

# CHAPTER ONE

# Why Homework?

*“With each new day,  
there is a new  
lesson. . . . It  
prepares us for what  
is yet to come!”*  
**E. Skiver**

**W**hat exactly is homework and why should your child do it? Does homework really have any educational value or is it just busywork? What is the purpose of homework? Is it simply a way for the teacher to show that she's doing her job? Does it serve to make the school seem more academic and prestigious?

Although you do your best to comply with homework demands, you no doubt find that homework cuts into your family time. You may wonder whether homework is worth the demands and stress it can put on families.

In this chapter we will address the importance of homework, and how homework provides the skills that lay the

foundation your child will need to achieve academic success. Research tells us that children who consistently do homework have better school grades and test scores. Homework also provides a great opportunity for you to assist your child in becoming successful, and it allows you to keep on track with what your child is learning in school.

This chapter will address:

- Why a child should do homework
- The educational value of homework
- How homework increases school success
- How homework is an extension of the school day



**Snapshot #1:**  
**Why Should My  
Child Do  
Homework?**

Many studies have found that homework is effective in improving academic skills and achievement, especially at the middle and high school levels. However, acquiring self-discipline and the habit of doing homework must be developed at the elementary level.

As a parent, you will do your child a great favor if you understand the benefits of homework and support your child in making time to complete home assignments.

**I**t seems like our family is always short on time. Between our jobs and juggling all the kids' activities, we don't have time for family meals, much less hours to spend working on homework each night. My child is an excellent student, goes to school each day, and is attentive in class. I don't want my child to have to do homework. What should I do?

*Working  
with your child  
and the school  
brings positive  
results.*

**Tip :** In today's world, where many parents have demanding jobs and children join in multiple activities, it's difficult to make the time for homework. However, homework can be extremely valuable and is assigned for several reasons.

First, in a classroom with dozens of students, a teacher might not have the opportunity to see whether each child has understood a concept. By doing homework, a student has the chance to analyze, practice, and then master the concept on his own.

Second, think about the times you've been given a fact or an idea and you say, "I need time to think about that." The same is true for many of the theories put forward during the school day. Children may need time away from classroom distractions to process an idea or may simply need to read more about it at their own pace.

Third, studies show that doing a reasonable amount of homework DOES positively affect a child's ability level—as well as class rank.

Fourth, having a homework regimen teaches a student self-discipline and study skills.

**Snapshot #2:**  
***Does Homework  
Have Any  
Educational Value  
or Is It Just  
Busywork?***

It's important to note, however, that the most educational value comes from homework that is not just "busywork," but relevant to the student in the "real world." A child's interest and understanding vastly improve when homework is both challenging and "real world-based" rather than simple rote learning or dry theory.

**R**ecently, I watched a show on television about the pressures on today's kids. Many of these kids talked about the stress of doing a lot of homework. My son keeps complaining that his homework is the same stuff they did in school. I feel that my son has to do homework that doesn't have any educational value. What should I do?

**Tip:** Homework does have educational value! Multiple studies have shown that doing homework benefits a child in many ways. However, since you have a concern, talk with your son and schedule a conference with the teacher to discuss your feelings.

You may find out that homework gives a child a chance to "think" about things that were presented during a lesson but weren't discussed in depth, that homework allows a child to practice with and manipulate the information. We all know that it's a far different thing to watch and listen to someone else do something than to "do it ourselves." We also know that most of us weren't born being able to do math or write paragraphs. Some skills are vastly improved with repeated exposure and practice. Homework has been proven to significantly raise ability levels, achievement scores, and class rankings. In addition, homework offers you the opportunity to be involved with your son's education, and in many cases, to offer insights on how the subject matter could be applied in practical, realistic situations. In doing so, you help your son see the value of what he's learning.

## Snapshot #3:

*My Preschool-Age Son Is Already Concerned About Homework. What Should I Say to Him?*

**E**very day after she arrives home from school, my daughter, who is a sixth-grader, complains about having to do her homework. My four-year-old son sees this and it's causing him some concern. The other day he asked me, "Mom, what is homework? Is it bad?" What should I do?

