

Learning at Home: Interactive “Homework” That Engages Children and Families

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Teachers often struggle to engage families in children’s learning at home, but can find it difficult to overcome obstacles to family involvement such as lack of time, resources, or proficiency in English. In the face of these challenges, what approaches and activities are effective in encouraging learning at home? The answers to this question lie in research on children’s learning, family involvement and homework for young children.

Research base

- What we know about children’s learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009)
 - Children are active learners.
 - Children learn through interactions with others.
 - Children learn holistically.
 - Each child’s learning style is unique.
 - Children learn through play.
- What we know about family involvement
 - Family involvement is strongly linked to children’s success in school and in life (Henderson & Mapp, 2002.)
 - Families want to help their children succeed, but many do not know how to do so appropriately (U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).
 - Family involvement can take various forms (Epstein, 1995).
 - Among the reasons families don’t get involved are time constraints, language and cultural differences, unfamiliarity with the school system, feelings of intimidation or inadequacy, and inability to attend school-based events because of individual circumstances (U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).
- What about homework?
 - Most homework assignments, even for young children, are pencil-&-paper tasks (i.e., traditional worksheets) (Cooper, 2007).
 - During the last 20 years., homework has increased for 6- to 8-year-olds (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Even preschoolers are given traditional homework.
 - Research shows traditional homework has an *insignificant* effect on children’s academic achievement elementary school (Cooper, 2007). It also may be *counterproductive* (Miller & Cantor, 2008).

Encouraging learning at home

- Effective initiatives that involve families
 - Reach out to them (Berger, 2008)
 - Give specific information about what they can do to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005)
 - Enable them to experience a direct connection between their efforts and their children’s learning (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1995)
 - Rely on family strengths, recognize cultural differences, and respect diversity (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006)
 - Make it easy for them to participate (Morton, 1992)
 - Recognize and reinforce family participation through positive feedback (Barbour, 2002)
- Appropriately designed learning-at-home activities (“homework”) for young children (Barbour, 2010):
 - Enable them to learn through first-hand experiences
 - Include interaction with others
 - Allow children to apply what they know in a variety of contexts
 - Differ according to children’s individual characteristics, abilities and needs
 - Accommodate variations in home environments

- Are connected to and enrich classroom learning
- Provide feedback to children and means for parents to give feedback to the teacher

Examples of effective interactive “homework” activities

- Based on materials teachers send home
 - Individual activities
 - Books with bookmark (“Read to me,” “Read with me,” “I can read”)
 - Learning rings with individual words
 - Games to play
 - Stuffed animal & journal in backpack
 - Learning rings with individual words
 - Poetry notebooks
 - Interviews
 - Scavenger hunts
 - Flip books
 - Take-home learning kits
Collections of books and activities that are related by a theme. Typical contents include: 2-3 books, 1-3 book-related activities, letter to parents, child’s response journal, parent’s response journal, and all necessary materials.
 - Language & Literacy kit themes: Writing Suitcase, Rhythm & Rhyme, Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia, All in a Day
 - Mathematics & Science kit themes: Count Up and Count Down, Treasure Box Math, Shapes & Shadows, The Night Sky
 - Creative Arts kit themes: Color My World, Twisting & Turning, The Music in Me, Something Beautiful
- Examples of learning activities that require no materials from the teacher (for newsletters, Web sites, day-by-day or vacation calendars)
 - Games
 - License plate games
 - What’s missing?
 - I spy
 - Activities using everyday or found items
 - Coin caterpillars
 - Secret messages
 - Kitchen vegetable sprouts
 - Collections
 - Top 10 lists
- Family Projects (open-ended, long term, unique to each family)
 - Begun with teacher-supplied item(s)
 - Family “quilt”
 - Decorate & dress-up projects
 - Using common household items
 - Time capsule
 - Recycled junk sculpture
 - Neighborhood map

Inexpensive activities that can be mass produced

- Folder-based activities
 - Board games
 - Felt board
 - Sequencing, matching, categorizing activities
- Puzzles
 - Craft stick (use both sides)
 - Dye cut templates (drawn on & cut apart)

- Photocopied books illustrations cut in pieces
- 3" X 5" cards, or card stock
- Dramatic play props
 - Gloves for finger plays (use Velcro, pipe cleaners, yarn, pompoms)
 - Thrift store shirts customized with fabric markers
 - Props from stories in books
- Puppets
 - Jumbo craft stock
 - Finger
 - Sock
- Other
 - Laminated card stock board & dry erase marker
 - Card games
 - Concentration-type games
 - Bingo, lotto or domino games
 - "Feelie" bags

Well-designed learning-at-home activities foster children's skill and concept development, intellectual dispositions, quality parent-child interactions, home-school communication, and parent education. In addition, this type of "homework" sustains young children's eagerness to learn, a critical component of their future success.

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* This book summarizes the rationale for "interactive homework" and includes hundreds of practical ideas and reproducible games that engage everyone in the fun of learning.