Helping with homework

O. Evans Scott
"HELPING" WITH HOMEWORK

Although actually helping a child with homework is rarely recommended there are many ways in which parents can help young children to cope with their school work. Some of them are outlined in this article.

By O. EVANS SCOTT

TEACHERS and children all like parents to take an interest in the school work a child brings home. However, as teaching methods are often changing to keep pace with modern ideas, helping with the actual work is not recommended.

Despite this there are many general ways in which parents can help their children. Let us assume that the children have been adequately prepared for school, as discussed in the "Farm and Home" September 1963.

Attitude to School

Parents can help children by letting them see that school is a desirable thing. If the child feels that his parents are apathetic or even antagonistic to school or teachers, the bother of getting children to the school bus, or that they wish he could stay and help on the farm, this will be reflected in his own attitude to school and homework. The willing and interested student is a delight to teach, and learns more in the same time than does an unwilling pupil.

Parents can show their interest in the child's school by attending parents' days, sports days, Parents and Citizens' Association meetings, and by helping at fetes, fucshops, etc., when possible. If the child feels that Mum and Dad are keen on his school his own attitude to school will be good.

Encourage children to respect their teachers—check any tendency to talk in a derogatory manner. If parents allow and are amused by talk of "silly old so and so" they will lose some of their own children's respect, too. Possibly the children will be laughing behind the parents' backs, and using the same epithets to describe them. No matter what the personal opinion, never speak unfavourably of teachers or school in the child's hearing—this will put a conflict in his mind which can form a barrier to learning. Being allowed to criticise a teacher at home, then having to say "Yes, sir" at school can be very unsettling.

Good Manners and Discipline

Good manners and consideration of others is a form of self-discipline which stands a child in good stead throughout his school and later life.

Every aspect of good manners, such as "please" and "thank you," letting elders go first, handing such things as pencils, scissors, knives and so on to another correctly, keeping quiet and still while another is speaking, speaking quietly, bus and train etiquette, table manners, and so on, should all be so well ingrained that they are followed completely unself-consciously. As the child matures this
self-discipline gradually takes over from the discipline imposed by elders. It is essential for the smooth functioning of all societies.

The importance of being well mannered cannot be over-emphasised. Parents and older children should set a good example to the younger children and insist on good manners from them.

If, at the time of starting school, a child has not learnt to accept discipline, good teaching time is lost bringing him into line ready to start learning. He should listen when he is spoken to and carry out requests quickly and quietly. If he is not accustomed to this he will find it hard to obey instruction at school, lagging behind the others and even wasting valuable time for the whole class while they wait for him.

The Homework Habit

As early as possible, establish the homework habit. Even Grade One children are expected to do a few minutes' reading each night.

Choose a time that is suitable to the family and, as far as possible, keep to this time spot, so that to sit down to do homework becomes a strong habit.

This should not be a hardship to a family—from five minutes up to a maximum of 30 minutes is all that is expected of primary school children.

If no specific homework has been set, have children spend this time reading, finding out some facts from an encyclopaedia, or even drawing. Don't say “Go and read a book for ten minutes.” Instead, set a definite task to do, such as “Find the land-locked countries of the world,” or “List the inland seas.” Make a game of it with other children—“Who can have the longest list of rivers (or capital cities, or mountain ranges) in five minutes,” or “Pin-point all the places mentioned on the first page of the newspaper” or “Make a list of authors and some of their books” and so on. They could follow the journey of an ocean liner or international airline flight on a globe or map.

This setting of a definite thing to find out is called “motivated reading.” Making this homework or study and thinking time a habit will be a great help to the child for high school and later. Train him to think for himself. If he asks a question, lead him to the answer by asking him things he knows already. He should soon be thinking to himself “What do I know about it that will help towards the answer?” When answering questions, give reasons and encourage him to think about them. This will help him reason things out for himself.

This thinking and reading time should be about the same amount of time that he would spend if any specific homework is

Good working conditions are important even for young children

The child needs a place to work undisturbed, plenty of working space and good lighting
set, that is, from about five minutes in the
latter half of Grade One and Grade Two,
10 minutes in Grade Three, and so on up
to about half an hour for Grade Seven.

