

Parents and the Adolescent Brain-Grades 6-8

Top 5 Homework Tips

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Parenting adolescents is like supporting someone who is mountain climbing. They are still very much harnessed in and attached to you, but they are the ones choosing their footing and exploring their own path and gaining their sense of accomplishment. At the same time, however, you are the belayer; balancing between supporting them when they fall and being their "rock", as well as slowly releasing the rope as they strive for independence.

1. **Focus on process, not product.** Research shows that when students focus on the process of learning and the act of working through a challenge, this will decrease learned helplessness (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). Avoid saying "You're smart!" Praise effort instead. Ideally, the final product will represent your child's work, especially when process is valued.

2. **Allow your teen to fight his or her own battles whenever possible.** Outside of your moral support, which is essential, it is your teen's job to get along with people in their world-this includes friends as well as teachers! Teach them to self-advocate in regards to questions about assignments. Avoid openly criticizing the school or teacher in front of your teen-this leads to a breakdown of trust and respect. If there is a more serious conflict or problem, go directly to the teacher. It is important to remember teachers are essentially experts in this developmental age group-having taught hundreds (sometimes thousands) of students in this age range. While you currently are raising one or two kids in that age group and indeed an expert on your own child; teachers possess a unique perspective and expertise in regards to advice, insight and guidance regarding adolescence.

3. **Kick distractions to the curb.** Provide a quiet area and enforce the motto: Homework first; screen time later. **Remove televisions and computers from the bedroom.** Research suggests having televisions and computers in children's bedrooms lowers test scores, increases apathy, increases risk for substance use, and interrupts sleep.

4. **Sufficient sleep and exercise enhances connectivity in brains!** Teens need **9 ¼ hours** of sleep a night! Getting less than recommended may affect mood, thinking, and reactions to daily stressors. It is also recommended teens exercise at least 60 minutes a day (if not more), preferably outside. Exercise produces BDNF, which is a type of "**miracle grow**" for the brain (Medina, 2008). BDNF stands for brain-derived neurotrophic factor and is a protein that is released during exercise that activates stem cells to convert into new neurons.

5. **Teach them to work smarter, not harder!** Teach your kids the value of learning & studying based on their own learning styles. Pinpoint whether your adolescent is a visual, auditory, verbal, or kinesthetic learner. Have fun with this and teach ways they can study-playing to their strengths.



Top 5 Ways to Connect With Your Teen

Seize the moment! Take advantage of opportunities to talk to your teen, then be present—put down the electronics and turn off the TV. Share a time you made a mistake but then learned a valuable lesson in the end. Your teen will be completely “dialed in” to you and your story and it may even encourage them to open up about their own feelings and conflicts. Because many teens may have trouble asking for help, look for those “windows of opportunity” and subtle invitations to talk in the car, playing hoops or taking a walk.



1. **Realize that your teen’s frontal lobe is “under construction”.** This is the part of the brain that is not fully developed until about age 25. This “CEO” part of the brain is in charge of organization, self-control, making long-term plans, and judging risk. These skills are not quite fully developed. Because of this, teens have a greater sensitivity to rewards but less awareness of the consequences. For now, you essentially serve as *their* frontal lobe! Teaching them to grasp the bottom line and “gist” of things is very helpful.

2. **Stress impacts the ability to concentrate and stay calm.** Teens are highly vulnerable to stress and will resort to the “Fight, Flight or Freeze” response. Their amygdala (the emotion center) is more activated than yours, however, their ability to manage these strong feelings is not fully developed. They also have a difficult time reading your feelings and facial cues. *Translation: even if you are not mad at your teen, they may jump to this conclusion and become defensive.* To further confuse things, their own feelings may not match their response. This is why many teens seem “out of control”; their emotions are soaring but their frontal lobe lags behind. Helping your teen verbalize their feelings and problem-solve solutions is invaluable!

3. **Eat dinner together.** Regular family meals together reduce a teen’s risk for drug use, obesity, and depression. Teens learn new vocabulary, feel engaged with their families and feel more connected. Asking each family member to share a news story or current event of the day will also encourage critical thinking, spark debates, and engage the whole family!

4. **Parental-child conflict can be good.** For one, moderate parent-child conflict may promote mental growth, problem-solving and moral development. In fact, some researchers suggest that when there is conflict, this could be a sign of less dishonesty because teens may lie to “keep the peace” (Bronson, et. al., 2009). “The type of parents who were lied to the least had rules and enforced them consistently, but they had found a way to be flexible that allowed the rule-setting process to still be respected” (2009). The key? Balance limit-setting & flexibility.

5. **Expect criticism of school, others and you.** They are very self-conscious at this stage and have rapidly changing “hats” and perceptions of themselves. They are also realizing their own as well as **your** flaws. This is a tough realization that their parents are not perfect. ☺ The saying “The grass is always greener” holds true here.

Bronson, P & Merryman, A. (2009). *Nurture Shock-New thinking about children*. New York: Twelve.

Healy, J. (2004). *Your Child’s Growing Mind* (3rd ed.). New York: Broadway Books.

Medina, J. (2008). *Brain Rules*. Seattle: Pear Press.

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