

Homework: Yet Another Balancing Act

How much do we get involved, how much do we leave homework up to our kids? It takes a walk on the balance beam to find the answer. Fear makes us lose our balance. "I'm afraid my child won't do any homework or will get it all wrong if I don't help him." Rescuing and fixing in the disguise of helping allows our children to relinquish responsibility. Why should they take responsibility if we take it all?

To get back in balance, we need to be clear about who our help is intended for. Is it genuinely intended for the child in the way she needs it to feel successful and competent? Or is it for us, so we look like good parents when our child gets a good grade? If your child gets a D in math, do you give yourself a D in parenting?

We need to stay just enough on the edge of homework so they take ownership yet feel supported and held by our interest and involvement in their school life. Each child needs a different amount of parental involvement depending on individual temperament and capability.

The goal is for schoolwork to be under the child's jurisdiction. That means the child should hold the perception that school and homework is his responsibility and that he is capable of directing his education—and thus his life.

Many children struggle way too hard or give up under a system that they view as imprisonment intending to force them to perform in ways a teacher, a principal, a parent, or an administrator wishes. Our children need to understand that their education is for them—for their learning and future advancement. They spend too much energy on either satisfying or rejecting what a teacher or parent wants of them and need to focus more on what they want for themselves.

They need us as allies

Many children complain about school in general, a teacher, a homework assignment, a test, a grade. To make sure you remain on the balance beam as your child's ally, listen, acknowledge his complaint and let him know that you can understand how he feels from his point of view. This does not mean you have to agree. You are merely saying, "I can see what you mean."

Children need us to be sounding boards, not jury members. Instead of, "You've got to do your homework now. No child of mine is a slouch when it comes to school. No TV until it's all done and I sign off on it," try, "So you really think this is a stupid assignment and don't want to do it. I can totally understand thinking that this homework is boring and a waste of time. Boy do I remember that feeling!" Make *very* sure it doesn't sound like a "but" is fast approaching! Then you have made connection. Your child's ears are open. Discussion and negotiation is more likely to follow. Then something like, "What do you think is the best idea?" If she says she's not going to do it, add, "How will that turn out? Will that get you what you want? Do you know what you want?" Put her in the driver seat of her thought process. Don't tell her what to do. It's very important that she is doing her schoolwork for her, not for her teacher, not for you, and hopefully not just for a grade. But if all she wants is to pass a boring class, then the grade is all she needs. Ask her how she can get that.

All children want to be successful. When they aren't, they feel upset or angry. When they can't, they feel hopeless. Last week, Conval teacher Tim Clark

wrote in his column about the “can’t-do” students vs. the “won’t-do” students. He said that help is there for the “can’t-dos.” But if effort isn’t made, it’s easy for the “can’t-dos” to become the “won’t-do’s.” When children feel hopeless about succeeding either at home or at school, they quickly become “won’t-dos.” They are much harder to reach. The only way to get to them is to address the root of the hopelessness, become an ally and find that kernel of capability to build on—not put the student in detention.

But the effort required on the parents’ part is a walk on that balance beam. Give just enough help and support that your child is motivated, but not so much that the doing of it becomes your responsibility. One child might need more help than another. But the resulting attitude should be the same. This is my education, my life and I am the only one responsible for it. The risk is that he falls on his face, fails a test, or sacrifices a good grade. What better example of natural consequences. Don’t wait till he is a junior or senior in high school to allow him to be responsible for his own education.