

# Homeroom: How Can I Get My Child to Finish Her Work?

She says she's "done" when she's not. And when I try to intervene, it ends in tears.

**BRIAN PLATZER AND ABBY FREIREICH** **THE ATLANTIC** FEBRUARY 9, 2021

*Editor's Note: Every Tuesday, Abby Freireich and Brian Platzer take questions from readers about their kids' education. Have one? Email them at [homeroom@theatlantic.com](mailto:homeroom@theatlantic.com).*

**Dear Abby and Brian,**

My seventh grader, Lucy, says that she's "done" with her homework when she's not. The tough thing is that she actually seems to believe she has completed her work. She checks it off in her planner, and submits it on the portal her school introduced when classes went virtual last spring. But she regularly forgets to submit the whole assignment or doesn't read the directions closely, and as a result loses so much credit that she easily could have gotten if she had really focused. I've tried intervening, but that always ends with her in tears, and me being really frustrated. Is there anything I can do to help?

**Carmen**

*New York, N.Y.*

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**Dear Carmen,**

Students love nothing more than being "done." The sense of relief we educators see when a test is turned in or recess has arrived is unmistakable. Adults can relate: Who doesn't enjoy the feeling of completing a project or being freed from a meeting?

But as you know, Lucy's eagerness to be done often causes its own set of problems. By day's end, all that stands in the way of relaxation and sleep is that final homework assignment. So Lucy rushes through it. Or does the bare minimum. Or doesn't look it over. Or tells herself those final details aren't important. She checks it off in her planner, clicks the Upload button, and can finally breathe.

Some version of this scenario plays out in homes across the country every evening, and it's no wonder that parents like you are upset. One of the most frustrating feelings for a parent is knowing that your child is capable, but nevertheless not following through. Many parents in these moments voice their frustration in the form of monologues directed at their exhausted kid: "You should have started earlier!" or "Didn't you read the directions!" or "How could you have missed the most important part?" Kids, unsurprisingly, feel defensive and lousy about themselves. There's no overnight fix here, but yes, you can help. The main thing to do is get her to understand that the feeling of real accomplishment is more satisfying than the short-term rush of handing in an incomplete assignment.

So start your conversation with Lucy with positive, specific feedback, helping her understand that you see her potential. Maybe her science teacher has noticed the connections she's able to make between concepts, or her English teacher has referred to her insightful comments in class. Discussing Lucy's strengths in a concrete, honest way means she'll be less likely to dismiss your suggestions outright.

Then focus on adding some structure to Lucy's daily routine. Before starting her homework each day, she should create a checklist. Lucy can jot down her assignments and other commitments and how long she thinks they'll take on a big whiteboard in her room. She should include a 15-minute "work review" window for a final read-through of her projects. Creating this finite, set time each evening means that she will have a built-in guardrail to prevent her from racing through her work.

For essay writing or any other assignment with many components, Lucy might find it helpful to print out any directions from her teacher and number each step. This way, she can figure out if she is actually done with her assignment by literally checking off the completed steps as she goes. She is also far more likely to catch avoidable errors when reading over a hard copy of instructions with a pencil in hand.

Lucy might also print out a “finished work?” checklist to be prominently displayed in her work area. This list can be modified according to each subject, depending on what her tendencies are in terms of omissions and rushing, but should rely on a manageable framework, like this one:

#### DAILY WORK-REVIEW CHECKLIST

1. Did I answer *every* part of each question?
2. Did I proofread my written work by reading it aloud?
3. Did I submit my work to my teacher?

The hardest part of this process can be the feeling that even if we follow all the above advice to the letter, we can't force our kids to care once we leave the room. So after you help Lucy understand how to be thorough in her work, let her take over. It's a tricky balance, but when parents are overbearing or overinvolved, kids tend to push back and have more difficulty becoming autonomous. If Lucy is still struggling after putting some of these measures in place, reach out to her teachers. Many kids are more responsive and less resentful when they get pointers from someone other than their parents.

This may be a long process, but fortunately minor accomplishments tend to result in continued success and confidence. So when Lucy's thoroughness pays off with positive feedback and better grades, she'll be more likely to stick with these routines, and build habits that help her avoid calling it quits too soon.

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