



*Smart*TALK

Homework Support for Kids

Staff Guide

Harvard Teaching and Learning Partnerships



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SmartTALK

Homework Support for Kids

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Introduction

Afterschool Staff Make the Difference

You Can Help Kids Achieve!

Good news! Research confirms that kids in strong relationships with caring adults who have high expectations of them are more likely to succeed in school and life.¹



Words of Wisdom

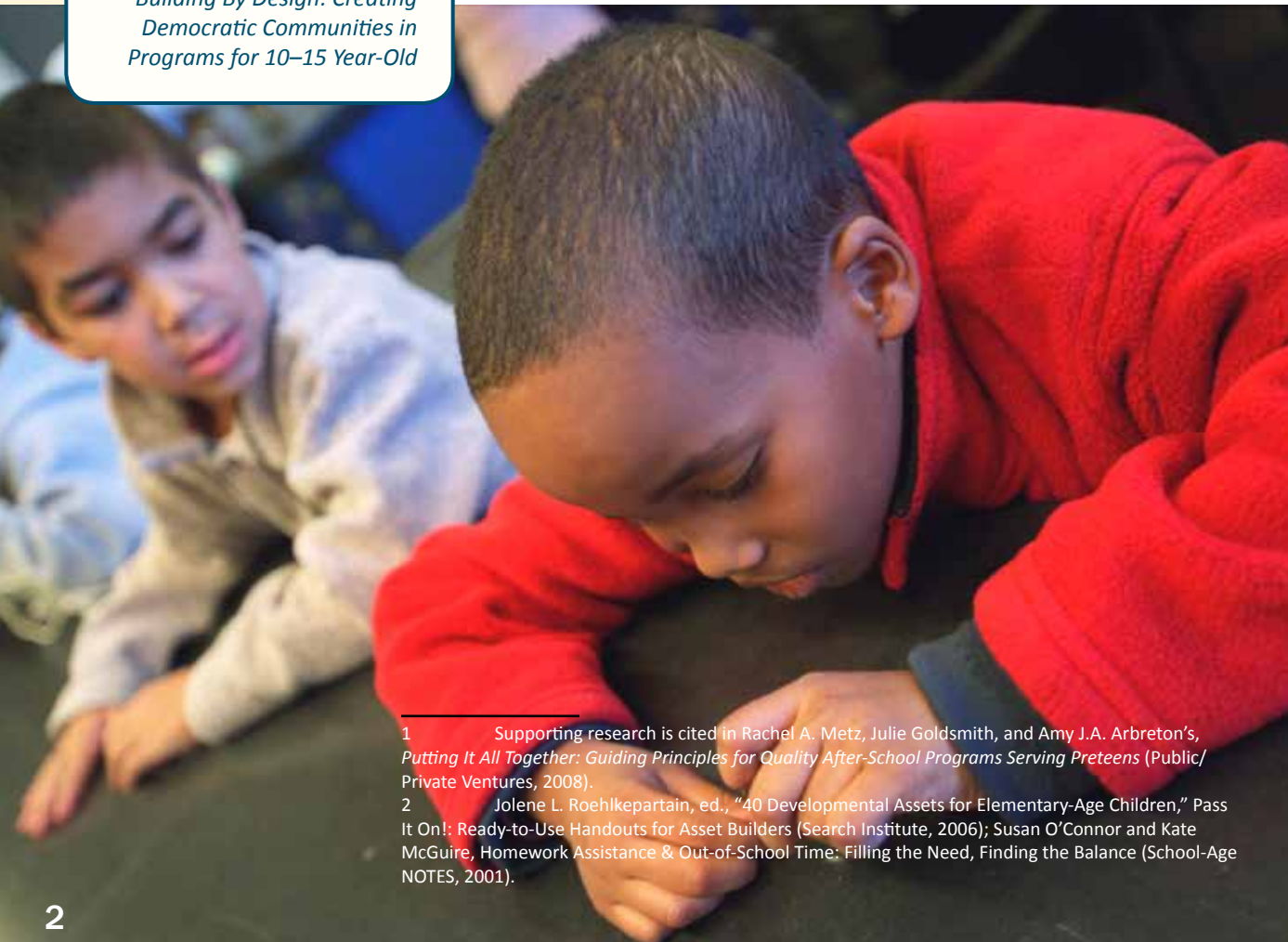
“Good programs don’t just happen, they are led. In fact, staff are the single most important element in the success of youth programs.”

