

## **"THE HOMEWORK WORRIERS": 13 IDEAS FOR PARENTS TO HELP KIDS WHO WORRY ABOUT HOMEWORK**

Every week in my job, I meet a "homework worrier": a child who gets very anxious about getting homework done, and getting it right. Homework Worriers do things like:

- Spend excessive amounts of time on a simple homework task
- Cry or be teary before and during homework
- Ask for lots of help and reassurance during homework, more than expected for their age/the task
- Act irritably or get frustrated when someone tries to help
- Say, "I can't do it!" or "it's too hard", or "I'm not doing it right"
- Complain about reminders to start homework, or try to avoid it
- Get very upset if they get something wrong
- Worry that their teacher will be disappointed in them or get angry with them

Some parents get very frustrated with homework worriers and there are fights, tears and storming off (from both parents and children!). Other parents don't get mad, but are very anxious themselves about their children's anxiety. Usually the homework worriers sense their mum/dad's worry – which makes them more anxious. Neither the "angry" nor the "worried" approach from parents helps very much. Where possible, parents should try to be calm about their child's homework worries. The reality is that most schools set homework, and learning to cope with it is a big life task – but children can survive this.

There are a few things that parents can do to help homework worriers cope. I have listed 13 ideas below. Be warned, none of these ideas are instant solutions. Homework worriers need slow, steady and patient support. But hang in there, with persistence, even the most frantic homework worrier can learn to calm down.

1. Empathise with your child. Homework and assessment is understandably tough at times. Just for a minute: remember the last time you were assessed on something at work, had someone grading you or looking at your performance. It was somewhat nerve wracking right? Homework can be similarly scary. Say "I'm sorry you feel so stressed about this" or "I can see you are feeling a bit worried about this" or "It's tough when the work is hard isn't it" or "I'm sorry that you are finding this a bit scary". Brief, calm statements of care and understanding can help children feel heard, and sometimes this is enough to help them calm down.
2. Help the child to calm their body. Ask them to take three deep, slow breaths. Do it with them! Slower and deeper breathing leads to less "anxiety chemicals" in the brain which means they will learn and remember better.
3. Occasionally, try to help your child figure out exactly what worries them about homework. Ask questions like: "What do you think might happen if you don't finish this/get this right?" or "What is something you really don't like about making mistakes" or "what is the hardest or most unpleasant thing about doing this/handling this up?" or "What do you think your teacher/friends/I might think if you don't finish this/get this wrong?". Write all your child's worries about homework down on a piece of paper with them. This will help you know how to reassure your child, but more importantly will help your child think about their anxiety more clearly.
4. Ask your child to help you think of some "calm sentences" about homework. For example, "My teacher hardly ever gets mad with me, and even if they do, it's not the end of the world"; "I can do SOME of this, and it's okay if I can't do it all" or "I'll just try my best and ask for more help tomorrow". Again, write these calm sentences down. Writing has more impact than just saying it out loud. Put the calm sentences on cards that the child can read through themselves when they are worried. This helps build the child's own skills in dealing with their fears rather than always needing us to be reassuring them ourselves.
5. Help your child talk with their teacher about their worries. (Warn the teacher in advance so they can be prepared). Ask your child to bring the paper in with their worried thoughts on it, and discuss them with the teacher. Most teachers are happy to help reassure children and help them feel calmer.
6. Once children have been given calming information by yourself and the teacher, try to help them remind *themselves* of this information when they are stressed. When your child says worried things, ask them, "Is there

any of your calm sentences you could read that might help with that?”. Don’t expect that a “one time” reading or writing of the calm sentences will fix the problem. The child needs to remind themselves of these calm sentences in an ongoing way. Have them around you whenever homework is getting tough.

7. Check with the teacher how your child is coping in class. It may be that the homework set is too hard or onerous for them. Children in primary school shouldn’t be sitting and doing homework for long periods of time. If this is the case, the teacher can help modify the homework set and change the expectations. Note that homework worriers will often freak out about having different expectations to others – some will think they will get in trouble or that they will stand out from others in their class. Have some calm sentences ready for this (“It’s okay that I’m different to some other kids”, “some students are good at some things, and I am good at other things”)
8. Choose a set, short time for homework (ask you child to help you choose when this should be) and stick to this routine religiously for a month. For some children this is straight after school so they have less time to worry, and they get it out the way. For other children it helps if they have run around, eaten and rested. But keep it constant. If children do their homework at the same time, every week, without fail for a while, they are less likely to try to get out of it, and also less likely to worry about it. I suggest only starting with a month for this routine because this helps both parents and kids be motivated to stick to it without fail. You can review it after this time, and see if it helped or not.
9. If you are actively helping your child with homework, understand that they will often be reluctant to take advice. They will often say things like “That’s NOT right!”, “Mr Smith says I can’t do it like that!” and “No Mum that’s wrong!” Be understanding and calm – it’s their anxiety that is making them stubborn, their brains are flooded by anxiety chemicals – and don’t take it personally. Before walking away, softly but firmly tell them you don’t want them to speak in a rude tone to you and that you will be back in a minute. Then come back quickly to continue to help support – even if only in the background.
10. For some children, a few “let’s do it wrong on purpose” homework nights can help homework worriers learn to de-catastrophise about getting things wrong. On these nights, get the child to read all of their sight words wrong on purpose, write all their spelling words completely wrong and do things as fast and messily as possible (let the teacher know about this). The child will see that even though they got 0/10 – they survived, and no-one died.
11. If you are working closely with your child on homework, then at some point you will need to train them in “homework communication”. Teach them how to take advice from you, how to tell you their opinion and how to calmly express their worry rather than communicate it in a rude, panicked way. You will need to teach them the words to say, and remind them of it. Say: “You know when you think I’m wrong, instead of saying “you’re wrong”, you could say, “Mum I don’t want to be rude, but I don’t think that’s what I’m supposed to do.” Could you try that?”” This training will take a while. Try to be patient. You can also ask them how *you* might be able to communicate with *them* about homework in ways that are more helpful for them.
12. Work on your own patience. Don’t try to do a hundred other things during homework. Even if you are not actively helping, for many homework worriers, having a calm, “not rushed” parent available in the background is useful. I know this is hard to do. The house might have to be messier, other children might have to watch more TV and washing might not get done. Before homework starts, remind yourself “Be bigger, stronger and wiser”. If you yell and get impatient, don’t get too mad at yourself. Most parents struggle with this at times. Just take a deep breathe, apologise and give yourself some time out. Then try again.
13. If you find it impossible to be calm with your homework worrier – despite trying all of the above - you might need to see if you can find someone else to help your child for a while. Can another parent do it – at least on some nights? Is there a Grandparent around who could help? One parent I worked with, had so much stress and conflict over homework they employed a local high school student (who was much calmer and more patient) to come in a couple of nights a week to help with homework instead of the parent doing it every night. Immediately this parents’ relationship with their child improved.

If you continue to struggle with your homework worrier, it can be helpful to get some advice from a health or education professional. Talk more with a school counsellor, child psychologist, doctor or school teacher/leader.