Helping children with homework

BY KESANG MENEZES

SCENE 1:

Child: Appa, I cannot understand this maths problem.

Parent: Ok. Come, I will explain it.

As he explains, the child is unable to grasp…

Parent: You do not even understand how to do division? You should have learnt this in 4th standard. How can I teach you when you do not even know the basics? What were you doing when they taught you this? And even now you are not concentrating. How do you expect me to teach you?

SCENE 2:

Parent: Anitha... this page is full of spelling mistakes and your handwriting is too messy. I think you should rewrite it.

Child: I am not going to do it all over again. I want to go and play.

Parent: But you cannot do such bad work. What will your teacher say?

Child: Why do you have to bother? I will handle my teacher. You do not have to keep telling me.

Parent: I am only telling you for your own good.

Today, parents are enthusiastic and interested in helping children with their studies. They want their children to do well in academics and they feel that they must push their children to do their best in this competitive world. They meet their stumbling blocks at

Constructive ways of giving feedback to the child

"I think your teacher would enjoy reading your work more if you took the trouble to write neater."

"What you have written is so interesting, but if you write it more clearly everyone would enjoy reading it."

"I know you are capable of doing these sums, but sometimes you get distracted. Let's see how you can work on them with more concentration."

home...with homework issues! Instead of this tug of war, we can, if we choose to, use the homework opportunity to create a climate of learning and exploration at home. We can make it a bonding time with our children, through an activity made rewarding. For this, we need to know what we are doing wrong.

What we do to our children from our position of strength

From the examples above, when a child seeks a parent's help for homework, we do not give the desired inputs in a manner that he can understand and accept. So the child feels that we are being critical and judgmental. This feeling grows on him, even when it is not always warranted. He feels more and more inadequate. Our constant correction - No, that is not the way, you should do it this way - gives the child the message that he knows nothing. He loses confidence and hence his work deteriorates even more.

Why do we do this, when we wish the best for him

It rests in our belief about our own role as a parent. Parents should be all-knowing. Parents should pick out mistakes and correct the child. Parents should push the child to work harder. It is also related to our beliefs about children. If we do not force them, they will never want to do well. They do not care to excel. They do not like to learn.

These ideas that we have about children have been proven false by a number of child development experts. In fact, studies show that every child is constantly working towards his own development and has a great deal of inner motivation. We need to recognize that actually there is a desire in each child to do well. (Maybe not in every task but in things of interest to them, and this is true of a particular piece of homework as well). Children see their peers, get feedback from teachers and try to do better.

Correcting our overall objective

Instead of looking at the completion of those 30 sums in Math, or that essay in English, we should look at a larger goal of getting the child to develop and strengthen his attitude towards learning. The fact is, that if our children have an interest in learning, they can achieve anything; and without that, nothing.

If we want them to engage in learning with enthusiasm and be self-driven, we need to give children the message that it is the effort and the interest that is more important than the result. So when we sit down to help children with homework, we need to be clear in our mind as to why we are there. To set the tone, we should ask the child "What kind of help would you like from me?" Then the child feels nourished and respected by his parent.

As long as the child is happy doing his work, we should leave him in peace. When we expect perfection in his homework or project, we put a burden on the child. Only if a child overtly resists school work, do we need to dig deeper to find the reasons. Has he labelled himself as incompetent? Has criticism from the teacher discouraged him? Or is there a learning problem? ■

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To encourage learning

Negotiate with the child and arrive at a time when he is willing to do homework: Keep that as a fixed time every day. Children function best with a routine.

Do not take over: Be clear, that it is the child's responsibility to get the work done. Make it clear that you are there to help him. Be present for him, but without interfering.

How much help do I give? This is something you have to decide based on the need of the child. If you see a child getting overwhelmed, you may have to step in and break up the work into manageable parts.

Do not pick on every error the child has made: Just make sure that he has understood the overall concept.

Try to give a child indirect help: For example - If the child is learning the tables in a way that you feel is not correct, you can say "You know when I was small I found an easy way to learn the tables - I would do it like this.... Would you like to try it this way?"

Allowing him to discover things by himself: When we see a spelling error, we can say "Hey, I am not sure about this, why don't we look at the dictionary". Instead of giving all the answers, encourage them to use resources like reference books.

Make homework learning a partnership: "I am sure you know a lot. Let's put our heads together and see how to do this." The child feels motivated when treated as an equal. He will reveal his knowledge, and we can learn from them too.

Give importance to what the child knows rather than focusing on what he does not know: When he gets things right appreciate it - "You managed to learn that long poem by heart. That must have taken a lot of effort!"

Do not put crosses and red marks on children's work: This is very discouraging. Even if this is done at school, we need not do it at home.