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When "Helping" with Homework Isn't Helping

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Penny was angry and embarrassed as she described her growing frustration with helping her son, Marcus, with his math homework: "I start to think, Geez, how many different ways do I have to explain this, what's wrong with him? Of course, I would never say that out loud." But Marcus could tell when she was getting agitated, and he would quickly apologize. Penny then felt terrible that Marcus felt he had done something wrong when he was just struggling with a math concept.

Sound familiar?

I expected some pushback when I tentatively suggested to Penny that she back off of homework, leaving it between Marcus and his teachers. It's hard for parents to let go of desperation about our children's academics. She did push back, saying that while she knew it didn't matter about the math — she trusted he would learn the concepts — she was determined to teach him perseverance and grit: "I can't stand it when he just gives up."

When I thought Penny was ready for a fresh perspective, I told her that I thought the problem wasn't math or grit, but excess tension. This tension is the result of built-up emotions that both of them had about homework. Penny worried about her son's future and was frustrated by his lack of perseverance. She also had plenty of leftover tension from her own school days. I could only guess the source of Marcus's tension, but probably homework aroused feelings of humiliation, inadequacy, and worry about the loss of his mother's love. I explained to Penny that I knew there was no danger of Marcus losing her love, and she knew there was no danger of that, but Marcus might still worry about rejection when he feels his mother's agitation.

Children often interpret homework "help" as criticism. And let's face it, usually they are right, as much as we try to be "constructive" about it. As a result, children need to establish that they are OK and that the parent-child relationship is OK. Some children do this by regressing — acting less mature than their years or even like infants — in an attempt to restore the cozy security of early childhood. Other children try to restore the relationship through aggression, seeking reconnection any way they can. Finally, children may retreat and withdraw, protecting themselves from the pain of criticism and disconnection in a way that looks to parents like giving up or lack of grit. All of these responses aggravate parents to no end!

Since the problem is excess tension, the solution is to relieve the tension with laughter and rest, play and breaks. I suggested one of my favorite "homework games" to Penny: "Hey, Marcus, how about I'll be the problem and you need to tackle me." This game takes advantage of the pun about tackling a problem and tackling a person. Penny's face lit up. "I think he will go for this!"

Roughhousing is a surprising and effective way to ease tension — especially that triple tension that develops in homework struggles: the parent’s tension, the child’s tension, and the tension between them. If you must help with homework — or violin practice, which was the bane of my life during my daughter’s fourth-grade year — then you can try “frustration breaks.” Emma and I evolved a game where she relieved frustration by throwing balled-up paper at the wall and I made noises like a violin smashing. We both laughed and the tension was relieved. She could go back to practicing. Full disclosure: This did not make her a concert violinist, but it did make the practices bearable and even enjoyable.

As soon as Penny saw the possibility of a way out of the tension, her worries about Marcus’s math performance and perseverance lessened considerably. Ongoing playtimes and frustration breaks can help relieve tension as it arises, preventing disastrous buildup. In addition, Penny saw that her drive to help Marcus with his math was eroding their relationship, which was not worth the questionable gains from their stressful homework sessions.

So next time you feel compelled to help your child with homework, consider sitting with your emotions, just noticing what you feel, instead of jumping in to explain or standing over your child loudly gritting your teeth. After all, it isn’t just children who need to practice impulse control and emotional regulation!

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