

LITTLE PLOT TWISTS · FREE PARENT GUIDE

Homework Without the Fight

**5 science-backed fixes that end the
nightly homework war, in 3 weeks.**

- ✓ Exact phrases to say (and what to stop saying)
- ✓ The 10-minute rule, by grade
- ✓ Printable routine + 7-day reset plan

WELCOME

Every night at 6 p.m., our kitchen turned into a war zone.

One worksheet. Ten questions. Two hours, two meltdowns and one very loud parent. If that sounds like your house, you are in good company: in parent surveys, about one in three parents say helping with homework leads to family arguments, and homework regularly ranks among the top reasons parents and kids fight.

The good news: most homework fights are not about the homework. They come from how we help, how long it drags on, and who is in control. Change those three things and the fights shrink fast.

This guide gives you five fixes backed by research, the exact words to use, a printable routine and a 7-day reset plan. It takes about 15 minutes to read. Start tonight.

“The problem wasn’t my kid. It was the way I was helping.”

How to use this guide

- Read Fixes 1–5 once (10 minutes).
- Print the routine on page 10 and put it on the fridge.
- Follow the 7-day reset. Expect pushback on days 1–3. That’s normal.
- Re-read the phrase swaps when you feel the yelling coming.

Note: this guide is general education for parents, not medical or psychological advice. If your child has a diagnosed learning difference or homework causes serious distress, talk with their teacher, school counsellor or paediatrician.

WHY IT TURNS INTO A FIGHT

The 4 hidden causes of homework battles

Cause	What it looks like	The fix
Control struggle	You point at every mistake; they argue or shut down	Fix 1: support, don't control
It takes too long	Homework eats the whole evening; everyone is exhausted	Fix 2: the 10-minute rule + timer
Endless negotiating	"Five more minutes!" "Games first!"	Fix 3: When-Then
Attention & focus	Wandering off, needing you, or needing you to leave	Fix 4: body doubling, not hovering
No ownership	It feels like your homework, not theirs	Fix 5: small choices

A big one experts mention: some kids drag homework out because it is the most reliable way to get a parent's full attention. If that rings true, give your child 10 minutes of fun one-on-one time before homework. It often shortens homework more than any reward chart.

FIX 1

Support, don't control

Researchers at the University of Illinois (led by Eva Pomerantz) studied how parents help with schoolwork. When parents helped in a controlling way, giving commands, rushing, or doing the task for the child, children who were struggling became disengaged. When parents were autonomy-supportive, letting the child explore and choose their own strategy, struggling children's performance improved, and their grades improved over time.

What it sounds like

Instead of...	Try...
"No, that's wrong. Do it like this."	"Walk me through how you got that."
"Hurry up, you know this."	"What do you think the first step is?"
Taking the pencil	"Want a hint, or want to try one more time?"
Checking every line	"Tell me when you want me to look."

FIX 2

Know how long homework should take

Duke University psychologist Harris Cooper's widely used 10-minute rule suggests roughly 10 minutes of homework per grade, per night. The guideline is endorsed by the US National PTA and National Education Association. Cooper's research also found the link between homework and achievement is weaker in younger grades, so more is not better for little kids.

Grade	Rough nightly total
1	10 min
2	20 min
3	30 min
4	40 min
5	50 min
6–8	60–90 min
High school	90 min – 2.5 hrs

Use a visible timer. When it rings, stop, and send a short note: “Max worked focused for 40 minutes; this is how far he got.” Most teachers appreciate it, and the timer becomes the bad guy, not you.

FIX 3

When–Then

“When your math is done, then you can play.” Psychologists call this the Premack principle: making a preferred activity depend on finishing a less-preferred one reinforces the less-preferred one. The magic is consistency: same order, every day, no debate.

- Say it once, calmly, then stop talking.
- Don't add bribes on top. The normal fun thing is the reward.
- Never use “then” as a threat (“then no dinner”). Keep it positive.
- Let them repeat it back: “When I finish, then games.” It becomes their deal.

