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

"My ten-year-old says "I'm not doing it" about homework every night, and it turns into a shouting match. How do I give him a say without giving in?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You'll do it right now, or there's no screen time for a week."

A week without screens is a big threat for a small task, and at ten he can see that. The argument moves from homework to whether the punishment is fair.

What the research says

Researchers writing from self-determination theory describe autonomy support in parenting as three things: taking the child's perspective, offering real choices within clear structure, and giving the reasons for rules and requests. They contrast it with control through pressure, such as threats and guilt. Structure and autonomy support are meant to work together; one is not the soft version of the other.

A meta-analysis of 41 studies found that being given a choice was linked with more intrinsic motivation, effort and performance, especially for children, and especially

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Homework gets done tonight. Before dinner or straight after? And kitchen table or your desk?"

for small choices about how a task is done. These were mostly short experiments, not homework at home, so they point a direction rather than promise a result.

The American Academy of Pediatrics adds the plain version for school-age children: explain the rules in terms they understand, keep them consistent, and pay attention to what goes right.

What the words do

"Homework gets done tonight" is the limit, and it isn't up for debate. "Before dinner or straight after?" and "kitchen table or your desk?" are two real decisions he gets to make. Once he has chosen, the follow-through is about his own choice, not your order. If the refusal keeps coming back, ask what the hardest part is. Sometimes "I'm not doing it" means "I can't do it."

If you live in two homes

Routines may differ between homes, and the choices you offer can too. What helps is that the limit in your home is clear and the choice is real. If your child says "At Mum's I don't have to," you can answer calmly: "That's how it works there. Here, it happens. You choose how."

In the UK

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 (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. Joussemet, M., Landry, R., & Koestner, R. (2008). A self-determination theory perspective on parenting. Canadian Psychology, 49(3), 194–200.
2. Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Robinson, J. C. (2008). The effects of choice on intrinsic motivation and related outcomes: A meta-analysis of research findings. Psychological Bulletin, 134(2), 270–300.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org (2018). What's the best way to discipline my child?
4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
5. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
7. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
8. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

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.