**Tip:** Be both honest and positive. Tell your young son that homework is a part of going to school. Consider putting the concept into a situation he understands: If he plays T-ball and you practice batting and throwing with him in the yard, that's a kind of "homework." It's practice done "at home," not during game time, to improve his skills. Even though your workouts are at home and not in the ballpark, and you don't do them with other team members or his coach, point out that he still has fun doing them. And the more practice or "homework" he does, the better a player he becomes.

Show him how homework can be enjoyed. It's a chance to practice skills and gain confidence. Sometimes he practices T-ball at home because he doesn't get enough times at bat during practice sessions or games. The same is true with schoolwork. There may not be enough time to study all the subjects, have recess, and practice what he learned that day unless he "practices" it at home. Show him how you enjoy being with him and that homework, like practicing ball, can be either an activity you help him with or one he does by himself. Explain that the big leaguers—and all people who are successful—work hard to get where they are. By doing his homework, he can do well in school and be a real winner.

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## **Snapshot #4:**

***How Does Homework Improve a Child's School Grades?***

***Children who regularly do homework develop study skills, self-discipline, and self-motivation—all factors that lead to success not just in school, but in life.***

**M**y neighbor's daughter and my son are in the same class. My neighbor is constantly complaining that her daughter isn't doing well in school and that she takes hours to do her homework each night. My son, however, usually finishes his nightly homework within an hour and has good grades. Yesterday my neighbor came over, very upset, saying that homework is making her daughter fail. She wants me to sign a petition to stop homework. What should I do?

**Tip:**

First, make your neighbor a cup of chamomile tea and let her talk. After she is done tell her that you understand her frustration and want to help her. If she is really angry at the teacher, ask whether she has ever talked with him about her feelings or has let the situation get out of control. The first step is to have your neighbor express her feelings to you. Once she's calmed down a bit and her feelings are under control, she needs to schedule a conference with the teacher. You may want to help her write a letter to the teacher stating her concerns or make a list of concerns she can take with her to the conference to stay focused. Help your neighbor understand that school success and homework go hand in hand. It's possible that homework is not the real issue. Her daughter may be having difficulty in school, which is being carried over at home through her homework.

## How to Be Heard: Talking to Your Child's Teacher Effectively

The best way to approach any situation is to be prepared. When scheduling a parent-teacher conference, keep the following points in mind:

### Before the Conference:

- Write down everything you want to discuss.
- Prioritize the list.
- Take the items from the list and make a statement out of each one. Follow up each statement with supporting evidence. Example: I am concerned that my child spends too much time on homework. On the average it is taking four hours a night.
- Look at all the items. If you have more than three items of concern, try to group together those that are similar. Remember: Less is more. Your concerns will have more of an impact if presented in a simple and concise way.
- Take the top three statements and follow up with a nonthreatening question. Example: How can we work together to make sure that my child is getting the best education possible?
- Be sure to take the time to think about something positive that the teacher has done for your child and tell her about it.

## Key Points for a Successful Meeting

- Go in with a positive and cooperative attitude.
- Always be prepared.
- Be respectful and professional.
- Let the teacher know you support him, but also let him know that you want to make sure that your child's best interests are of primary importance.
- If you feel the conference is going nowhere, end on a positive note and schedule a meeting with the principal.

**Snapshot #5:**

***My Son Is Starting  
to Struggle with  
Math***

**M**y son, who has just started struggling with math, repeatedly asks, “How is doing homework going to help anything?” I am at a loss. I want to help him understand the importance of homework in his ultimate success. What should I do?

**Tip:**

Sit down and have a little heart-to-heart talk with your son. It's hard not to sympathize with him. Working on something that you struggle with is a difficult task. But it's also possible he is playing on your sympathy a little to get out of doing homework. (Let's face it. Kids are human and would probably rather have fun than sit down and do homework. Wouldn't we rather relax than do the laundry?)