FIX 4

Sit nearby, but don't hover

Body doubling means working alongside someone who is calmly doing their own task. It is a popular strategy for kids (and adults) with ADHD, and it helps many kids without it. Your presence anchors them; your silence keeps it their work.

- Bring your own quiet task: emails, a book, bills, meal planning.
- No commentary. If they ask for help, use Fix 1 phrases.
- Phones face-down for both of you.
- Older kids? Try a 'study session' at the same table, or a video call with a friend.

FIX 5

Give small choices

Kids fight what feels forced. Experts consistently recommend letting children help choose when and where they do homework. Small choices create ownership, and ownership creates habits.

Choice	Example
Order	“Math or reading first?”
Place	“Kitchen table or your desk?”
Break	“Break after 15 minutes or after this page?”
Start time	“4:30 or 5:00? You pick, then we stick to it.”

SAY THIS, NOT THAT

12 phrase swaps for homework time

Stop saying	Say instead
"This is easy."	"This one's tricky. Let's figure it out."
"Hurry up."	"Timer's on. You've got this."
"Let me just do it."	"Show me where you got stuck."
"You're so smart."	"You kept going even when it was hard."
"Why didn't you listen in class?"	"What did your teacher say about this?"
"Stop complaining."	"It's frustrating. Want a 2-minute break?"
"You're not leaving until it's done."	"When this page is done, then you're free."
"Wrong."	"Check that one again."
"I did this at your age."	"How would you explain it to a younger kid?"
"You always do this."	"Tonight, let's try it a new way."
"Ugh, fine, skip it."	"Circle it. We'll ask the teacher."
"Good job."	"You did the hard one by yourself!"

Praising effort and strategy ("you kept going") rather than fixed traits ("you're smart") is a well-known finding from growth-mindset research and helps kids stick with hard problems.

PRINT ME

Our homework routine

Fill in the blanks together with your child. Kids follow rules they helped write.

☐ Snack + 10 minutes of fun one-on-one time

☐ Start time: _____ Place: _____

☐ Phones away (everyone)

☐ Pick the order: _____ first

☐ Timer on: _____ minutes (10 × grade)

☐ Break after: _____

☐ Stuck? Circle it, move on, ask at the end

☐ Grown-up sits nearby doing own work

☐ When homework is done, then: _____

☐ Pack the bag for tomorrow

YOUR PLAN

The 7-day homework reset

Day	Do this	Expect
1	Family meeting (5 min). Fill in the routine together. Start the timer rule.	Curiosity, some eye-rolls
2	Start When-Then. Say it once, then stay quiet.	Testing: "Just 5 minutes?"
3	Sit nearby with your own task. Zero comments unless asked.	The hardest day: hold steady
4	Use 3 phrase swaps from page 9. Praise effort once.	Fewer arguments
5	Let them pick order + place. Send the teacher a timer note if it ran over.	More ownership
6	Review: what worked? Change one thing together.	Kids feel heard
7	Celebrate the streak (a family movie, not money).	A new normal starting

When to get extra help

- Homework regularly takes 2× the 10-minute guideline even when focused: talk to the teacher.
- Your child is often in tears, or says "I'm stupid": ask the school counsellor.
- Constant trouble focusing or starting tasks across settings: consider asking your paediatrician about an assessment.

SOURCES

Research behind this guide

- Pomerantz, E. et al. University of Illinois research on autonomy-supportive vs. controlling parental homework help (news.illinois.edu).
- Cooper, H. (2006) homework meta-analysis and the “10-minute rule”, Duke University (today.duke.edu).
- Premack principle (behavioural psychology): preferred activities as reinforcement for less-preferred ones.
- Body doubling for focus ([Understood.org](https://understood.org); Medical News Today).
- Family-argument surveys: homework causes arguments in about a third of families (PR Newswire UK); homework among top dispute reasons (Sleepopolis 2018 US survey).

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