

3 tips to make reading homework easier

By Mary Ashby-Green*

Don't let reading homework ruin everyone's day. Here are three simple tips that really work to reduce reluctance and aggravation during home reading time.

You are keen to help your child and you may wish they were as dedicated to helping themselves as you are. But often they have used so much energy up at school (particularly if they're not finding learning easy), that they come home despondent, tired and often reluctant to do more work with you. When it comes to homework time, it can very easily turn into a nightly battlefield.

If you have children who are very reluctant around reading homework, here are three tips that parents tell me really work.

1. set a timer

Set a specific length of time for the reading homework (between 5-30 minutes) and set a timer. Don't select the time period according to how long they usually take because you want to change that habit. Make sure the time of day suits you both because you want to build co-operation.

The more reluctant they are, the shorter amount of time you set. You are aiming to change the dragging of feet and the arguments. The new message you are giving your child is that you will be totally available for that length of time, and regardless of what they accomplish, homework time will stop when the timer goes off.

This will take a little getting used to – from your child, and you. You are used to hanging in there to make sure the work is done, and they are used to taking a very long time to get round to it. But stick to the timer, and when it's finished, be matter-of-fact that the reading homework time is over, and that your child will get better at doing it in that appointed time. As much as you can, let the timer be the 'bad guy' – you are just obeying its rules, just as your child has to.

The purpose of the timer is for your child to trust that the homework time will be short and that it will end. This gives them a feeling of control, and they will become more and more willing to co-operate. Warning: don't be tempted to add on a few more minutes if it's going well! This completely ruins all your good work.

If your child wants to extend the session, the most powerful thing you can do is not agree immediately. (That's hard for us as parents because that's what we have been longing to hear!) However, take time to think about it – and add only another few minutes to the timer. You are better to add only a few minutes in increments, rather than a half-hour block, because this gives the child the feeling that they have some choice and control.

Parents report that this also gives them a feeling of choice and control, and it creates a more balanced atmosphere so that co-operation can grow. You are letting your

child know that you are on their side, but they have to play their part too. Parents tell me that homework actually comes to be a pleasant time.

2. focus on one thing at a time

Sometimes you can be overwhelmed with all the things you see that they are doing incorrectly and it is tempting to point all those things out. However, your child will progress faster if you decide on a particular learning intention for each session and stick to it. Take note of the other issues, and then make each one the focus of another session.

3. create categories for the information you want your child to learn

Categorising the information for your child breaks it down into bite-sized chunks that are easier for your child to process. Do this by turning it into a picture or diagram, preferably using colours as this engages the right-side of the brain. It can also help give the child an overall picture of where they are going and what's required.

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ages and stages

under-5s

- Play listening games that help your child listen for rhymes and syllables.

5- to 8-years

- When you are helping children learn spelling words, get them into the habit of hearing how many syllables the word has. Ask them to tap out the syllables as they say the word.

9- to 12-years

- Take the time to put the words onto a separate piece of paper and explore the pattern together with your child. Use a dictionary and together build up lists of words under each pattern – you'll be surprised at just how many there are.



helping with patterns

Knowing how to prompt your child and head them in the right direction when they are having difficulty with a word can make all the difference to the ease with which they decode new sounds and words. Using the same prompts and tips that a teacher uses ensures that the learning taking place between school and home is more consistent.

Here are some patterns for word endings that you can teach your child.

Make suffixes simple: here's an example of sorting information into patterns. Have a look at the list of endings of words below. These suffixes have complicated spelling, but they actually make very simple sounds.

When children recognise that these tricky suffixes all make the same sound, they can relax and focus on the first part of the word, which is actually easy to recognise.

I use this with older children who have lost confidence, and particularly those with learning difficulties. I also find it very useful for children who spell words letter-by-letter. Seeing the words in syllables helps them create a carry-over between reading and spelling.

these syllables say 'shin'

- tion: station mention solution tradition intention
- sion: vision collision decision illusion confusion conclusion
- cian: musician politician electrician mathematician
(95% of words are spelt with the -tion pattern)

these syllables say 'shil'

- cial: special financial official commercial
- tial: initial essential substantial confidential

these syllables say 'shis'

(These suffixes have the I O U (I owe you) pattern to help remember the order.)

- cious: delicious ferocious precious suspicious
- tious: cautious ambitious nutritious infectious

these syllables say 'shint'

- tient: patient impatient
- cient: ancient sufficient efficient deficient

these syllables say 'she-ate'

- tiate: negotiate initiate differentiate substantiate
- ciate: appreciate depreciate

Remember to make it fun!