



The Homework Struggle: Learning From What We Say to Dogs

QWERTY Education Services offer this advice to families who want to avoid the all-too-common battle over homework. QWERTY (www.qwertyed.com) has provided individual academic tutoring and diagnostic educational evaluation services in downtown Menlo Park since 1986. **Mark A. Carey, M.A.** is the Founder and Consulting Educational Director for QWERTY Education Services, Inc.

What are the top five strategies to get *The Homework Struggle* under control?

1. Write down your expectations.

That's it. Not a top five; just a top one. Admittedly, there is more to it than that, but if you neglect this step, you are far less likely to make headway on the four other strategies. For many, simply taking this first step in earnest will go a long way to understanding *The Homework Struggle* and how to manage it.

A classic *Far Side* cartoon comes to mind: In the first panel captioned, “**What we say to dogs,**” the human yells, “*Okay, Ginger! I've had it! You stay out of the garbage! Understand, Ginger? Stay out of the garbage, or else!*” The next panel, captioned “**What they hear,**” says, “*blah blah GINGER blah blah blah blah blah blah GINGER blah blah blah blah . . .*”

Sound familiar? You might be talking a blue streak to your child about homework issues while she may just be hearing “Blah blah blah.” Putting things in writing can move you past this deadlock. How to do this, and what to do with it once you are done, depends on your situation. Differing grade levels, learning styles, academic prowess, personalities, motivation, parent and sibling relations, parenting styles, teacher expectations, and more will shape the details of an effective homework management plan.

Consider some of the following ideas and develop your plan to best of your ability, but know that what you develop will be a “work in progress” rather than the definitive answer. Your plan will not work perfectly; kids are experts at finding the loopholes. The process of developing a homework management plan is an ongoing one because students change and so do the supports they need.

Some parents will want to include the student in developing the plan while others may be more autocratic from the start. In any case, you would be wise to write out a tentative draft in advance, because in the end, you really need to be in charge of the outcome and will have more success if you have thought through various implications as much as possible beforehand.

Start by making a written list of your expectations for the student's homework habits. Be very specific when you can. While some items may seem obvious to you, they may not be clearly understood expectations that your child shares. For example, you might want “Wear

your reading glasses while you work” on the list. Your daughter may agree with the expectation but might benefit from seeing that in print rather than having to recall it from memory or get a verbal reminder. As a student comes to demonstrate the ability to meet documented expectations, these written statements become testimony to their successes. It doesn't hurt to list some that you are already confident she can easily meet. Some areas you might include and some sample expectations follow. Choose what fits best in your case and omit or design others:

Be Prepared

- Have your assignments written down in a planner.
- If your planner is not filled out, start by filling in your planner.
- Bring all needed materials home [Parents might make a specific list: binder, textbooks, handouts, emailed copy of work started on a school computer, etc.].
- Drop your backpack, books, etc. in your study area when you get home.
- Deposit all your school materials by the front door when your homework is done (to facilitate morning routines).

Get Off to a Good Start

- Start your homework no later than 4pm (or other time that fits your family's schedule)
- Start your homework without a reminder—or, Start your homework with only one reminder.
- Tell me about something you hope to accomplish in your homework tonight.

Make Your Best Effort

[Note: this is a tricky one. It's not always a good idea for a parent to get involved in evaluating the work. You want to look at *apparent effort*, not so much *results*.]

- No TV, phone calls, or messaging during your homework time.
- Give the appearance of being involved. If you are staring out the window for a long period of time, it may be a sign that you aren't making an effort.
- Try by yourself first. If you are stuck, ask for help.
- Work on homework for a minimum of ___ minutes daily. If you do not need that much time to complete assigned work, use the time for study, long-term assignments, or required or recreational reading.
- Show the evidence that the day's tasks are completed. This might mean showing the completed work (again, not for evaluation but for evidence that the work is done). It might mean simply showing that your planner looks complete and you have crossed off all tasks done.
- Show me something in your homework tonight that you are proud of, or tell me something you think you can improve.
- [Consider the idea that evidence of “best effort” in high school may be found in grades. You may choose to reward a student for certain grades or degree of improvement in grades.]

Oddly enough, in many cases, simply making this list is all you will need to do. Going through the process with your child can help cement a sense of mutual agreement about expectations and promote success in achieving them.

In some cases, writing down your expectations will instead serve to highlight the fact that you and your child do not agree on the expectations. That, too, is very useful. If you are going to disagree, it's helpful to have the points of contention spelled out clearly. From there, you can work toward a resolution. Keep in mind that just because you have said that something is your expectation, you do not have to insist the expectation be met immediately. It may be that you will go through a week and discover that your son or daughter consistently meets most of the expectations but routinely fails to meet others. You can argue with him about those failures (which sounds like, "Blah blah blah" most of the time) or you can punish her for those failures, but there may be better alternatives.

You can take this a step further by making a chart of the expectations that you can use to monitor behavior over a week's time or more. Create columns to mark whether or not each expectation was met each day of the week. While rewards and consequences are a good way to change behavior, it might be more amicable and productive to simply have a week of charting performance with no special rewards or consequences. At the end of the week you will have written evidence of a number of successes, which hopefully will please everyone. You will also have evidence that certain areas need improvement. Rather than finding fault for those shortcomings, think of this as establishing goals for the coming weeks.

As for those other four steps . . .

2. **Make a written list of basic rights and privileges** the student has when he or she is meeting your basic expectations.
3. **Make a written list of additional rights, privileges, and rewards** the student can earn if he or she exceeds your basic expectations or meets additional goals.
4. **Make a written list of consequences** that will apply when he or she does not meet the basic expectations.
5. **Make a written plan of action** that will apply if consequences are earned. It is not enough to simply apply consequences; it is important to also address the steps that can lead to changes that will lift the consequences.

Read more about these steps to follow through on your behavior plan: www.qwertyed.com/homeworkmanagement