

Homework

SHOULD HOMEWORK BE PART OF YOUR PROGRAM?"

You must give the parent your policy on homework in writing. Most school-age children receive homework assignments. In the early primary grades, homework may be minimal. However, by the time children reach the upper elementary grades, homework assignments can be quite lengthy and, for some children, difficult and frustrating. The decision to offer time and space to do homework at your program raises several issues related to the needs of children and families.

Some school-age professionals believe that homework should not be a part of the daily schedule. They think it is more important for children to have opportunities to engage in different kinds of activities than those they experience at school. Homework should be done at home, they feel, where parents can give children structure and support, keep track of progress, and congratulate them for their accomplishments.

Other professionals believe providing time and space for doing homework at their program is a way to support children and families. They believe in offering children a variety of choices — with homework being one of them.

When deciding if your program will include homework, consider the needs of the children and families you serve:

- Do children lack a quiet space at home for doing homework?
- Is there no one in the family who can provide encouragement and assistance if needed?
- Are families tired at the end of the day and is there little time after the completion of other daily chores for children to get help on assignments?
- Have families requested their children become involved in homework during the program?

Your program might be able to offer the structure and support children need to do their homework and succeed in school.

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CONSIDERATIONS TO HELP DEVELOP HOMEWORK ASSISTANCE

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) highlights four important considerations when programs are developing homework assistance:¹²

1. The best homework policy reflects the opinions and needs of children, families, program staff and schools. Staff and parents can look at the research on homework, and the resources available, when designing policy.
2. Homework help and learning activities are especially important for children who are struggling in school or whose families are not able to help with homework.
3. Homework is only one way to support school success. Programs can also offer recreational reading, tutoring, and many other learning activities.
4. Children's academic needs must be balanced with their needs to relax, have snacks, learn new skills, get exercise, and develop social skills.

The purpose of homework is help children practice what they have learned in school, be introduced to new materials, and apply their skills to new situations.

While homework can not only help with learning and skill building, it can also help children learn to solve problems, accept school as their responsibility, and learn to plan ahead. But homework can also make children tired and anxious if they spend too much time on it or if it interferes with other important activities such as making friends and learning sports, art or music. Without adequate support to finish homework, some children may fall further behind in school.

Here are some questions to consider when you begin to discuss what your program's policy about homework will be:

- Will we just offer the time and place to do homework or will we offer homework help?
- Who will offer it (program staff, teachers from school, volunteers, tutors, etc.?)
- What training and supervision will they need?
- How much time should be set aside for homework? Should children have to complete their homework?
- Where can we locate a homework comer?
- What resources are needed?
- How can good communication be maintained between families, schools, and providers if homework is to be done in the program?
- How will you follow up to be sure this homework policy is working?

Finally, when deciding if your program should provide homework help, it will be important to think about the needs and opinions of everyone involved including children, program and school staff, and families.

¹² Susan O'Connor and Kate McGuire, "Homework Assistance & Out-of-School Time: Filling the Need, Finding a Balance". National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Center for Research on Women. Wellesley College, 1998, pp. 3-7.

GENERAL IDEAS FOR ESTABLISHING HOMEWORK ASSISTANCE

When setting up homework assistance in your program, you will want to think about good timing in the child's day for focusing on this activity. Some parents will want their children to do their homework as soon as they arrive at the program and do nothing else until it's done, thinking this will assure their children will do well in school. But some children actually do a better job on their homework after they have had a chance to play actively or take a break. Perhaps you can have a discussion and develop a plan which will work for the program, the family and the child.



