

Should parents help their kids with homework?

August 29 2019, by Daniel Hamlin



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Schools across the country encourage parents to help their children with homework.

Parents are listening. Helping with [homework](#) is one of the most common things that [parents say they do](#) to support their children's learning.

Many experts have found that helping with homework cultivates [positive learning behaviors](#), [reinforces](#) class material and [signals](#) to children that their education is important. The federal [Department of Education](#) says that parents play an important role in their children's learning when they help with homework.

Yet parents often hear through the media that helping with homework may not be worth it. After seeing headlines such as "[Why It's So Important You Never Help Your Kids With Their Homework](#)" and "[Don't Help Your Kids With Their Homework](#)," moms, dads and other caregivers can be left wondering whether they should even bother.

[I'm a professor](#) of education policy. Together with sociologist [Angran Li](#), I set out to make sense of this conflicting guidance.

Cause or consequence?

The basis for claims that parental help with homework can be bad for students comes from [research](#) examining [national surveys](#). These studies find that frequent homework help from parents [is associated with lower test scores](#).

But this finding [does not necessarily mean](#) that moms and dads do harm when they help with homework. When children are struggling in school, parents may step in to help more often. That is, frequent homework help from parents might not be the cause of problems, but rather, coincide with them.

My colleague and I wanted to see if this was the case.

To find out, we studied data from an important nationally representative survey administered by the [federal government](#)—the [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study](#). We found that [low-achieving children](#) were far more likely to receive frequent homework from parents.

And importantly, after we factored in children's achievement levels, help with homework from parents was no longer associated with lower test scores.

Other considerations

While this finding was insightful, we figured that the effect of homework help from parents on [student achievement](#) might also be influenced by many other characteristics.

So we used a [statistical technique](#) that would account for many overlapping factors, such as how well parents and their children get along, the number of siblings, and behavior at school.

Our results also indicated that children with low test scores benefited the most when their parents frequently helped with homework.

In other words, calls for all parents to stop helping with homework could end up hurting some children.

In addition, [one common concern](#) is that only affluent and highly educated parents have the time and resources to help their children with homework regularly. We find little evidence to support this presumption. [On national surveys](#), low-income and minority families report helping their children with homework frequently. And this was also true in our study.

Quality counts

It is important to point out that our study looked at the frequency of homework help from parents. However, evidence suggests that the [quality of homework help](#) also matters. Parents [can make a difference](#) through warm encouragement and a positive outlook and by communicating high expectations to children.

The effectiveness of homework help also seems to increase when parents foster [independent learning behaviors](#). When helping with homework, parents should avoid trying to control the process and should also resist the temptation to [complete assignments for their kids](#). Instead, they should let their children figure out answers on their own while offering helpful hints and positive feedback as needed.

Although parents should always consider their child's individual learning needs, [researchers say](#) that parents should gradually reduce homework help as their children grow older, probably phasing out direct assistance with homework by the time their [children](#) reach high school. Parents can also seek advice from teachers and other school staff on how to make homework support [engaging and attuned](#) to their child's learning needs.

Blanket statements about whether homework help is simply good or bad can be misleading. Under the right circumstances, [parents](#) can help their kids learn more when they help with homework.

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