

**Q & A: What is the best study environment?
Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Question: I have two children, and they are as different as night and day. I have come to accept many of their differences, but I just can't seem to reconcile the disparities between their study habits.

My 15-year-old son has difficulty studying if there's any noise at all in the house, but my 13-year-old daughter insists on having either the CD player or TV blasting while she's doing her homework. She says that she "learns better" with a lot of noise in the background.

Her grades are actually fairly good, so it's hard to argue with her when I try to get her to turn down the volume — she feels it's unfair if I try to make her study like her older brother and that it's really her decision how she does her school work since she's doing so well.

Is this something I should take control of or should I let her do it her way?

Answer: The research on study environments is quite contradictory. Some studies suggest that your daughter would do even better were she to do her homework in a quiet environment. Other research backs up her assertion that many students can achieve satisfactory results despite — or are even aided by — things going on around them.

My belief is that the study environment for each child needs to be individualized. Many kids, especially the more inattentive ones, really do need as much silence and fewest distracters as possible. The sound of the air conditioning unit turning on, a noise from outside or even the television in another room can draw them off-task and cause their homework to take twice as long. Yet, others, who can tune out distracters seem to do beautifully listening to their CD players while reading “Othello.”

In terms of your daughter, if she is successful in the way she's studying with her favorite TV shows or CDs playing, then most likely she's mastered the ability to attend to two things at once. In fact, she may even have developed a preference or even dependence upon this type of study environment and may feel uncomfortable if placed in a very quiet setting.

And it may actually be an advantage to be able to concentrate on work with extraneous noise occurring since many academic and work environments are not particularly quiet. In fact, people who insist upon absolute silence while they are studying or working often do not do as well in the *real* world when they cannot control other people's behaviors and actions. This becomes particularly important when living in a college dorm following high school, or working in an office later in life. The ability to “tune out” the TV set is a real plus if your roommate insists on watching game shows while you are studying or your office partner speaks loudly on the telephone.

Therefore, as long as your daughter is performing well, you probably should let her do it her way. Meanwhile, if your son insists that quiet is a necessity, you should try to help him find an appropriate place to study in the home where it is peaceful and he can have some control over the noise level where he's studying. But, I would have a discussion with him, warning about the lack of noise control that he may face in college. He may wish to gradually increase the noise level in his current study area to see if he can adjust. Again, many kids in college dorms have a great deal of trouble concentrating because they've never learned to tolerate noise while doing their work. (Although a trip to the library can solve this problem, it is inconvenient to *have* to leave the dorm in order to complete homework each day.)

Dr. Peters' Bottom Line: There are no distinct rights or wrongs when it comes to study environments — it's more a question of your individual child's personality, desires and focusing ability. However, some level of distraction and/or noise may be useful in preparing children for the rough and tumble of many work environments.