

7 Secrets to Happy Homework and Better Grades

By Jessie Brumfiel

School homework needn't be a nightly struggle for kids and parents alike. Try these proven study ideas on your own or get help from a tutor. Achieve happier homework and greater school success by putting modern brain science to work for you!

Get colorful.

When it comes to homework, disorganization is a killer. Too many kids spend 20 minutes looking for their assignment sheet, and another 20 on the phone asking a classmate, "What were we supposed to do tonight?" Then they take a break with video games because they've been 'studying' for 40 minutes.

It's a worthy investment to equip your kids with loads of school supplies they really love - in vivid colors, unusual textures, even calming scents. Color engages the brain and makes doing homework a little more fun.

Also invest in a homework notepad in which your child writes (1) the class, (2) date of each assignment, (3) all assignment details, and (4) the due date. Their brain's reward center will love crossing off completed tasks each night.

Insist on routine.

The brain controls all your thinking, feeling, and doing. Your doing brain loves habit, and it takes just about six weeks for a new routine to become habit. That means with a little effort, you can train your kids' brain to sit down for homework every night from 7-9pm - or whenever fits your child's schedule.

Avoid letting your kids' feeling brain control whether their homework gets done. As in, "I don't feel like it", or "I'll do it when I feel like it." Tell your kids, "Your feeling brain chooses your friends and your favorite bands. It doesn't choose whether your homework gets done." Period.

Eat and sleep right.

Tell your kids this: new research shows that a fatigued brain can perform up to 30% below its best effort. That means you can drop a B grade down to an F just by staying up too late!

And if your kids can't get enough rest, it's even more important to feed them brain-friendly foods like fish, eggs, and nuts. Teach them to avoid the harmful spike and crash of sugary junk foods and sodas.

Take frequent breaks.

Some research studies have shown kids can only concentrate effectively for about as many minutes as they are old. Plan to give your kids short mental breaks during homework time.

A good strategy is to tackle the hardest subject first, then have your child take a break. Eat a healthy snack, pick flowers in the garden, bounce on a trampoline, or shoot a few hoops. A five minute break between each subject really helps.

Instill a growth mindset.

Researchers at Stanford have documented two mindsets when it comes to intelligence: people who think their smarts were handed out at birth, and those who believe their brain can learn anything. Your child may have convinced herself, “I’m just dumb at math” or “I’ll never be a good reader.”

Those helpless attitudes can be reversed by teaching the growth-oriented mindset. How do you do that? Teach your kids their brain is like a muscle. Tell them it gets stronger every time they use it. Talk about how their math brain buffs up on fraction problems just like their triceps build when they do pushups.

After working with one boy on his growth mindset, I overheard him tell his dad, “My brain knows all this stuff, Dad. You have to get me new stuff to learn so my brain can keep growing.”

Focus the spotlight.

In order for your kids to learn from homework, they need to put information and ideas into their long-term memory. Once it’s there, they can find it again during a test and use it to understand new, related concepts.

Scientists have shown us practical ways to get things into our long-term memory. First, your kids need to focus 100% on what they’re trying to remember. Too many competing inputs – like from TV and instant messenger -- prevent memories from taking hold.

On the other hand, your kids *should* use multiple paths to put into their brains the information they *do* want to remember. Have them read it, then write it, then say it back to you in their own words. Make up a song about it. Draw it. Use funny mental images to remember new vocabulary terms in foreign language and science. Ask them to quiz themselves or make flashcards. These memory boosters will help your kids get better results from their studying efforts.

Get in a learning zone.

When we're anxious or upset, our brain triggers a fight-or-flight response. Our heart pounds, we sweat, and our pulse quickens. This is useful when we need to escape a lion attack, but it's a hindrance when we're grappling with trigonometry.

If stress and fear of failure set in when your child tackles a hard subject, help him calm down before he continues. Quite simply, we can't learn when we're upset. Tell your child that his brain *will* get it. Maybe he needs new study skills, extra help from his teacher, or a little time reviewing past concepts with a tutor. Redirect your child's thoughts to strategizing on how he will learn, not that he can't learn.

Try out these 7 homework tips with your kids, or enlist a tutor to help instill good new habits. Kids are never too young or too old to train their brains for successful studying. Here's to happy learning this year!

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