What to say when your teenager refuses to do homework

"My fifteen-year-old says she's not doing her homework and I can't make her. She's right, I can't. What do I actually say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"If you don't do it, you're losing your phone. I'm not watching you fail."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"It's your work and your call. What's getting in the way? If you want a hand making a plan, I'm here."

You cannot make a fifteen-year-old do her homework, and she knows it. The instinct is to reach for the biggest lever you have, the phone. The research points instead at the conversations around the work.

What is known, and at what age

A review of 50 studies of parents of young teenagers found that involvement in school went with higher achievement, except for helping with homework. The involvement most linked to achievement was what the authors call academic socialisation: talking with teenagers about why school matters, linking it to their goals and helping them plan. The studies were of middle-school students, around eleven to fourteen; for an older teen it is the closest research evidence, not a finding about her age.

A second review found that, among high-school students, parents' homework involvement went with higher achievement, and that parents setting rules, such as a time and a place, had a stronger link than other kinds of involvement. Both reviews describe links, not causes.

In a study of 122 parents and their children, children who saw their parents as supporting their own choices during homework were more motivated and more engaged with it. For a teenager, that is a reason to hand the choices back.

What the words do

Take 1 makes the work yours and the phone a hostage. Take 2 hands the work back ("your call"), asks the one useful question ("what's getting in the way?"), and offers a plan rather than supervision. Keep the rules you can keep, a time and a quiet place, and let the rest be her decision. Then, on a calm day, talk about where school fits in her plans.

If you live in two homes

Homework that lives in two homes gets lost between them. Agree with the other parent, directly, on where the reading book and the planner live and who checks what on which nights, so your child is not the one carrying the messages. Pediatricians' guidance on separation says not to make a child the messenger.

In the UK

Schools in the UK set their own homework policy, so the class teacher or form tutor is the person to ask how much is expected and what to do when it becomes a nightly fight. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.