

Motivating Children to Do Their Homework Parent's Guide



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Motivating Children to Do Their Homework

Your child gets home after a long day at school and you ask, “Do you have any homework?” Does your child complain and say something like, “Yes, but I don’t want to do it!” or “Yes, but it’s too hard”? What happens next? If you’re like many parents, you soon find yourself in an argument that may end in your child doing the homework, but you’re both mad.

Do you often wonder whether there’s a better way? The purpose of this guide is to show you how to motivate your child to do their homework in a peaceful, positive way.

Research has a lot to say about how to shape behavior and how to motivate your children to complete tasks. Here’s a summary of some findings:

- When students are motivated to learn, they do better in school (Logan, Medford, & Hughes, 2011; Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2009; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).
We will show you how to motivate your child to learn while at home.
- When parents communicate their desire for their children to do well in school, students are more motivated to do well in school (Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2012).
We will show you what to say for encouragement while your child completes their homework.
- If children believe they can do a task, they are more likely to succeed (Bandura, 1997; Pintrich, 2003).
We will show you how to introduce, use, and taper off a reward system to teach your child that they can do it. Your child will learn that they can do it, and then they will!

This guide will show you, step by step, how to set up an effective system for supporting your child’s homework time through motivation, encouragement, and rewards. First, we’ll show you how to set up a reward system to support homework completion. Next, we’ll show you how to use the reward system, including what to say to your child on the first day. After that, we’ll help you identify some encouraging and motivating things to say to your child throughout the process. We will conclude the guide with a set of frequently asked questions about motivation and rewards.

Setting Up the Reward System

We suggest setting up a simple reward system. With a little preparation and persistence, it can be a powerful way to change behaviors.

It is your job to do the following:

- Identify the behaviors you want to see.
- Notice when your child displays the behaviors.
- Praise your child for the behaviors.
- Reward the behaviors with checkmarks. Create a list of identified behaviors or tasks that your child can check off when you and your child agree that they have been completed.
- Reward the checkmarks with a prize. It’s also possible to reward positive behavior and completed tasks with tickets or tokens that can later be traded in for a reward.

At the end of this guide, you'll find a Planning Journal. It will come in handy as you work through the following four planning steps.

Step 1: Identify the Behaviors You Want to See

Imagine a homework session that is peaceful and calm. What does your child's behavior look like in that situation?

Use the chart in the Planning Journal to note your child's current behavior and what you would like that behavior to look like instead. Then use the next page to make a list of those desirable behaviors.

Here's an example of desirable behaviors.

Our Homework Goals	
When I say, "Get out your homework," you say, "OK."	
You get your homework and agenda out of your bag.	
You sit at the dining room table.	
You do not complain.	
You take one break after you work for 20 minutes.	
You put your finished homework back in your folder.	
You put your folder in your backpack.	

Step 2: Identify the Rewards

We are all willing to work hard for a reward that we like. In this step, you'll identify the rewards that are the most powerful for your child. You may want to include your child in the brainstorming process so that the rewards are meaningful and work as an incentive. The rewards don't have to be expensive. In fact, you will give rewards frequently, so choose things that are inexpensive but powerful. Here are some ideas.

Free Rewards	Inexpensive Rewards
<p>Invite a friend over</p> <p>Walk around the mall with a friend</p> <p>Go to the park</p> <p>Watch TV</p> <p>Play video games</p> <p>Do arts and crafts</p> <p>Play games with mom, dad, or another family member (e.g., cards, charades, Pictionary)</p> <p>Cook with mom or dad</p> <p>Have a sleepover with a friend</p> <p>Choose music at home or in the car</p> <p>Have a later bedtime on the weekend</p> <p>Do homework outside</p> <p>Receive a coupon to have a parent do one of their chores for a day</p> <p>Choose an outdoor activity to do with a family member (e.g., play catch, go for a walk, ride a bike)</p> <p>Choose a TV show or movie to watch with a family member</p> <p>Take a trip to the library to choose a book to read for pleasure</p> <p>Download a new app or game onto their phone</p> <p>Add 5 minutes to the homework break</p>	<p>Food treat</p> <p>Ice cream</p> <p>Popcorn</p> <p>Drink</p> <p>Small gift card</p> <p>Comic book</p> <p>Nail polish</p> <p>Coins, tickets, or tokens (to place in a rewards jar to save up for a special treat of their choice)</p>

Step 3: Create a Check Sheet

Create a simple check sheet to provide immediate feedback to your child when they engage in behavior you want to see. Remember that the check itself is a reward—you're recognizing their appropriate behavior. When they collect a certain number of checks (you decide on the number), they receive a bigger reward. How often you decide to provide the reward depends on your child and how much support they need. You may choose to start with providing a reward

at the end of each day or at the end of the week. If your child needs extra support to complete a task or you need to regulate their behavior, you can create a more detailed checklist that breaks down tasks into smaller tasks or steps. Once your child has mastered all the steps, the detailed checklist can be phased out and replaced by the original checklist.

