

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Getting Homework Done

Promoting Focus and Self Control in School Age Children

Three Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: Everyday, my child and I seem to battle over his homework. How can I help him focus on his assignments instead of procrastinating and getting up to play?

There is no universal “right” time, place or way to do homework. Here are some suggestions drawn from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Mind in the Making research:

- **Find out what works best for your child.** After school, does your child do his best work right away or after some free time? Does he respond well to a strict schedule or to guidelines like: “No TV until your homework is done”? Find out what works best for your family as a whole and stick with it.
- **Work with your child.** Rather than battling with your child, help your son set goals about his schoolwork and then come up with a plan for achieving these goals. This process works best if he makes a list of all of his ideas for getting homework done effectively, evaluates what would work or not work about each of these ideas and then, with you, selects one strategy to try. After you have time to see how this plan works, talk your son about it and, together, make changes as necessary.
- **Create a routine.** Based on the plan you have developed, establish a regular location and time to work on daily assignments.
- **Limit distractions.** No matter what place you choose, it needs to be well lit and as quiet as possible. Research has shown that background noise from the television can disrupt children’s focused attention. If your child wants to listen to music, try it as an experiment and see if it works.
- **Be prepared.** Keep your child’s materials (paper, pencil, dictionary) nearby so he can get started quickly and independently.
- **Remember the importance of play and time off.** While encouraging your son to complete assignments, keep in mind that he has had a lengthy day of learning at school and may need some free time. Play is a big part of your child’s social, emotional and physical development.

If your child is not doing well in school, you can ask his teacher about special help or tutoring that may be available.

Being able to pay attention to tasks and to stick with them until they are complete are important life skills for children to develop—skills that influence their success later in life. Megan McClelland of Oregon State University and her colleagues found that “attention-span persistence” in four year olds was strongly predictive of whether or not these same children graduated from college when they were 25 years old.

Helping children develop good homework habits involves providing a routine and a setting where distractions can be managed and work can be done. You can further help your child learn the life skill of Focus and Self Control in ways that don’t directly involve homework, but have been found to improve cognitive achievement. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Play games. Many simple games help children to develop the skills of Focus and Self Control in fun ways. For example:

- Guessing games and games like “Red Light/Green Light” require your child to pay attention.
- Board games or other turn-taking games help your child practice self control.
- Games like “Simon Says” ask your child to follow simple rules while using his working memory and self control.
- Games that promote flexible thinking, like “Simon Says Do the Opposite” prompt your son to inhibit his initial impulse (self control), as well as to use cognitive flexibility to follow the changing rules of the game. In this game, the task is to do the opposite of what the leader says. If you say: “Simon says, ‘sit,’” children are supposed to stand. If you say: “Simon says, ‘wave your right hand,’” children are supposed to wave their left hand. If you say, “Simon says, ‘be noisy,’” children are supposed to be quiet. You can play this game alone with your child or with a group of children. If a child doesn’t do the opposite, he or she is out. The child left at the end becomes the winner and can become Simon for the next round.

2. Strategize with your child. Work with your child to come up with strategies to resist the temptation to procrastinate. Being able to work toward goals, even when it is hard, is an important part of learning Focus and Self Control. For example, your child might try taking a short break in between assignments or switching to a different task if he begins to feel bored or distracted.

In the Marshmallow Test, a classic study conducted by Walter Mischel of Columbia University, children were given a choice between one marshmallow now or two marshmallows later. Some could wait for the larger treat and some just couldn’t. Those who could wait were more likely to do better later in life, including pursuing academic and personal goals with less distraction and frustration, but, as Mischel says: “Children can always learn self control.”

3. Be a role model. Parents teach by doing as much as saying. Your child takes cues from watching you, so try to model the skills of Focus and Self Control in your daily life. One of the most important ways you can role model this for your child is by paying attention to him—resisting distractions—when he needs it.

These three strategies will promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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