

# When your middle-schooler skips their homework

This is a lesson many parents learn the hard way. Author Shari Steelsmith recalls how she had to deal with an underperforming seventh grader as the time for his first progress report of the year was nearing. He was then failing his math course.

"It's not because he didn't understand the material — he simply was failing to turn in homework assignments. After three weeks of his claims that he was doing fine in math class and completing all the work at school, I e-mailed his teacher and asked if this was true. The teacher replied that he was missing six assignments, had been given a progress report to take home a week ago, and was currently receiving an F in the class."

She continues, "Let's just say I was more than a little annoyed about the ditching of math homework, and really upset that he lied to me and failed to give me the report."

Steelsmith, who has both written and spoken on parenting techniques, says, "When I'm at my wits' end with my kids, I'm usually bright enough to give myself a time

out and think about things and chat with my spouse. Given my work, I look for help in parenting books and articles, I talk to other parents whose parenting I respect, and I sometimes ask for advice from the professionals in my circle—teachers, counselors, speech therapists, nurses, parent educators, etc."



Here is some of the advice she received and examples of the tools she and her family used with this situation.

"Louise Tracy's book 'Grounded for Life?! Stop Blowing Your Fuse and Start Communicating with Your Teenager' reminded me that confronting my child with emotions such as anger and intense disappointment will only set a kid up to feel defensive, to lie or argue.

She also pointed out that a child's grades belong to him, not me. It's his problem, not mine. Remembering this helped me stay calmer and keep a little emotional distance, which, in turn, allowed him to hear more of what I said.

"When my son got home, I met him on the steps and asked him to read the teacher's e-mail. Staying calm really paid off. He was upset, but it was more with himself and the situation; his emotion didn't get directed toward me (I appreciated this). When I asked him specifically why he didn't give me the report, he said he knew it would upset me and he wanted to try and turn the work in before he showed it to me. Some of this turned out to be true — he had turned two of the assignments in that day in school (yes, I checked with the teacher). I'm not sure he actually would have showed the report to me, but I decided not to quibble on that point.

"Tracy advises stating the problem and allowing the child to explain his position. Don't interrupt, she says, even if the excuses are lame beyond belief. Giving the child his 'day in court,' so to speak, keeps him open and talking. In our situation, it went like this:

My son: Mr. Barlow never said those things were homework! I thought it was just stuff we were doing in class!

Me: Well, whatever you thought it was, it appears he expected you to finish it and turn it in. He still expects you to turn it in. What is your plan for doing that?

"My neighbor advised me to keep any discussion to five minutes



## Parenting Tip

or less. More than five minutes, she says, and you tend to start lecturing or repeating yourself and the kid just tunes out. I found this excellent advice but still went over by one minute.

"My teacher-friend told me that the 'not turning in work, even if it's finished on time' habit is a phenomenon well-documented in middle school boys. She saw it in her ninth grade boy students all the time. It was a little comforting to know that it's a common behavior.

"I don't need to go to anyone else for advice on consequences — I wrote the book ('Go to Your Room!: Consequences That Teach'). Since he'd neglected his homework for entertainment pursuits, effective immediately, I told him, all activities with screens (TV, computer, games) were off-limits until every last page of the missing assignments were turned in. To address the dishonesty, I told him that he would be required to prove all statements regarding his math homework. If he said there was no homework for the evening, he would need to show me a signed note from his teacher attesting to the fact; if he said he was already finished with the assignment, I would need to see it. If he forgot the note at school or failed to bring home the work, he would be restricted from all screens for the evening or weekend."

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