to pay attention to him—resisting distractions—when he needs it. Share your experiences and strategies.

3

Set up a learning environment.

The ability to pay attention to tasks and stick with them until completion are important life skills for kids to develop—skills that influence their success later in life. Megan McClelland of Oregon State University and her colleagues found that “attention-span

persistence” in four year olds was strongly predictive of whether or not these same children graduated from college when they were 25 years old.

There is no universal “right” time, place or way to do homework. Helping children develop good homework habits involves providing a routine and a setting where distractions can be managed and work can be done. You can further help him learn the life skill of Focus and Self Control in ways that don’t directly involve homework, but have been found to improve cognitive achievement. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Learn what works best for your child.** After school, does he do his best work right away or after some free time? Does he respond well to a strict schedule or to guidelines like: “No TV until your homework is done”? Learn what works best for your family and stick with it.
- **Create a routine.** Based on the plan you have developed, establish a regular location and time to work on daily assignments.
- **Limit distractions.** No matter what place you choose, make sure it’s well-lighted and as quiet as possible. Research has shown that background noise from the television can disrupt children’s focused attention. If your child wants to listen to music, try it as an experiment and see how it works.
- **Be prepared.** Keep his materials (paper, pencil) nearby so he can get started quickly and independently.
- **Remember the importance of play and time off.** While encouraging your son to complete assignments, keep in mind that he has had a lengthy day of learning at school and may need some free time. Play is a big part of your child’s social, emotional and physical development.

If he isn’t doing well in school, ask his teacher about special help or tutoring that may be available.

4

Play games.

In the Marshmallow Test, a classic study conducted by Walter Mischel of Columbia University, children were given a choice between one marshmallow now or two marshmallows later. Some could wait for the larger treat and some just couldn’t. Those who could wait were more likely to do better later in life, including pursuing academic and personal goals with less distraction and frustration, but, as Mischel says, “Children can always learn self-control.”

Many simple games help children to develop the skills of Focus and Self Control in fun ways. For example:

- Guessing games and games like “Red Light/Green Light” require your child to pay attention.
- Board games or other turn-taking games help your child practice self-control.
- Games like “Simon Says” ask your child to follow simple rules while using his working memory and self-control.