Tips For Helping Kids and Teens With Homework and Study Habits

Certain key practices will make life easier for everyone in the family when it comes to study time and study organization. However, some of them may require an adjustment for other members of the family.

Turn off the TV set. Make a house rule, depending on the location of the set, that when it is study time, it is "no TV" time. A television set that is on will draw youngsters like bees to honey.

What about the radio? Should it be on or off? Contrary to what many specialists say, some youngsters do seem to function all right with the radio turned on to a favorite music station. (Depending on the layout of your house or apartment, maybe an investment in earphones would be worthy of consideration.)

Certain rules should be set about the family phone during study hours. The more people in the household, the more restrictions on long and unnecessary phone calls are needed. A timer, placed next to the phone, can help to control the length of calls so that the telephone will be available if it becomes necessary to call a schoolmate to confirm an assignment or discuss particularly difficult homework.

Designate specific areas for homework and studying. Possibilities include the child's room or the kitchen or dining room table. Eliminate as much distraction as possible.

> Since many young people will study in their own rooms, function becomes more important than beauty. Most desks for young people really don't have sufficient space to spread out materials. A table that allows for all necessary supplies such as pencils, pens, paper, books, and other essentials works extremely well.
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> Consider placing a bulletin board in your child's room. Your local hardware store sells wallboard that might not look too pretty and isn't framed, but a 4 x 3'section is inexpensive and perfect on which to post pertinent school items. You might want to paint or cover it with burlap to improve its appearance or let your child take on this project.
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> Encourage the use of a small book or pad for writing down assignments so that there is no confusion about when certain assignments must be turned in to the teacher.
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> Keeping general supplies on hand is important. Check with your child about his needs. In fact, make it his responsibility to be well supplied with paper, pencils, note pads, notebook paper, et cetera.

Regularity is a key factor in academic success. Try to organize the household so that supper is served at a standard time, and once it and family discussions are over, it's time to crack the books. If the student doesn't have other commitments and gets home reasonably early from school, some homework can be done before supper.

Consider you child's developmental level when setting the amount of time for homework. While high school students can focus for over an hour, first-graders are unlikely to last more than 15 minutes on a single task. Allow your child to take breaks, perhaps as a reward for finishing a section of the work.

Organize study and homework projects. Get a large calendar, one that allows space for jotting down things in the daily boxes. Rip it apart so that you (and the child) can sequentially mount the school months for the current semester. For example, you can tear off September, October, November, December, and January and mount them from left to right across one wall. Have the child use a bold color writing instrument (felt tip pen) to mark exam dates in one color, reports that are coming due in a different color, et cetera. This will serve as a reminder so that things aren't set aside until the last dangerous moment.

Teach your child that studying is more than just doing homework assignments. One of the most misunderstood aspects of schoolwork is the difference between studying and doing homework assignments. Encourage your child to do things like:

- take notes as he's reading a chapter
- learn to skim material
- learn to study tables and charts
- learn to summarize what he has read in his own words
- learn to make his own flashcards for quick review of dates, formulas, spelling words, et cetera

Note-taking is a critical skill and should be developed. Many students don't know how to take notes in those classes that require them. Some feel they have to write down every word the teacher says. Others have wisely realized the value of an outline form of note-taking. Well prepared teachers present their material in a format that lends itself to outline form note taking..

Should notes ever be rewritten? In some cases, they should be, particularly if a lot of material was covered, and the youngster had to write quickly but lacks speed and organization. Rewriting notes takes time, but it can be an excellent review of the subject matter. However, rewriting notes isn't worth the time unless they are used for review and recall of important information.

A home dictionary is essential, but if it is kept on a shelf to gather dust, it won't do anyone any good. Keep it in an accessible place and let your child see you refer to it from time to time. If the family dictionary is kept in the living room and the child studies in his room, get him an inexpensive dictionary for his exclusive use.

Good dictionary, encyclopedia and organizational skills depend on the ability to alphabetize. See if your child's teacher practices alphabetizing in class. Try alphabetizing spelling words, family members' names or a few favorite toys at home as a way of practicing.

Help your child to feel confident for tests. Taking tests can be a traumatic experience for some students. Explain to your child that burning the midnight oil (cramming) the night before a test is not productive. Better to get a good night's sleep. Students also need reminding that when taking a test, they should thoroughly and carefully read the directions before they haphazardly start to mark their test papers. They should be advised to skip over questions for which they don't know the answers. They can always return to those if there's time. Good advice for any student before taking a test: take a deep breath, relax, and dive in. Always bring an extra pencil just in case.

During a homework session, watch for signs of frustration. No learning can take place and little can be accomplished if the child is angry or upset over an assignment that is too long or too

difficult. At such times the parent may have to step in and simply halt the homework for that night, offering to write a note to the teacher explaining the situation and perhaps requesting a conference to discuss the quality and length of homework assignments.

Should parents help with homework? Yes-if it is clearly productive to do so, such as calling out spelling words or checking a math problem that won't prove. No-if it is something the child can clearly handle himself and learn from the process. And help and support should always be calmly and cheerfully given. Grudging help is worse than no help at all!

Read directions, or check over math problems after your child has completed the work. Remember to make positive comments - you don't want your child to associate homework with fights at home.

Model research skills by involving your child in planning a family trip. Help your child locate your destination on a map or atlas. Use traditional encyclopedia or a CD-ROM to find information about the place you will visit; try the Internet or books in the library.

How best to handle report cards? To save shocks and upsets, gently discuss from time to time "how things are going at school- with your child. Something casual, such as "How did the math test go?" "How did you do on the history report?" "How's your science project coming along? Need any help?" are questions that aren't "third degree" but indicate interest. Find out if it is a policy at your child's school to send out "warning notices" when work isn't going well. Generally, such notices require the parent's signature to verify that the parent has, indeed, been alerted. This is the time to contact the teacher of the course, along with your child, to learn what the difficulty may be. If such notices aren't sent, then grades on projects and reports and from tests may be the sole source of information short of what your child wishes to share. Be tuned in to statements such as "He's an awful teacher," "She goes too fast," etc. This may be the child's way of indicating frustration in understanding content or lack of study time with the subject. However, be cautious in contacting teachers without your child's approval or interest. It may disrupt good feelings between you and make you seem to be interfering and spying.