*Some suggestions for providing homework assistance:*³

- . Establish a place in the environment for doing homework. In many programs, the quiet area includes the space and materials children need to work on their assignments. Like any workplace, the area should be well lit and well stocked.*
- . Keep in mind that children have different learning styles. Some learn best through reading, some by listening, some need to be shown how to do something, some need hands-on experiences, and most need a combination of approaches.*
 - Encourage children to take a break every 15 or 30 minutes. Taking a break relieves stress and helps them do their best work.*
- . Respect children's individual approaches to doing homework.*
- . Maintain a positive attitude. This lets children know that you think it is important for them to do their homework, and do it well. Try to emphasize quality over speed. Encourage children to take as much time as they need to do their best.*
- . Remember that homework is a child's responsibility. It is an opportunity for the child to practice and reinforce lessons learned in school and it gives teachers information about the child's skill level. Teachers need to know if an assignment is too simple, too difficult, or just right.*

¹³ Susan O'Connor and Kate McGuire, "Homework Assistance & Out-of-School Time: Filling the Need, Finding a Balance", National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, 1998, pp. 8-11.

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. Resist the temptation to give the correct answer when a child asks for help. First, ask lots of questions and encourage the child to try again: "Can you show me how to set up the problem?" "I think the answer is in the first paragraph. Try reading it again." "Let's do a similar problem together. Then you can try that one again." If the child continues to struggle with the assignment, suggest putting it aside for a while and going on to another one.

. Tell children if you don't know the answer or have no idea how to help. Suggest asking another child for help or asking the teacher at school. Share your observations with the child's parents so they can go over the assignment later and perhaps notify the teacher that their child is having difficulty.

. Offer support that reinforces children's learning. You might quiz a child studying for a test, listen to an oral presentation, read an essay, or discuss a book the child is reading.

. Suggest study tips that help children do their best. For example, introduce the "COPS" method for checking a paper. The child checks the paper four separate times: for Capitalization, Organization, Punctuation, and Spelling. Focusing on a separate item each time helps children catch their own mistakes. You can also show children how to make flash cards to study math facts or vocabulary words.

. Encourage children to apply their thinking and arithmetic skills as they play board games; writing skills when they make up plays and stories; and reading skills when they read a magazine to catch up on the activities of a favorite sports star.

SPECIFIC MODELS MAY HELP WHEN PROMOTING HOMEWORK ASSISTANCE

In order to accommodate the needs and learning styles of different families and children, you may want to consider adopting specific homework assistance models; Here are four models developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time:

1. Homework as One Activity Choice

Some programs create a homework space. Each day children decide if they want to go to the homework space or not. They also decide when to go to the homework space.

¹⁴ Susan O'Connor and Kate McGuire, "Homework Assistance & Out-of-School Time: Filling the Need, Finding a Balance", National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Center for Research on Women. Wellesley College, 1998, pp. 13-14.

Advantages

- Gives children the chance to make thoughtful decisions about homework.
- Lets children relax or blow off steam when they need to.

Disadvantages

- Homework may not get done.
- Children who have problems with homework may not do it.

2. Homework as a Contracted Activity

Children, families and programs enter into a contract about homework. The contract says how much homework a child will do, and when they will do it.

Advantages

- Allows children and families to work out decisions about homework together.
- Both staff and children know what the child is expected to do.

Disadvantages

- Adds a layer of paperwork.
- Parents may pressure children to sign a contract that the children do not agree with.

3. Homework as Part of the Daily Schedule for Every Child

A mandatory homework time is set for every day.

Advantages

- Provides quiet time for programs with limited space.
- Offers structured homework time for children who are easily distracted.

Disadvantages

- Children have no choice. There is no flexibility to meet their different needs and moods.
- Children who do not have homework may have nothing to do or be given worksheets that are too hard or too easy.
- Young children may be expected to spend as much time on homework as older children.

4. Homework Help that Includes Tutoring, Mentoring or Learning Activities

Advantages

- Builds academic skills. This is especially important for children who are struggling in school.
- Provides positive role models and relationships.
- Offers one-on-one help to meet the different needs of each child.

Disadvantages

- Reduces time for children to relax or blow off steam.
- Leaves less time for children to build relationships with other children.
- Decreases time for social, creative and physical activities.