

How to Help Your Child Study

Regardless of a child's age or challenges, parents can encourage sound homework routines for a successful start to the school year.

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Every cartful of new school supplies is loaded with promise: binders organized by subject, crisp homework folders and pristine notebooks. But for many parents it can feel like it's just a short hop from those freshly sharpened pencils to a child in full meltdown over a barely started English essay.

You don't have to let go of the optimism. As parents, teachers and tutors, we have some concrete advice for staving off the tears — for both parents and children.

Regardless of a child's age or challenges, parents can encourage sound homework routines for a successful start to the school year. First, students should consider how to create organized work spaces, backpacks and lockers cleared of clutter and systematized for easy retrieval of important assignments. Second, nightly to-do checklists are a must to help prioritize and plan ahead.

But many students still struggle when it comes to homework. Their stress tends to be exacerbated by three primary challenges: *procrastinating*, *feeling overwhelmed* and *struggling to retain information*. Ideally, parents can help elementary school children develop effective homework habits so they will not need as much guidance as they get older. Parents who are not home during their kids' prime homework hours can try out some of these ideas on the weekends and pass along the best practices to their caregivers.

For Procrastination

Reduce potential distractions.

Many students finish reading a sentence, and then refresh their Instagram feed. Ideally, their phones should be nowhere near them during homework time. Or they should disable or mute apps and texting functions on the phone and computer while they work. We know this will mean a grumpy adolescent. But it's a battle worth fighting. Establish a family tech-space where phones and laptops go when not in use. And model these boundaries by leaving your devices there, too!

Remember that consistency is key.

Kids ultimately thrive in the comfort and reliability of a structured approach to homework, so each afternoon they should follow the same steps in roughly the same order.

For Students Overwhelmed by Workload

Plan ahead.

It might be helpful for you to model the planning process, so your kids can see how you schedule a series of tasks. Try to make a point of letting them in on the process when you're running errands, preparing for a trip or completing a project for work. Then take advantage of some set time (Sunday tends to work best) to plan the coming week.

Students should break down large assignments into more manageable chunks and then backplan from the due date, recording on a calendar what they'll need to do when in order to complete each major task and its components.

In the early grades, this could mean reading a book by Tuesday in order to write a book report on Wednesday. By middle school, it could translate to finishing the research for a science project with enough time to make a compelling poster to display at the science fair. The more practice students get with planning, the sooner they'll become self-sufficient.

Use time estimates.

Students should estimate how long each assignment will take and develop a schedule accordingly. Even if the estimate is wrong, the process of thinking through timing will allow them to internalize how best to proceed when juggling multiple tasks. It will give them a better gauge of how long future assignments will take and make the evening ahead less intimidating.

Begin with the most difficult task.

Most kids' instinct will be to complete the fun or easy to-dos first. But they should start with the hardest work. Otherwise it will be later when, energy depleted, they begin trying to outline their term paper. Encouraging them to do the most challenging work first will allow them to devote attention and energy to the demanding assignments — then they can coast through the easy tasks.

For Students Who Struggle to Retain Information

Use a cumulative approach.

Memorize information in stages that build upon one another. When students are confronted with vast swaths of material, it can be overwhelming and difficult to recall. Suggest that they break it up into a series of discrete parts based on the number of topics and the number of days they have to study for the test. For example, students might divide a history test study sheet into sections 1 to 3. The first day should be for studying section 1. The second day, section 2. The third day, reviewing sections 1 and 2, before moving to section 3 the following day. This way, by the time students get to section 3, they haven't forgotten what they learned in the first section. This cumulative approach reinforces retention of content through review and repetition.

Summarize with concise lists, identify keywords and use mnemonics.

A big block of text on a study sheet can be difficult for students to absorb and memorize. Instead, they should break the sentence or paragraph up into a series of points, highlighting the keywords and then creating their own mnemonic device to remember it. Sometimes the silliest mnemonics stick the best, and remembering the first letters of words will help trigger ideas that they might otherwise forget. (Remember the [DR & MRS VANDERTRAMP verbs](#) from French class, or [Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge](#) when learning musical notes?)

Employ visual aids and narratives.

Some students can best synthesize information by creating charts or other graphic organizers. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by writing several paragraphs with important information about how a cell works, for example, students might present the same data in streamlined form with a chart. Charts distill and organize numerous sources (parts of a cell) according to the same set of criteria (form, function, location), creating a categorized snapshot that's easier to memorize.

Other students prefer narratives that link ideas to their context. Instead of trying to memorize various inventors, students could recall how they built on one another's accomplishments. Most students thrive when both these approaches are used simultaneously.

Make study materials.

We know it's old-fashioned, but writing out information [helps commit content to memory](#) far better than typing it. If writing out the material longhand is too onerous, kids should still create their own study sheet digitally, rather than borrowing one from a friend. The work of creating the study sheet is a crucial step in internalizing its content. Active is always better than passive studying. Most students benefit from being orally quizzed on the material so they can determine both the information they know inside-out, and what they still need to review. Online resources like Quizlet can work well to prepare for straightforward vocabulary quizzes, but is less helpful when it comes to tests covering more complex information. Most importantly, students should generate *their own* study material to make the most of using Quizlet, rather than relying on pre-existing content that others have posted.

How Much Studying Is Enough?

Some kids believe they'll never be prepared, even after hours of studying. Others barely crack a book open and declare they're done.

Use practice tests.

The best way to know that study time is over is when students are able to perform the task that will be asked of them on the in-class test, quiz or essay. Initially, children can review the material orally. They should write down any material they missed to help commit it to memory. Then, they can take a sample test from a textbook, or create a mock test with class notes, homework and study guides. When students demonstrate a verbal and written command of the information, studying should be complete.

Talk through these study habits now, so that on the first day of school, your child will not only have the requisite sharpened pencils, but also a plan of action.

Abby Freireich and Brian Platzner are the founders of [Teachers Who Tutor | NYC](#) and the authors of a book about homework to be published next summer.