Steve Musson

Building By Design: Creating Democratic Communities in Programs for 10–15 Year-Old

In your afterschool program, you spend time with kids every day, and are able to build relationships with them as you help them do their homework and learn to get along peacefully with many other children. You are a consistent, important person in their lives, which makes you the perfect person to provide them with these essentials for success in and out of school:²

- High expectations for doing well in school
- A role model for problem solving
- Time to read together every day
- Effective homework routines and support



¹ Supporting research is cited in Rachel A. Metz, Julie Goldsmith, and Amy J.A. Arbretton's, *Putting It All Together: Guiding Principles for Quality After-School Programs Serving Preteens* (Public/Private Ventures, 2008).

² Jolene L. Roehlkepartain, ed., “40 Developmental Assets for Elementary-Age Children,” *Pass It On!: Ready-to-Use Handouts for Asset Builders* (Search Institute, 2006); Susan O'Connor and Kate McGuire, *Homework Assistance & Out-of-School Time: Filling the Need, Finding the Balance* (School-Age NOTES, 2001).

The Homework Crunch

***E*very day you help kids get their homework done. Sometimes it can be a challenge. Children are being given more and more homework at younger and younger ages.**

Children learning English as a second language or those who struggle academically need extra help with their homework; often more than their families can provide. These children rely on you for essential homework assistance.³

In addition, homework today may be different from the homework assigned when you were in school. That makes it difficult for afterschool staff to know how to assist kids in getting their work done. The result can be frustration for both children and staff—hardly the best way to building strong, caring relationships in the afterschool hours. This guidebook will help you help them—without frustration and with a lot of fun.

“Research suggests . . . that simply completing homework assignments is not strongly linked to school achievement.”

The Big Secret: It’s Not About Homework!

***W*e often assume that to do well in school, kids just need to complete all their homework assignments.**

We even assume that “more is better.” Research suggests, however, that simply completing homework assignments is *not* strongly linked to school achievement, especially before third grade.⁴

School achievement *is* linked to:⁵

- Good relationships with adults
- Adults with high expectations for kids
- A place to learn and play in which kids feel safe, respected, and have a sense of belonging
- Small homework groups in which the kids know who their afterschool staff will be each day
- Predictable homework routines

³ Twenty percent of school-age children speak a language other than English at home; about 5% speak English with difficulty. From The Condition of Education 2008 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008031.pdf>

⁴ Harris M. Cooper, The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents (Corwin Press, 2007).

⁵ Metz, Goldsmith, and Arbreton, Putting It All Together; C. Addison Stone et al., eds., Handbook of Language and Literacy Development (The Guilford Press, 2004); Betty Bardige, At a Loss for Words: How America Is Failing Our Children and What We Can Do about It (Temple University Press, 2005); O'Connor and McGuire, Homework Assistance.



- Lots of conversation between adults and kids, allowing good questions and thoughtful answers
- Engaging, educationally enriching activities to do when homework is done

These are the ingredients of a strong afterschool homework program, and form the foundation of *SmartTALK*. Providing homework assistance and using educational games that support classroom learning and the Common Core State Standards⁶, *SmartTALK* is designed to give you a framework to run an effective homework program that keeps the learning going even after homework is done.

It's All About Good Habits



Kindergartners

Afterschool staff can also help kindergartners not yet ready for homework by encouraging them to play in a wide variety of ways—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Kindergarten children may or may not arrive with homework, but we suggest a homework time for the children to either complete homework or enjoy a quiet academic-based activity. This helps establish a homework routine for the youngest children, while also keeping the volume down for the older children who might be doing homework nearby. For children without homework assignments you might want to suggest a quiet activity while others are doing homework. Consider paper, crayons, markers, puzzles, pattern blocks, or interesting picture books.

Although doing lots of homework is not necessarily linked to school achievement, a structured daily homework routine has been shown to benefit elementary school children.⁷ Children who regularly complete short homework assignments:

- Retain and understand concepts better
- Have stronger study habits throughout their lives
- Have better attitudes toward school

A daily homework routine encourages kids to use their time well, learn independently, and take responsibility for their work.

In successful afterschool programs, staff members are confident in their ability to help children, and children become confident in their ability to manage their homework. Adults use familiar classroom materials and strategies that help kids understand broad concepts as they complete their assignments. Adults structure the time so that children follow a predictable routine. These adults know that their role isn't just to help children get their homework done, but to help children develop the attitudes and study skills they need in order to become lifelong learners.