Ask your son why he feels the way that he does. Listen to him and explain that “practice makes perfect!” Talk to your child's teacher, tell her how he is feeling, and ask for help and suggestions on what you can do at home to assist him. Tell your son that using your mind is like using any other muscle in your body. The more you work it, the better and stronger it gets. Tell him that whether it is playing an instrument, learning to swim, kicking a soccer ball, or learning long division, all skills take practice. The more he does it, the better he gets. Doing homework lets him spend more than just class time on mastering skills, and he gets to practice it on his own, at his own speed, in his own environment, with no one around to notice missteps or errors. Working through problems also helps him find out what step or part of the process he doesn't understand, giving him a place to start asking the teacher questions. You can also call to his attention the absolute necessity of math skills by talking about how you use math in everyday life. If the problem continues, talk to the teacher and ask if there is any tutoring available.

***Individual practice  
and repeated exposure  
to a subject through  
homework increases a  
child's ability in that  
subject.***



## How Well Do You Know Your Child?

Take the following quiz:

1. What is your child's favorite subject in school?
2. What is your child's least favorite subject in school?
3. What is your child's favorite sport?
4. Who are your child's closest friends?
5. Do you spend at least fifteen minutes each day listening to your child, without any other distractions?

Sit down with your child and go over your answers. Talk to your child for at least fifteen minutes about what she likes best about school. Ask your child what subjects in school she is having a hard time with. The first step for success starts with positive thinking. Say something positive to your child.

## Never, Ever Do Your Child's Homework!

It is late, you are tired, your child is cranky, and the assignment is far from finished. You are tempted, but WAIT! Don't give in!

Doing an assignment, research paper, or science project yourself can be tempting, especially if it is the eleventh hour. Helping your child with homework is very different from doing the homework for him. Parents can provide productive help by calling out spelling words or checking over math problems after the child has completed the work. You are teaching your child not only how to become smarter but also how to be successful, and a principle part of success is accepting responsibility. Homework is the responsibility of your child.

## Snapshot #6:

### *How Does Homework Help a Child with Time Management?*

**M**y daughter is eleven and a terrible procrastinator! No matter how much or how little homework she has, she always puts it off until the last minute and then must rush through it or stay up late to get it finished. What should I do?

*Routine, routine, routine.*

*Tip:*

The first step is to talk to your daughter to discover whether there's a reason she avoids homework. Is she overwhelmed by the sheer amount of it? Does she need a break immediately after school? Is there a television show that she is particularly fond of and doesn't want to miss? Finding out why she avoids homework and then helping her develop a schedule that fits her "clock" will make homework easier.

Teach her to manage time by breaking down homework into manageable blocks. For instance, have her work in twenty-minute intervals followed by a five-minute break. Follow the Daily Schedule plan shown here. Some visually oriented students benefit from seeing a schedule drawn out. Others acquire time-management skills when they are paired with external motivation. If your daughter sticks to a specified time-management plan and completes her homework before a deadline, then she can be rewarded with a treat or an extra half hour of television. Help her prioritize her work by doing the hardest homework first and saving the easiest parts for last.

Praise her when she finishes each assignment. Once she gets the hang of focusing for short periods of time and prioritizing her workload, she will complete the work more quickly, begin to dread it less, and consequently stop the procrastination.

Remember, homework can teach your child time-management skills that will serve her in high school, college, and beyond.

To make your child successful, you need to make sure he follows a routine. Balance is very important. Your child needs time to unwind and play. When your child comes home from school, what does he do? Does your child like to go outside and play, watch TV, or read? How does your child relax? Is your child involved in sports or other extracurricular activities? The best way for your child to follow a schedule is to get organized. Take a piece of paper and a pencil. Sit down with your child and map out his daily routine. You may want to have a regular schedule for the week (Monday through Friday) and one for the weekend (Saturday and Sunday).

