

Take the Hell Out of Homework

Sample text from the book

On Children

Kahlil Gibran

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
for they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children,
as living arrows, are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might
that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Extract from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran
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WORKING WITH YOUR CHILD AT HOME

Being a parent is stressful at the best of times - and never more so than when helping a child with homework tasks. And if the child has learning needs the potential for stress can be much greater and there is always the risk of "tears before bedtime"!

A child's fear of failure and the emotional baggage carried by parents can get in the way on effective working together. Perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give our children is the realisation that it is ok to find some things difficult. Put it another way - we love you as you are!

Having said all this, the situation will always arise when a child needs help and a parent does not know quite how to go about it. The focus of this book is to give parents some of the "tricks of the trade". Also it is hoped that you will develop the confidence to work at home with techniques you know to be appropriate and successful.

Homework is a curse for many parents/carers as well as our children. As the father of a child with additional learning needs, nothing, absolutely nothing has caused more conflict and grief than homework and, when I rule the world, it will be banned! The problem is that a typical, undifferentiated piece of homework (undifferentiated in this context means something which is given to the whole class without much thought about how difficult some might find it) will take some children a few minutes and some a few hours. In the case of one of my own children, three notional "20 minute homeworks" could take her over three hours and, because she is a very conscientious student, she would put the time in to the exclusion of all else, especially having any form of a life.

So this book is written for Corinne, and children across the world (and their parents) who are victims of homework.

The right to learn differently. - "stress free is error free"

It has been suggested that up to 80% of difficulties associated with learning new ideas and skills are due to stress. When I run training courses for parents and children (see appendix) I always make a point of asking parents to refrain from ever saying to their child "You are doing it wrong". What this usually means is "You are not doing it the way I would". A key principle of effective "parenting for homework" is to accept that "our children are not our children" and to support them to learn and work in the ways that suit their unique blend of talents and preferences. This can require a paradigm shift for some adults.

When parents share their concerns about a child's progress I always stop them and ask them to begin by identifying their child's strengths; sadly many parents find this hard to do at first - they have focussed for so long on the "cant's" that it becomes almost impossible to see their child in a positive light.

So stop, just for a minute, and think about all the things that your child does that you value and appreciate - why not jot them down? Is s/he caring, responsible, reliable, sensitive, creative, enthusiastic? These "soft skills" are recognised as being increasingly important in employment

It helps, then, to identify preferred ways of working so that we can set our children up to succeed - this is often a complete turnaround from the way we ourselves were taught. For many of us teaching was based around the principle that mindless repetition was the key to learning - so when, for example, we struggled to spell words we had to write them out 10 times. This approach is completely useless, has never worked and yet is still seen by many as an important strategy. Giving children more and more of what they cannot do in order to get better at it flies in the face of reason, to say nothing of the psychology of learning!

So it is important that us parents resist the temptation to impose the comfortable but ineffective practices of our own schooling on our children.

How does your child prefer to learn?

In over 30 years of teaching I have never met a child who does not want to learn, although I have met many who have all but given up because of the struggle of being expected to learn in uncomfortable or impossible ways. Interestingly, once these children have discovered their unique learning patterns and have been given permission to learn differently, most go on to learn very effectively. Some take longer than others to move on and the time it takes seems to depend on the amount of baggage being carried around from previous failures and battles with an inflexible system.

Finding out how your child prefers to think and learn can be an illuminating experience and my preferred method is to use the mind map below (see Stage 2 for a full size, photocopyable image).

This exercise helps us find out the different ways that our children are smart.

Work with your child and ask them to:

1. Colour each of the "triangles" closest to the centre of the map - Music, Picture etc
2. Take a heading and ask your child to highlight and/or underline any statement that "sounds like me". This is often best done if the parent reads the descriptor and the child decides. If in doubt please go with the child's opinion. This mind map is only intended to be a snapshot in time and many preferences change as they grow in confidence and experience. It may help to view these preferences as your child's "comfort zone". This zone may initially be quite narrow but it will

expand as baggage from previous failure is cast off. Even if the parent is found to be right in the future, giving the child the right to choose is an important message at this stage of building a working relationship.

3. Work around the map for your child to underline and/or highlight personal preferences. It is quite likely that in one or two areas s/he will have little or no preferences, which is quite normal - for example I do not register any preferences in the "picture" strand because I am definitely not a picture person.
4. Work with your child to choose three main headings to represent a "core learning strategy". This strategy will form the basis for most learning in the future and is where your child currently feels most comfortable. In my case, I am most comfortable using activities involving Word, Body and People.

Extract from *Taking the Hell Out of Homework* by Neil MacKay
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