Big Idea Here



With the right kind of **adult support**, a regular homework routine helps young children gain **lifelong learning skills** including how to:

- *Ask for help*
- *Manage time*
- *Organize materials*
- *Persevere through difficult tasks*
- *Solve problems*

⁶ <http://www.corestandards.org/>

⁷ Cooper, Battle Over Homework; O'Connor and McGuire, Homework Assistance

21st Century Children

Kids who are independent readers by the end of third grade are far more likely to finish high school and enter college than those who struggle to read.⁸

Becoming an independent reader by third grade, however, can be difficult for many children. When parents must work in the evenings or home is far from a library, children may not have regular reading time with family or a ready supply of books—both of which help children become good readers. When children speak a second language at home, families may read together in their native language. Literacy is strengthened for kids who hear and read stories in their home language, but learning to read in a second language may sometimes be delayed.⁹ Issues and stressors that affect families can sometimes impact children’s learning which make them less likely to perform at grade level in both math and reading as they enter fourth grade. Children who struggle with reading at this age are less likely to later earn high school and college diplomas. These days, many children need extra support from the adults in their community to help them achieve their potential.¹⁰ Children need to acquire the life skills—organizing, problem solving, communicating, and working well in groups—that enable success in life for every child, no matter his or her circumstance.

“Kids who are independent readers by the end of third grade are far more likely to finish high school and enter college than those who struggle to read.”

— Richard Murnane and Frank Levy,
*Teaching the New Basic Skills:
Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a
Changing Economy* (Free Press, 1996).

⁸ Bardige, Betty. *At a Loss for Words*.

⁹ The International Reading Association’s position statement, Second-Language Literacy Instruction (International Reading Association, 2001)

¹⁰ Roehlkepartain, ed., “40 Developmental Assets.” To learn more about principles for asset-building communities, visit www.search-institute.org/key-themes-asset-building-communities.



Big Idea Here

The term “21st century skills” refers to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes children need to succeed as effective citizens, workers, and leaders in the 21st century. These skills are in addition to the **3 R’s**—**reading**, **‘riting** (writing), and **‘rithmetic** (arithmetic)—they include collaboration, problem solving, teamwork, and communication. To earn a middle-class income, young people must proficiently:

- **Apply** learning to real-world situations in order to identify and solve problems (defined as “expert thinking” skills)
- **Communicate and work** with diverse groups of people in task-oriented situations (defined as “soft” skills)
- **Elicit, analyze, and select** critical information in order to convey a convincing interpretation of it to others (defined as “complex communication” skills)
- **Demonstrate** literacy and numeracy skills in accordance with national standards of performance (defined as proficiency in “core academic” skills)



These skills can be taught in afterschool programs that offer a structured homework program that includes engaging games and resources that extend learning beyond homework time. *SmartTALK* can help your program set children on a path to graduate from high school and attend college.

Throughout these pages you'll discover the tools and tips informed by local schools and community-based organizations. These strategies are designed to:

- Reduce problem behaviors;
- Increase concentration;
- Engage and motivate kids to finish homework;
- Increase confidence and excitement about learning;
- Lower frustration with homework;
- Help staff understand what kids are learning in the classroom; and
- Increase staff confidence in their ability to provide homework support.



Big Idea Here

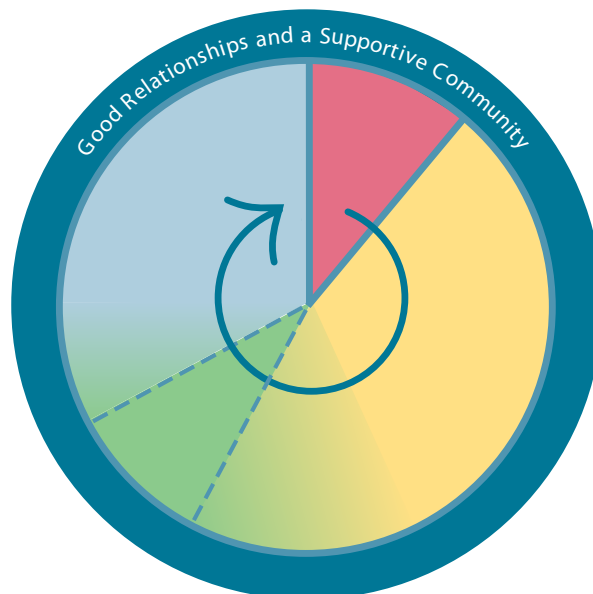
According to the authors of *The Condition of Education 2008*, **“Minority students have accounted for about half of the growth in associate’s and bachelor’s degrees awarded between 1989–1990 and 2003–2004.** In 2006, young adults with a bachelor’s degree earned about \$11,000 more than those with an associate’s degree, about \$16,000 more than those who had completed high school, and more than twice as much than those who did not earn a high school diploma.” For more information, see the National Center for Educational Statistics website.