## Daily Schedule: Example #2

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
7:00 A.M.	Wake up and get ready for school
7:30 A.M.	Breakfast
8:00 A.M.	Go to school
8:30 A.M.	School
3:30 P.M.	Get home from school
3:45 P.M.	Eat snack
4:00 P.M.	Soccer practice (Mon-Wed-Fri)
5:00 P.M.	Piano lessons (Tue-Thu)
6:00 P.M.	Dinner
7:00 P.M.	Homework
9:30 P.M.	Bedtime

## Daily Schedule: Example #1

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
7:00 A.M.	Wake up and get ready for school
7:30 A.M.	Breakfast
8:00 A.M.	Go to school
8:30 A.M.	School
3:30 P.M.	Get home from school
3:45 P.M.	Eat snack
4:00 P.M.	Homework
5:30 P.M.	Free time
6:30 P.M.	Dinner
7:45 P.M.	TV/computer time
9:30 P.M.	Bedtime

## Daily Schedule: Example #3

(For the Working Parent)

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
7:00 A.M.	Wake up and get ready for school
7:30 A.M.	Breakfast
8:00 A.M.	Go to school
8:30 A.M.	School
3:00–6:00 P.M.	Afterschool program
6:30 P.M.	Get home from school and finish homework
7:00 P.M.	Dinner
7:30 P.M.	Check and review homework
8:00 P.M.	TV/computer time
9:30 P.M.	Bedtime

## **Snapshot #7:**

***Why Is Homework Considered an Extension of the School Day?***

***Homework also provides a way for a parent, student, and teacher to connect personally through feedback and comments on assignments, which, if done well, can contribute positively to a student's motivation.***

**A**s a parent, I am often frustrated by school officials who tell me that my child should have to do homework nightly. I firmly believe that work should be completed in the classroom and not sent home. I want to understand why teachers feel that doing homework is a necessary extension of the school day. What should I do?

**Tip:** Review the packet that most teachers send home the first day of school. It usually contains information about the school day and policies. Homework is one of those procedures the teacher likes to deal with right away so as a parent you will understand why it is given and how much to expect. You can further address homework guidelines at the open house. Teachers do understand that many parents today are battling the frustrations of a busy world and a harried family schedule. However, you need to understand teachers have a limited amount of time with their children and they too have pressures to cover all the material that needs to be dealt with in a limited amount of time. Educators often explain to parents that doing homework also allows them to see what their children are working on at school and how well they are doing in the subject matter, and provides a link between school, teacher, and child.

## Snapshot #8:

### *How Does Homework Benefit the Parent?*

**A**t a recent PTA meeting, members of the board asked for ideas on how to get more parents involved. Many parents believe that being involved in their child's education is an activity only those people who don't have full-time jobs can enjoy. As PTA president, I want to promote the idea that parent participation in a child's learning is beneficial to the parent as well as the child. What should I do?

*Tip:*

You are smart to be a proactive PTA president. By having the parents understand the importance of the home-school connection, the school will reach greater heights of success. Even if parents can't be volunteering in school, it doesn't mean they can't be actively involved in their child's academic life! One benefit both parents and children receive from homework is the ability to give and to get the parents' personal insight and practical experience about a subject. A child studying state history, for example, would benefit from hearing a parent's knowledge of ancestors who were early settlers. If a math lesson involves fractions, parents might point out real-world instances in which knowledge of fractions came in handy for them. Encouragement from a parent boosts the child's knowledge and appreciation of the parent. What parent doesn't like to seem helpful and smart in the eyes of a child?

Another perk for involved parents is an increased understanding of their child's personality and abilities. You might not have known your daughter has a fear of snakes if you hadn't been talking to her

***The most important person in a child's life is a parent.***

about her science lesson. Perhaps you didn't know that your son was the class mathematician until you monitored his homework. Knowing what lessons are covered in class also allows a parent to be proactive. If a child is struggling with a subject, a parent who knows what's being taught can help before it's too late. Finally, parents who know what's going on in the classroom will benefit by being prepared. They won't be surprised the night before a project is due with the agonized yell, "But I haven't even started!"

