Too much help with homework can hinder your child’s learning progress

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Parents are often guilty of helping their child a bit too much with their homework. Sometimes the homework battle can be made that little bit easier if you just tell your child what to do, or simply do it for them. At least it’s been done, you think.

Teachers have spoken of parents writing their children’s assignments, taking on the homework responsibility and emailing teachers out of hours, or, as in one case, turning up at a teacher’s home on the weekend to ask about the homework that was set.

But research shows that giving your child too much help could actually hinder their skills development and lead them to feel incompetent.

Help with homework can be filled with tension or create pressure to succeed for the child.

That’s not to say that parents shouldn’t get involved, as research shows this is an important factor in academic success. But parents need to know when it’s appropriate to do this, and when to step back.

**Helicopter parenting**

Overparenting has been described as delivering appropriate parenting characteristics to a degree where they cease to be beneficial. This approach can result in anxiety, narcissism, poor resilience and an external locus of control in children.

When parents assume responsibility for making their child always happy and successful, they discourage their child from developing age-appropriate autonomy and encourage the child to expect other adults to protect them from facing any challenge.

One study showed children over the age of nine viewed parental help or monitoring of their homework as a sign of their incompetence. It might be useful to offer this kind of support when a child is younger, but parents need to adjust their approach to homework as the child gets older and help only if specifically requested.

For adolescents, parental help with homework has been posited to be developmentally inappropriate. The child should be self-managing their workload, so this kind of help can limit the adolescent’s development of autonomy and sense of responsibility for their schoolwork, leading to poorer homework performance.
By year 12, parents should step back completely. If they don’t, students can rely on the adults in their lives to take a high level of responsibility for them completing their academic work, which may reduce their motivation in school work.

A recent study of parents from Catholic and independent schools found those who endorse over-parenting beliefs tend to take more responsibility for their child doing their homework and also expect their child’s teachers to take more responsibility for it, particularly in the middle and senior school years.

This research may explain why some parents continue to be highly involved in their child’s university work and not grant their child autonomy over their own decisions. These parental actions have been associated with higher rates of depression and reduced life satisfaction among university students.

Here’s how to provide the appropriate level of support.

**Tips for parents**

- Show an interest in your child’s schooling but avoid being more interested in their schoolwork than they are – or it risks making it “your thing” and not “their thing”.
- Set rules about homework (when and where it should be done), particularly in their younger years.
- Try not to offer your help before they ask; let them ask you. This will boost their confidence in completing schoolwork without constant adult help.
- Make sure you are coaching and not doing. Don’t fix every mistake or act as an editor. Get older children to ask you specific questions only, like, for example: “Is my conclusion clear?”
- In junior school, get homework done before fun things. Then prompt rather than remind them, eg: “What needs to be done before you watch TV?”
- Every year, reassess what you do for your child and whether your actions stop them developing important skills, such as responsibility and autonomy. For example, you should start to withdraw your reminders for homework early in their schooling, including gentle reminders such as, “Do you have much homework?”
- With this must come the child accepting responsibility for homework and teacher-delivered consequences should they forget to do homework or to bring it to school. Remember these remain a reflection of your child’s current organisation and motivation, not your parenting.
- Finally, remember a golden rule – your actions as a parent should not be primarily about making them successful now, but about building the life skills that will enable them to be successful in the future without your help.