

Q & A: Homework Completion
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QUESTION: “Almost every time that I try to work with my 12-year-old son on his homework, we end up getting into a battle.

Sometimes he says that he doesn't understand what I am explaining to him or that I don't do the problem the way his teacher does it. Other times, he just plain quits and I find myself doing the studying!

Now it's got to the point that I yell at him. I find that I'm losing my patience working with my child yet I know that he needs my guidance with his homework.

Do you have suggestions?”

ANSWER: This is a classic case of "leading a horse to water when he doesn't want to drink." Your son apparently is not motivated to work cooperatively with you. Trying to be patient with him when he acts up leads to frustration on your part, which is then expressed in anger.

In order to break this cycle, here are three tactics that should help ease the tension and put you on the road to a better "homeworking" relationship:

Get involved after he's taken the initial responsibility for his homework: I suggest that you ask your son to do his homework by himself and tell him to come to you when he's done, leaving unfinished only the problems that he cannot complete. This teaches him to do what he can in each subject and to save the items that he doesn't understand until you can offer guidance. In this way, he's responsible for completing most of the assignments in each subject, leaving a smaller, better-defined area in which the two of you can work together to complete the remainder of the homework.

Put the ball in his court: When you're trying to work with him, explaining concepts and principles or helping him to memorize facts, and he becomes upset, tell him that it is difficult for you to work with him and impossible for him to learn when the two of you are arguing. Let him know that you will not continue if the atmosphere is tense and that if he wants your help later in the evening that you'll try it again after the two of you take a break to cool down. Then walk away. Giving him this choice allows him to decide whether to regain his composure and ask for your help later in the evening or to work it out on his own with the teacher the next day. Overall, you should bear in mind that it's not your responsibility to complete your child's homework for him. You should be available to help and to motivate him, but if he becomes rude, disinterested or nasty, that's where your responsibility ends for that day.

Think about outsourcing: Also consider the fact that many kids just do not mesh well with their parents when it comes to completing homework tasks together. They get defensive and feel criticized even if you're just pointing out an incorrect answer to a math problem. I've had good luck using what I call "study buddies"--employing a high school student to work with your child on a daily basis during the school week. Youngsters usually enjoy working with older teens, will often try harder to stay motivated and

focused, and tend to refrain from tantrums when frustrated (that would be too embarrassing!). Plus, a teenager is probably more fun to work with, may actually know the material better and can always shoot some hoops with your child when the math problems are completed! It's easy to find study buddies—just check with the teacher-sponsor of your local high school's National Honor Society. Many Honor Society students need “community service hours” for scholarships and will tutor your child without monetary reimbursement. Or, some teens will look upon this as a job to supplement their allowance, and greatly appreciate whatever salary you can offer. Either way, it's a win-win situation: the work is completed accurately, you avoid the daily drama with your son, and he's actually enjoying homework completion as the study-buddy tends to make it fun and interesting!