

## (Don't) Rescue Me

When your child reaches middle school, it's time for a hands-off homework policy.



By Abby Margolis Newman | July 31 , 2007



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Sometimes my involvement in my two middle school boys' academic lives feels like *A Tale of Two Mommies*: it is the best of instincts and the worst of instincts, coexisting and often struggling against each other. Many parents of middle-schoolers have to make decisions almost daily as to whether and how much to intervene in their child's work – when to help and when does "help" morph into hindrance – and we find ourselves veering from one extreme to the other trying to achieve the right balance.

A few months ago, Sarah Moore, a San Francisco mother of two boys, glanced at her 6th grader's just-finished book report and cringed. "I knew it was lame," she says. "But I had to sit on my hands while Henry turned it in, because his teachers kept saying, 'They're big kids now. They need to screw up and learn.' Well, Henry got his first-ever C, and that got

his attention."

Moore and her husband, David, conveyed to Henry through their hands-off attitude that he needed to take ownership of the book report, and that meant letting him fall on his face (excruciating as this can be for parents). They also communicated to Henry that he needed to be responsible for understanding how he could improve next time, and that it was up to him to approach his teacher to discuss it. As hard as it was, "He learned to ask for help and how to face a somewhat embarrassing situation," Moore says.

Annie E. Fox, M.Ed., author of *Too Stressed to Think? A Teen Guide to Staying Sane When Life Makes You Crazy*, tells the cautionary tale of a friend who constantly bailed out her son. "She hovered over him in middle school, and he is now a young man in his twenties who 'failed to launch,'" she says. "He never got the idea he could do it on his own." If his mom didn't do it for him, it didn't get done – from SAT forms to college applications. "He's still living at home and she's still doing his laundry," Fox says. "Overparenting," she adds, "is always going to lead to underfunctioning kids."

### Build a Bridge

So what is the proper balance? How do we take these babies of ours, these sweet-faced children fresh out of elementary school who are accustomed to our help with homework and class projects, and turn them into responsible students and independent thinkers, young men and women who will not be eating corn chips on our couches when they are 30, helplessly waiting for us to switch their clothes from washer to dryer?

"There are huge developmental differences between elementary and middle-school age children," says Madeline Levine, Ph.D., author of *The Price of Privilege*. "During childhood, parents still need to help kids organize their time and work. By middle school, kids need to begin to self-manage." Of course, just as physical changes happen in young adolescents at different times and different rates, similarly their abilities to take on work independently will vary.

Kim Roen, a 6th-grade language arts and social studies teacher in Mill Valley, California, who is a mother of three, talks about "the V of love, starting at the bottom and opening to eventual independence. It may be a narrower V for some in middle school." In other words, not all middle-schoolers are created equal – your child may need more guidance and help with academic work for longer than another child of the same age.

But the emphasis in middle school, says Levine, "switches to letting kids feel they own their work. It's no longer a collaboration between child and parent. It's more like, 'I'm here for you, but I have enough faith in you – after six years of school – that you can do this on your own.' This helps a child develop a sense of mastery."

One thing that is *not* helpful to developing this sense of mastery and independence? Bringing in the forgotten homework! Maybe give your kids one "free homework chauffeur pass" per year – but after that, let them live with the fallout. "If there is a consequence the child is allowed to feel, she is much more likely to check her backpack the next day," says Fox. "And that's what you want for her." (Again, envision the chip-eating adult on your couch, then just *back away from the homework* lying abandoned on the kitchen table.)

None of these experts advocates a cold-turkey approach on the first day of middle school – completely withdrawing academic assistance – but a gradual weaning process which helps your children develop strategies for time management, organization, and study skills. "You want to supervise the bridge [from elementary to middle school]," says Roen. "Not cutting them loose abruptly, but not doing the homework for them either."

#### Sign a Non-Compete Clause

In today's hypercompetitive atmosphere, parents can be tempted to go overboard – to get overly involved in order to give their children an edge under the guise of "helping" them, say our experts. But this doesn't help anyone; too much parental intervention robs children of the chance to learn and take responsibility for their own work, and it unfairly weights the scales against those kids whose parents have not "helped." Roen tells a couple of stories to illustrate this point:

Each year, her 6th graders study ancient Greece, with a unit on Greek architecture. A few years ago, one boy brought in a model of the Parthenon. "It was perfectly measured, mathematically accurate, museum-quality, with a gorgeous statue of Athena in it," Roen recalls. A couple of weeks later, the children were asked to fill out forms in advance of parent conferences. In answer to the question, "How can your parents help you?" this boy wrote, "Stop doing my work for me!" It turns out his parents were sculptors.

Another parent, upset about her daughter's grade on a homework paper, came in to see Roen and demanded to know, "How could my child get a C?" Roen calmly attempted to explain her grading rubric, but this parent just got more and more agitated until she finally erupted, yelling, "I did it! I don't know how I could have gotten a C!"

These stories, extreme though they may sound, are not uncommon. In today's pressured world, stress and grade anxiety are more pervasive, and start much earlier, than ever before. Levine observed this growing trend in her book, especially among children in more affluent families, and noted that the pressure infects entire communities.

"It's hard for parents to back off, because everyone around them is so anxious about how their children are doing," Levine points out. She adds that in an atmosphere where performance and grades are overly emphasized, creativity suffers. And parents who hover and are over-involved blunt their children's autonomy. "It's not worth it," she says. "Will your child get an A minus instead of a B plus? Maybe. But like in medicine, its risk versus reward. The risk of stressing your kid out is so great, for a minimal reward."

Remember, too, that as academic stress levels are rising throughout middle school, there are other major changes happening to your child at the same time. In a word? Puberty. And the attendant physical, emotional, and psychological changes can have a profound impact on academic performance. A child who had previously done very well in school may, to a parent's bafflement, start to struggle.

This is where having an open line of communication to your child's teacher can help, as middle-schoolers are not necessarily going to tell you what's going on. "The teacher may act as a reality check," says Roen, "reminding the parent, 'Look, your kid's hair is greasy, he's grown five inches, his feet are really big, and his best friend just dumped him. How do you expect him to be focused on his homework?'" In that case, she says, the parent needs to take care of the child's emotional needs first – homework becomes secondary.

Middle-schoolers, says Fox, are the "most burdened and least equipped to deal developmentally. Then you put on top of that pretty heavy academic duties." Parents need to ask themselves, are they functioning to relieve or add to the stress in their kids' lives? If you're totally honest with yourself and it's the latter, try to lighten up on the academic pressure and concentrate on strengthening their emotional undergirding.

After all, there will be plenty of time for them to be stressed out in high school. And for you to be stressed out when they're still living under your roof as they approach the big 4-0. But maybe by then they'll have figured out the whole laundry thing.

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