Five Ingredients Make a Pie

SmartTALK demonstrates that five ingredients make up successful afterschool homework support programs:

- **Good relationships and a supportive community:** A warm learning climate that creates a solid foundation for afterschool programs.
- **Transitions:** A routine for moving into small homework groups, engaging children in warm-up activities, and preparing for homework time.
- **Homework:** Support through individual check-ins and problem-solving approaches that include brain-building talk, asking good questions and helping children learn how to learn.
- **Homework check out:** A consistent routine of self check, buddy check, staff check, and putting all homework away.
- **Learning centers:** Keeping the learning going by using educational resources to extend learning and make it engaging.

This guide will take you step by step through this process, showing you how to put these principles to work in your own program. With your homework routine, you will want to add your own elements and make it your own. The pie chart below will help you know at a glance which ingredient each section of this guide covers—just look for the section highlighted by color in the margins.



“High expectations without relationships are demoralizing; relationships without high expectations are patronizing.”

– **Karen Pittman,**
Cofounder and Executive Director
of the Forum for Youth Investment

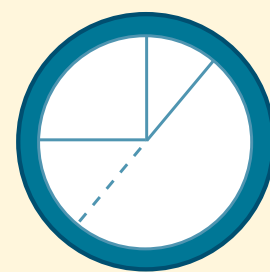


Chapter 1

Good Relationships and a Supportive Community

The environment of your afterschool program makes all the difference.

To ensure that every child feels comfortable and ready to learn, take some time to understand the stages of development. Kids grow at different rates and do not reach the same developmental milestones at the same ages. The chart on the following pages describes some social, emotional, and academic qualities that are typical of each age group.¹¹ While the kids you work with may or may not fit these characterizations, this information will give you a good sense of what to expect from the kids in your program depending on their grades and ages.



Good Relationships
and a Supportive
Community



“ I like when adults help me think of different ways to deal with problems and then help me pick what I would like to do. ”



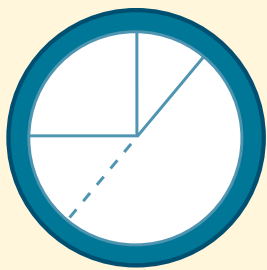
Words of Wisdom

“ The creation of cooperative, supportive environments in homes, schools, and communities has been shown to have a positive effect on students’ social and psychological wellbeing, which eventually leads to higher academic achievement.”

– Howard Gardner

author of
*Multiple Intelligences: The
Theory in Practice*

¹¹ This section was informed by a variety of useful sources, including: *Checkpoints for Progress in Reading and Writing for Families and Communities* (American Reads Challenge, 1998), which can be found at www.ed.gov/inits/americanreads; Lesia Oesterreich, *9-11 Years—Ages & Stages* (Iowa State University, 2001), which can be found at www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs/ch.htm; and Roehlkepartain, ed., “40 Developmental Assets.”



Good Relationships
and a Supportive
Community

Know What to Expect from Kids at Every Age

*H*ere's a quick reminder of what children are thinking, feeling, playing, and learning at each age and grade:

(see following pages)

KINDERGARTEN**Social and Emotional**

I STILL learn best with my senses. I like lots of hands-on experiences!

I LIKE to go to libraries, zoos, and museums. I want to talk again and again with you about my adventures.

I LIKE to make simple choices. For example, I like to make my own decisions about what to wear or what activity to do.

I WATCH the adults around me to learn how to be calm and solve problems.

I LIKE to take special care of things, like plants or pets, if you help me a little.

WHEN you cheer me on, I feel proud of all the new things I can do!

I AM learning to follow school rules.

Academic

I LIKE to make things. My art projects help me develop fine motor skills.

I LEARN best when tasks are broken down into small, “bite-size” pieces.

BY THE TIME I begin first grade, I might be able to count to 100.

I’M LEARNING to add, make patterns, and group numbers.

