

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?

Homework can be frustrating and stressful for many families. This challenge can be turned into an opportunity to teach strategies that will promote Focus and Self Control.

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.

1

Make a plan and be a goal setting team.

Help your child come up with his own strategies to resist the temptation to procrastinate. 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.

Being able to work toward goals, even when it is hard, is an important part of learning Focus and Self Control. For example, he may want to try:

- taking a short break in between assignments
- switching to a different task if he begins to feel bored or distracted
- setting a timer so he knows how long he has left to remained focused.

Then you can follow up with what he tried and evaluate it together.

2

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.. Share your experiences and strategies.

3

Set up a learning environment.

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.

There is no universal “right” time, place or way to do homework. 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:

- **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.
- **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) 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.

4

Play games.

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.”

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.