Don't worry if your child seldom has any
set homework. Some teachers feel that
homework is to give extra practice to the
weaker student and that it is not neces­sary to give homework every night to a
child who has already mastered the new
process. In this case, simply set him some
little thing to find out and hear him read
a page or so from his reading book, so that
this reading and study habit is formed.

When there is television in a home it
may be necessary to say "No T.V. until,
say, 5.30 or until such time as homework
(or this short reading period) is done."

Be selective in planning the programme
of T.V. watching for the children, and
veto the "Not Suitable for Children" pro­grammes. The advent of television has
surely reduced the time many children
spend reading—parents should see that it
does not cut it out altogether, for their
children's sake.

Aids to Homework

Each child should have access to and,
if possible, own a good, up-to-date atlas
or world map or globe, and a dictionary.
Encourage children to go to the town
library whenever possible, especially if
they can't find what they want in books
at home and school.

Let a child consult a dictionary himself
—the information he is seeking will stay
in his mind more firmly than if Mother
looked it up for him.

Study Conditions

Nobody can be expected to study or do
homework effectively in the wrong atmos­phere—noise from radio or T.V., children
and other people will distract him. Find
the time that suits the family and keep
young children away—it will take less time
for a child to do his work in good condi­tions, and he will then be free to play or
join in family activities.

Try not to leave him out of an interest­
ing visit or activity just because he has
homework to do—either wait for him for
a set time, or find another time to suit
(for some households, the early morning
is a good time). He must not be made to
feel that homework is a punishment or
a restriction.

Lack of desk or table space can hamper
a student, making homework a real effort.
There should be an area in which he can
work undisturbed, with room for books and
working space, and with table-top and
chair at a suitable height. Good lighting,
from the right direction, is essential, too.

Parents should resist temptation to look
over his shoulder while he is working, or
to help, even if you are an artist and the
child is painting, or if you feel you are
really adept at what he is struggling to do.
Leave him to work alone, for his own sake.

Encourage him to find things out
through his own experience — never
actually do his homework for him!

Study cannot be done effectively in
extremes of temperature, in uncom­fortable clothing and chair, and with dirty
hands. Parents can help by attending to
these where possible. Lolling in a soft
lounge chair or lying on the beach, floor,
or bed is also not recommended for effec­tive study!

Weaknesses

If a child's report card is not very good,
or you feel that he is not progressing,
make the time to see the headmaster or
teacher. Find out what the symbols on
the report card really mean and sys­tematically analyse the report to find the
child's weak subjects. Discuss it with his
teacher, who can suggest ways in which
the child may be helped at home.

If a child is having trouble with a par­
ticular thing, for example a multiplication
of money problem, get together with the
teacher to find out the method and the
setting out, before trying to help at home.
Showing him your own method may mean
his having to "unlearn" one method in
favour of another just when he is
struggling to grasp the problem.

When a subject has proved particularly
difficult over a long period, do respect
the child's limitations. He may not be men­tally ready for the work yet, or he may
simply be unable to do it. There is nothing
to be gained from trying to force a child
past the limit of his capabilities. Each
child is an individual and should be
treated as such—do not say, "But your
young sister can do it, so you should be
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able to. Pushing a child too hard can make him nervous and unhappy, and have exactly the opposite to the desired effect. Instead, praise his successful efforts in other subjects.

If a parent is anxious about a child’s ability, it is possible, through the headmaster, to arrange tests by the Education Department’s guidance section. These tests include I.Q., mental ability, reading age, and so on. Reports are confidential.

Reading and Spelling

Reading is one of the most important yardsticks by which children are measured for normal progression through school.

From Grade One, parents are asked to hear children read from half a page to a page from their reading books each day. If a young child doesn’t recognise a word, don’t tell him what it is, but ask a question to which the word is the obvious answer. For example, if he stops at “kitten,” ask him “What do you call a baby cat?” If the word “basket” tricks him, ask “What do we use to carry the eggs?” and so on, taking names and situations from the story he is reading.

A love of reading is one of the most valuable assets a parent can encourage in a child—suitable books can give him a good vocabulary, and a wide background of general knowledge.

Reading helps spelling, too—the avid reader is generally good at spelling.

If a child is weak at spelling, have him bring home the book in which the set words are listed. (Check with the teacher if you can help in this way). Test him by having him spell the words, or write them, then mark them. Have him write out each error several times, then test again until he has them all correct. Usually in school spelling lists there are only four or five difficult words.

