What to say when your six-year-old refuses to do homework

"My six-year-old throws his pencil down and says "I'm not doing it." It's one page of reading. What do I say before this turns into a fight?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're not leaving this table until it's done."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"This one feels hard. Let's do the first line together, then you try the next one."

At six, "I'm not doing it" usually means "this is hard and I'm tired." The instinct is to win the standoff. What the research describes is a smaller kind of help that the child can take over.

What is known, and at what age

In a study of mothers and their four-year-olds working on a hard task, minute by minute, the more controlling a mother was in one minute, the less the child kept trying on his own in the next. When mothers began very controlling, children's persistence dropped across the session. The children were younger than six and the task was a puzzle, not homework, so it is a pattern to keep in mind, not a homework finding.

A review of research on parents and homework pooled studies that trained parents in how to help. For primary-school children, training went with more homework finished and fewer homework problems.

Guidance for parents from KidsHealth puts it simply: parents can make suggestions and help with directions, but the learning is the child's job. It also suggests breaking work into manageable chunks.

What the words do

Take 1 makes the table a place you win or lose. Take 2 does three things. It names the feeling ("feels hard"), so he does not have to throw the pencil to say it. It shrinks the task to one line. And it promises a handover: you do one, he does the next. Then sit back. If he reads the next line, say what he did ("You worked that word out"), and stop while it is still going well.

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.