Feel free to use the check sheet template provided in the Planning Journal.

Step 4: Identify What You Will Say and Do to Motivate Your Child

This step requires some self-reflection and honesty. Like most parents, you may find yourself feeling frustrated or angry after your child acts out. This is natural. Your job here is to reflect on your current reactions to your child's behavior and what you might instead do to motivate them to do their homework.

In the Planning Journal you'll find a chart to guide you through the process.

Here are two examples:

When this happens:	My child does this:	And I usually do this:
I say, "Time to start homework."	"Ugh! I don't want to!!!"	I usually yell at him.
What I'll do instead:		
I will say: "Remember that you're working toward a reward for finishing your homework today without arguing. If you can get your homework and meet me at the table, you'll earn a checkmark."		

When this happens:	My child does this:	And I usually do this:
He gets stuck on a problem.	He becomes irritated, walks away, pushes the homework aside, and/or makes negative comments, such as "This is stupid."	I usually focus on the negative behaviors. I try to convince him to stop.
What I'll do instead:		
I will give him a hug or pat on the back and say, "Let me help you."		
I will check in with him frequently so that if he starts to struggle, I can help him before he gets frustrated and walks away.		
I also will give him a lot of checkmarks. I'll say, "I can tell the homework is getting difficult and you're staying calm and sticking with it. I'm going to give you two checks!"		

What to SAY to motivate your child

Set your child up for success.

- “Today, I will look for you to get out your agenda and identify the homework you’ll finish. When you have that done, show me what you’ll work on today.”
- “I want your finished homework to end up back in your homework folder. When it’s in there, come and show me.”
- “Today, I will look for you to stick with it rather than walk away. So, if it gets difficult, let me know before you get too frustrated. I promise that I’ll help you without getting mad.”
- “Today, you may take one break during your homework time. We will set a timer for 20 minutes. When the timer goes off, you can take a 10-minute break and then get right back to your homework.” (Your child can also set the timer to help them feel in control or responsible for the task.)

You can also set a homework goal with your child or have them set their own homework goal. If they have a say or are invested in the process, they will be more likely to want to meet their goal. The goal could be set a little higher each day or week.

Praise your child.

- “I’m proud of the way you finished your homework in 30 minutes today.”
- “I noticed that you took only one break during homework time today. That’s an improvement, and I like it!”
- “I’m proud of the way your backpack was organized so that you could find your homework.”

What do DO to motivate your child

Set your child up for success.

- Check on your child every 5 to 10 minutes. Ask whether they are having trouble or need your help.
- Have a dedicated place for your child to complete their homework. Your dining room table is fine. Just make sure it’s as free from distractions as possible.
- Turn off the TV during homework time.
- Set some ground rules or expectations ahead of time, write them down, and post them in the designated homework place. Generating these rules and expectations with your child gives your child some ownership over them.

Reward your child often.

- Your praise is powerful. Notice when your child is doing something right and tell them.
- Don’t be hesitant to give your child checkmarks. In fact, in the beginning, you should give checkmarks often—every few minutes. As your child gets better at completing their homework without problems, you can space out the checkmarks, but in the beginning, give them freely whenever they’re earned.
- When your child earns a reward, provide it as soon as possible. If it’s something that will

happen later that week (e.g., a trip to the park), write a specific note (e.g., “Park day on Friday”) and hang it somewhere.

Find something to do while your child is busy.

- Find something quiet but productive to do while your child is working on homework. It’s a great time to sit at the table with your child and read.

Explaining the Reward System to Your Child

Step 1: Set the Stage

When your child gets home, ask them to sit with you. Tell them you have something important to discuss. Create an atmosphere with no interruptions. No snack. No drinks. No TV. Just sit down, you and your child, and talk. This is a good opportunity to find out from your child why homework is such a challenge. Listening to your child's perspective may give you some insight into their feelings surrounding their homework. Your job is to stay calm and deliver the message that things will change during homework time and that you're there to help.

Saying something like the following has helped parents in the past.

I want to talk to you about something this afternoon. It's important to me, so I want you to pay close attention. Homework time has been difficult lately. I've noticed that the homework is difficult, and you have a reaction to that. Sometimes you walk away, yell, or speak in a disrespectful manner. Of course, I react to your behavior, and we end up fighting. Plus, it takes a really long time to get your homework done.

The thing is, homework is important. It helps you do better in school, and I want you to do well in school. So, you have to do your homework. We have a choice to make. You can continue to complete your homework with all of the arguing, or we can change things. I want things to change and I have an idea that I think you'll like. Let's come up with a plan we both can agree on. First, I want you to explain why doing homework takes so long. Then, I want you to tell me what might help you with your homework—for example, less distraction, soft music in the background, a quiet space without distraction, or help reviewing the topic. We will set some homework rules. Let's also talk about some rewards for completing homework according to our plan. If I promise to help, will you promise to cooperate and give my plan a try?