Should he have any difficulty with the others it is probably due to a weakness in wordbuilding (phonics, double sounds, and so on). In this case, see his teacher for ways in which you can help him. Play word building games such as “scrabble” with him, encourage him to do junior crossword puzzles, and to read.

Next week he will have a new list of words.

Take only two or three words each night, or only the difficult ones, and occasionally go back over the difficult words of a previous list. Mother could dictate a simple sentence, incorporating some of the words in his spelling list. Always mark any written work and have him correct any errors.

There is no need to stop everything while the spelling drill is going on—Mother can hear and test him while she is preparing a meal or doing the dishes!

Number Work

A child who is weak in arithmetic generally has an unsound knowledge of his tables and number combinations. Thorough drilling of basic number facts can in this case be a big help to a child—again, see his teacher to find out exactly what he is expected to know.

In most cases a Grade Two child should know the tables up to $5 	imes 5 = 25$—that is, multiplications with a result of 25 or less and with factors of 5 and less.

Grade Three go up to $9 	imes 9 = 81$, and Grade Four to $12 	imes 12 = 144$, so that by the end of Grade Four all the tables should be known. If Dad says to him “How many is $7 	imes 7$” his answer should be immediate. Drilling in these number facts in all forms ($6 	imes 7, 7$ into $42, 6$ into $42$) and so on can only be beneficial. Never drill for too long a period—several two-minute drills are better than one 15-minute session.

Number combinations are more difficult for parents to help with—Grade One should know the combinations of all numbers from 1 to 10 (that is, $1 + 9 = 10, 2 + 8 = 10, 3 + 7 = 10, 4 + 6 = 10, 5 + 5 = 10$) by the end of the year (this is not a hard and fast rule). They should also know the combinations that go to make up 9, 8, 7, 6 and so on as for 10.

Grade Two extend their number combinations to 12, and Grade Three to 18. Where a weakness exists, say in the combinations of 13, a parent can only help by persistent drilling of $8 + 5 = 13, 13 - 8 = ?, 13 - 5 = ?, 9 + ? = 13$, and so on. Again, make these drill periods of short duration several times a day.
Unconscious number drilling is given by such games as dominoes, monopoly, some card games, and most games in which a score is kept. A dartboard and darts can be an effective and enjoyable way of drilling number combinations and tables.

When out driving, have children add up the figures on the registration plates of the cars, and subtract, say, the truck number plates and the mileposts. Counting the wheels on vehicles could be an exercise on the $4 \times$ tables, and so on—children will probably devise games of their own after the first time. Do not let these carry on for too long—suggest a limit like 500 or so, and stop to prevent their becoming disinterested. Younger children could perhaps add just the last figure on the number plate, or the highest or lowest numbers, and so on—do not make it too hard for them—this could lead to disinterest and even dislike of arithmetic.

The Cuisenaire method of teaching arithmetic will be used in schools next year (up till now it has been used mainly as an aid to teaching, and for remedial work with backward children). This method gives children a better understanding of arithmetic, which is really rather an abstract subject and a little difficult for young children to grasp. It is doubtful whether parents can assist with this—as yet there are not enough teachers thoroughly trained in teaching by this method—but in a few years' time there should be an overall improvement in arithmetic in schools throughout the State.

General Health

Naturally, a child who is “full of beans” will take school in his stride, while a child who is “off-colour” will find his work more difficult. Parents can help in this respect, too, by seeing that children have plenty of sleep each night, and an adequate breakfast before school every day. (Nutritionists have proved over and over that a good breakfast is essential to vitality, mental alertness and general well-being). Provide small children with a piece of fruit to eat in their morning recess, especially if they have been accustomed to a mid-morning snack at home or kindergarten.

School doctors visit each school every three years, when they examine Grades One, Four and Seven. This ensures that a child is examined every third year. (Some smaller schools may be examined more often than this). In this time it is possible for eye or ear trouble to develop, and often a child thought to be mentally backward has been found to have defective hearing or long or short sight, and with suitable corrective aids has soon caught up with the class.

Take your child to a doctor if you suspect that some eye or ear defect may be the cause of a dislike of school and a general weakness in school work. Usually a teacher notices these defects, though shy children have been known to accept a desk at the back of the class without saying that they can’t see or hear from there, and consequently the child’s standards of work have fallen.