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

"Every night my ten-year-old says "I'm not doing it, it's pointless," and it ends in shouting about maths. What do I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You'll sit there until it's done, and I'm checking every answer."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You don't have to like it. Maths first or spelling first? I'll be in the kitchen if you get stuck."

By ten, a homework refusal is often an argument about who is in charge of the work. The instinct is to take charge harder. The research on this age suggests stepping back from the work and staying close to the child.

What is known, and at what age

A review of 50 studies of parents of middle-school students, around eleven to fourteen, found that parents' involvement in school went with higher achievement, with one exception: helping with homework. The kind of involvement most strongly linked to achievement was talking with children about why school matters and linking it to their own plans. An eight- or nine-year-old is younger than that, so read this as the direction of travel.

A second review found the same shape: the link between parents' homework involvement and achievement was positive in primary and secondary school, but negative in middle school, and parents setting rules (a time, 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 while helping with homework were more motivated, more confident and more engaged with it.

What the words do

Take 1 sets up a nightly contest and takes the work over. Take 2 agrees it is a chore, so there is nothing to argue about. It gives him a real choice (which subject first), keeps your rule (homework happens now) and offers help without hovering. Then go to the kitchen. If he gets stuck, help with that one step and hand it back.

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.