**Snapshot #9:**  
**Should Schools  
Provide a  
Homework Policy?**

**O**ur family has just moved across the country. The previous school my child attended had a schoolwide policy on homework. Her new school does not. I expected the school to give me information and provide a homework policy. What should I do?

One accepted guideline is based on research gleaned from one hundred studies of homework compiled by Harris Cooper, a psychology professor at the University of Missouri. Cooper's guideline suggests ten to twenty minutes every night at first grade and then a ten-minute increase per each succeeding grade level.\*

*It's not always easy to get a universal answer when you are interviewing at your child's new school, so it may be best to ask these questions of your child's teacher.*

*Tip:*

While some schools and school districts have developed an official homework policy, others have no universal approach to this age-old dilemma. Much controversy remains over the amount of homework to be assigned, the kind of assignments, the amount of parental involvement expected, and whether or not homework should be assigned at all. Your best bet is to schedule a conference with your child's teacher and ask the following questions:

- Are teachers expected to assign homework?
- Is there a guideline teachers follow about how many minutes of homework should be given to a student depending on age or grade level? Is there a homework-free weekend policy? (Some teachers feel that children need free time to spend with their families and friends.)

\*Romes Ratnesar, "The Homework Ate My Family," *Time*, Jan. 25, 1999, p. 54.

**Snapshot #10:**  
***How Do I Help My  
Child Become More  
Focused on  
Homework?***

Does your child's mind tend to wander? Does he have a hard time focusing?

Being a dreamer is a positive quality of creative minds. Children who love to daydream and are creative have a special gift and parents and teachers must encourage them to keep this unique gift alive. HOWEVER, there is a time and place for creative activity.

How do you help your creative, mind-wandering, daydreaming child focus?

Since this kind of child generally is not task-oriented, you can help by breaking down an assignment into smaller "bites." Example: Your child has to complete ten math problems. Get a timer and set it for ten minutes. Tell your child he has ten minutes to finish problem #1. When the timer goes off, check on your child. Then set the timer for the next "bite," and so on. Do this until all problems are finished. You can adjust the time you allot to fit the assignment and the age and the ability of your child. Breaking down the assignment into these manageable bite-size pieces will keep your child focused and moving forward through his homework.

**M**y son is just not doing his homework. No matter what I try, I can't seem to get him to stay focused. I often find him doodling or singing to himself or just staring off into space. He also uses any excuse to stop working—jumping up to get a glass of water, answer the phone, sharpen his pencil, pet the dog, whatever distraction he can think of. I want to help him concentrate. What should I do?

*Tip:*

Make sure that your son has a break after school, allowing him to burn off some energy before getting down to business. Also, setting aside the same time each day to do homework will help him develop the "homework habit." Find a special place for him to do homework, whether it's a desk in his bedroom or a designated area of the kitchen. The area should be quiet, free from distractions, and comfortable. (Let the child make the space his own by picking out special pencil holders, putting up a bulletin board, or having his favorite accessories handy.) Talk to him about what he's studying in school, and then help him look over his homework. Ask him which assignment is hardest and have him do that first. Teach him to break up each assignment into smaller parts. For instance, if he has to answer twenty questions, tell him that after he completes the first ten, he can get up and have a cookie, making sure he understands that after the cookie, he has to return to finish the next ten problems. After every half hour, allow a ten-minute "fun" break. As often as possible, show him how what he's working on is used in real life. Finally, after he's done his homework, review it with him, praising him for his hard work, and then allow him to do something he enjoys. You might consider using a calendar to help keep track of his assignments and due dates. Learning how to do homework teaches a child how to stay more focused on all projects and tasks in the future.

## Your Homework Assignment: Why Homework?

**Directions:** Now that you have completed Chapter One, take some time to answer the following questions. This is a short assignment that will act as a review and, we hope, increase your understanding of the key points.

1. Why is it important for your child to do homework?
  
2. List three things that homework can help your child with.
  - a.
  
  - b.
  
  - c.
  
3. What is your child's homework routine?
  
4. How does homework help your child become a better student?