

Homework Without the Battle

Understanding why homework can become such a flashpoint - and creating a calmer, more realistic bridge between school, home and learning.

Homework can ask a child to use the very skills that may already be depleted after a full school day: attention, working memory, task initiation, planning, emotional regulation, time awareness and frustration tolerance. By the time they arrive home, they may also be hungry, overstimulated, socially exhausted or simply desperate for home to feel different from school.

When a child says 'I can't', avoids the table, becomes angry, cries, wanders away or spends forty minutes doing almost nothing, the most useful question is not automatically 'How do I make them comply?' It is 'Where is this task becoming inaccessible?' Homework should support learning; it should not routinely consume the relationship between parent and child.

Find the barrier before choosing the strategy

What you may see	What may be underneath	What may help
Cannot get started	The task feels too large, the first step is unclear or activation is low.	Make the first action tiny: open the book, read question one, write the date.
Knows the answer but cannot explain it	Working memory, language demands or the effort of writing may be blocking what they know.	Allow thinking aloud, jot key words first or clarify with school what form of response is required.
Explodes over a small mistake	Perfectionism, shame, tiredness or repeated school-day frustration may already be present.	Reduce correction in the moment, normalise mistakes and return to the task in a smaller chunk.
Constantly leaves the task	Attention may need movement, shorter work periods or fewer competing distractions.	Try a brief timed work block followed by a purposeful break, then review whether returning is easier.
Parent ends up doing the thinking	The task may exceed the child's current independent capacity.	Support the process without supplying the answers; if substantial adult help is always required, tell school.

Home may need to be recovery before it becomes workspace

For some children, moving straight from school into homework simply does not work. A planned decompression period can be part of the homework strategy rather than a reward that has to be earned. Food, changing clothes, movement, quiet, music, sensory regulation or time with a preferred activity may help restore enough capacity to begin.

Agree what 'done' means before you begin

Unclear finishing points can make homework feel endless. Where possible, establish the task, expected amount and approximate time before starting. If school guidance is vague or the work regularly takes far longer than expected, ask for clarification rather than allowing the child to work indefinitely.

A calmer homework structure

The aim is not to create a perfect study routine. It is to reduce the number of battles surrounding learning and help the child use support without feeling that every difficulty is a personal failure.

Connect before directing	A snack, brief conversation or quiet presence can help the child arrive home emotionally before another demand begins.
Shrink the task	Cover part of the worksheet, choose one question, use a short checklist or divide a project into visible stages.
Use time carefully	A timer can make work finite, but it should not become a threat. Try short, realistic work periods and review what the child can sustain.
Protect the relationship	If the interaction has become a prolonged argument, pause. Learning is unlikely to improve while both parent and child are escalating.

Body doubling: working alongside rather than taking over

Some children find it easier to begin or persist when another person is quietly present. A parent might answer emails, prepare food or read nearby while the child works. The adult is not supervising every pencil mark; their presence provides structure and a sense that the child is not tackling the demand alone.

Perfectionism and fear of getting it wrong

Homework avoidance can sometimes be driven by anxiety rather than lack of motivation. A child who repeatedly erases, refuses to write unless certain, or becomes distressed by correction may need help tolerating 'good enough'. Model mistakes, separate drafting from final work and avoid turning every error into an immediate teaching opportunity.

When the parent does not understand the homework either

Parents are not expected to become subject teachers. If instructions are unclear, note what the child understood, what was attempted and where the difficulty occurred. This is useful information for school. Guessing the method or teaching a conflicting approach can create more confusion.

When homework is affecting family life

If homework regularly causes prolonged distress, sleep disruption, physical symptoms, explosive conflict or takes substantially longer than school expects, communicate that clearly. Record how long the work actually takes and the amount of adult support required. The fact that work is eventually completed does not show that the current demand is manageable.

School partnership matters

Useful conversations with school can include the expected time, which tasks are essential, whether instructions can be provided visually, how unfinished work should be handled, and what adjustments are already used during the school day. Where a child has SEND needs, involve the appropriate school staff so homework is considered as part of the wider support picture.

Homework Without the Battle - Family Plan

Choose one week and treat this as information gathering, not a test. Notice what helps the child access learning with the least unnecessary stress.

What homework is currently expected?	_____
How long does school expect it to take?	_____
How long is it actually taking?	_____
What is my child's capacity like after school?	_____
What recovery helps before starting?	_____
Where does the task usually break down?	_____
What is the smallest useful first step?	_____
What length of work period is realistic?	_____
What kind of break helps them return?	_____
How much adult support is currently needed?	_____
What do we need to communicate back to school?	_____

Useful language when things are getting stuck

Try language that reduces the size of the demand: 'Show me the part that feels hardest.' 'We only need to work out the first step.' 'Do you want me nearby or do you need space?' 'Let's write down what you don't understand for your teacher.' 'You have worked for the time we agreed; let's look at what is reasonable next.' The purpose is not to talk a child out of every feeling, but to make the problem more workable.

A message for parents

You are the parent, not the evening extension of the classroom. Supporting learning matters, but so do connection, food, rest, play, sleep and a home in which your child can recover. If completing homework requires repeated tears, hours of adult teaching or nightly conflict, that is not simply a parenting problem to solve more firmly. It is information worth taking back to school.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 and ADHD Foundation resources for parents and carers. Parents can also speak with the child's teacher, SENCO or relevant SEND staff about persistent homework difficulties and appropriate support. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 14