If your child agrees right away, great! You're on to the next step. But you may find that your child is wary and says, "I don't want to try a new plan." You might reply by saying, "Let's come up with a really good plan that we both will like. I need you to hear me out first. When I'm finished explaining it, I'll ask you again whether you're on board."

Step 2: Explain How It Will Work

You might say something like the following.

I want you to do your homework without problems here at home and I will reward you for doing it. Just like your teachers, I care about your success. Teachers set classroom rules or expectations so you all can be successful in class. We also will do that at home for homework time so that you can successfully finish it each day. Here's a list of what I'm looking for.

Show a prepared list, such as the following.

Our Homework Goals

When I say, "Get out your homework," you say, "OK."

You get your homework and agenda out of your bag.

You sit at the dining room table.

You do not complain.

You take one break after you work for 20 minutes.

You put your finished homework back in your folder.

You put your folder in your backpack.

You will earn checks every time I see you do these things. Here is the check sheet we will use.

Show your check sheet.

When you earn 10 checks, I'll let you [reward they're working toward].

Step 3: Get Started

OK. Let's get started. Time to start your homework.

Watch for your child to say, "OK" and then give them check marks right away.

Remember

- Look for your child to engage in the behaviors you want to see.
- Reward your child with checkmarks often.
- Set your child up for success.
- Praise your child.
- Check in on your child.
- Stick with this reward system for at least 4 weeks.
- Enjoy the peace in your home that comes from your new homework routine.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long should I use this reward system?

Use it for at least 4 weeks and as long as you want after that! As the reward system can be adapted to meet your evolving needs, its benefits can continue long term.

How can I keep the reward system fresh and exciting?

Change out the rewards. Ask your child what they would like to work toward and then decide how many checkmarks are needed for that reward. Just remember to choose small, highly desirable rewards in the beginning because you will reward your child frequently. As time passes, your child can accept that they need to earn more checkmarks over a longer period of time to earn a bigger reward.

Simply changing the look of the check sheet can also help. You could, for instance, use hearts or smiley faces instead of checkmarks.

The behaviors you would like to see may change over time. In the beginning, you might allow your child to take a break every 15 minutes or a total of three breaks. As your child finds success with that schedule, you might allow them to take a break every 20 minutes or two breaks total to build their stamina.

What if it's not working?

First, be honest with your child. Sit down together. You might say, "We still have a problem on our hands. I have come up with a way to reward you for cooperating with me during homework time, but it's not working. Why not?" If your child says, "I don't know," say, "Would it help if I give you more checks?" or "What if I remind you in a calm way what you need to do? Would that help?" or "I realize that you may not really want to work for an ice cream treat. What would you be willing to work for?"

Next, reflect on your behavior. Are you giving your child enough encouragement and praise? Are you watching for signs of frustration and checking on progress to make sure your child doesn't get so frustrated that they start to cry?

Should I see a change in my child's behavior immediately?

It depends. Some children respond positively to these types of systems quickly. Other children take a bit of convincing. They may not believe that you will be forthcoming with checkmarks or they may not believe that you will stop yelling at them. Prove them wrong. Give checkmarks, praise, and encouragement freely. They will soon believe that you will follow through with the rewards. They'll notice that homework time is no longer so difficult, and they'll be more willing to cooperate.

How do I know whether my child is ready for more time between rewards?

We suggest that you provide daily rewards for at least 2 weeks. Then, move to a reward every 2 days. Then move to every 3 days, every 4 days, and so on. Within a month, you may be able to give a weekly reward for positive homework behavior.

Planning Journal

Step 1: Identify the Behaviors You Want to See

Use this page to plan and then use the space on the following page to make a list of behaviors you would like to see from your child during homework time.

What My Child Does Now	What I Want My Child to Do Instead

Our Homework Goals

Step 2: Identify the Rewards

Free Rewards	Inexpensive Rewards

Step 3: Create a Check Sheet

Behavior	Check a box when your child engages in the target behavior.				

Behaviors									
Check a box when your child engages in the target behaviors listed above.									

Step 4: Identify What You Will Say and Do to Motivate Your Child

When this happens:	My child does this:	And I usually do this:
What I'll do instead:		

When this happens:	My child does this:	And I usually do this:
What I'll do instead:		

When this happens:	My child does this:	And I usually do this:
What I'll do instead:		

Encouragement and Motivation

I'm proud of you for _____.

I noticed that you _____. Keep up the good work!

You earned lots of checkmarks today. That's because you _____.

You finished your homework in record time today. That's because you _____.

Thank you for _____.

I'm so impressed that I will give you an extra checkmark for _____.

Good job _____.

Today, you _____. Let's see whether you can do the same tomorrow.

You've almost earned _____. Keep up the good work!

What are you most proud of today?

What can you do tomorrow to make our homework time go even more smoothly?