I’M LEARNING about letters and how letters form words. I can identify capital and small letters and by the first grade I’ll know all of the letter sounds.

FIRST GRADE**Social and Emotional**

I LIKE it when adults’ rules are clear and fair.

I ENJOY writing thank-you notes when someone does something nice for me!

I CAN use my words to let someone know I’m upset, but I may need some adult help to remember.

I LIKE when adults help me think of different ways to deal with problems and then help me pick what I would like to do.

I LIKE to hear and read stories that show kids, families, and neighborhoods that look like mine.

Academic

I STILL LEARN best when tasks are broken down into small, “bite-size” pieces!

THIS YEAR, my biggest job is learning how to read.

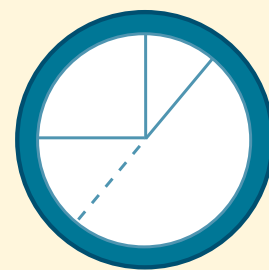
I READ by recognizing words that show up again and again, by looking at pictures, and by sounding out words.

I AM learning to write sentences—I use “invented” spelling mostly, but late in the year I may have “real” spelling tests for the first time.

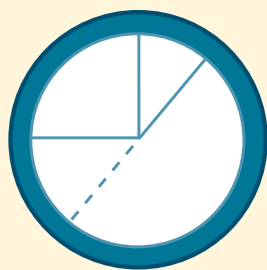
IN MATH, I am learning the value of coins, practicing patterns, adding, and subtracting. I practice skip counting by 2s, 3s, 5s, and 10s all the way to 100!

I’M BEGINNING to tell time— I know “o’clock” now!

EACH DAY, my teacher will give me about 10 minutes of homework and will expect me to read at home.



Good Relationships
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Community



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SECOND GRADE

Social and Emotional

I LIKE to play games in pairs and small groups when everyone plays by the rules . . . but I don't like to lose!

I LIKE to participate in music and sports clubs that are safe and fun for everyone.

I ENJOY reading and notice if the kids and adults around me like to read too.

I NOTICE when others are being kind or rough and I watch what the adults around me do and say about it.

I AM using my words to communicate about how I'm thinking and feeling rather than just my actions.

Academic

I AM reading directions and can follow them if they are clear. I may need some help breaking down tasks into manageable pieces.

I'M LEARNING more and more about words—like homophones and synonyms. Do you know these words?

I CAN write complete sentences with subjects and predicates, but I may not know the meaning of these words yet.

IN MATH I can use my 100s table to count forward and backward by 5s and 10s.

I USE "problem-solving strategies" to help me with word problems.

BY THE END of the year, I will count to 1,000, learn regrouping, and be able to add and subtract three-digit numbers.

I WILL practice my spelling and math each day at home (or in my afterschool program) for 10 to 20 minutes.

I will be expected to read each day.

THIRD GRADE

Social and Emotional

MY FRIENDS and I are starting to form groups. I want to fit in.

I SOMETIMES WORRY about making mistakes. I like when adults admit they make mistakes sometimes too.

I PLAY cards and board games in groups. We sometimes decide on new rules if we think the game needs it.

I ENJOY team sports. I like to be with people who encourage their team members and show good sportsmanship.

WHEN ADULTS ask me what I like and what I would change about an activity, I feel my opinion matters.

I KNOW some of my talents now, and I like practicing to get even better at what I do. I like teaching what I know to others, too.

Academic

I AM very interested in how the world works—I love magnets, bugs, planets, and mystery goop. Hands-on experiences with materials keep me motivated and focused!

I AM "reading to learn," not just "learning to read."

KNOWING what different words mean helps me understand what I am reading. I like it when adults talk to me about what words mean.

BY READING AND TALKING about different genres of books, like mysteries, biographies, and myths I am building a bigger vocabulary.

FROM POEMS to paragraphs, I am expressing myself through writing.

MY WRITING shows mostly correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

IN MATH, I am working on multiplication tables and word problems. The instructions always ask me to "show what I know," so I have to give the right answer and explain or diagram how I got it.

I GET about 20 to 30 minutes of homework a night, which may include free reading.

FOURTH GRADE**Social and Emotional**

SOME ISSUES, like global warming, are really important to me and I like to talk and act in ways that will make a difference. I like it when adults help me to brainstorm ways I can help.

I LIKE learning about people who have “made a difference” in the world. I am learning about “heroes” and am figuring out just who my heroes are!

I HAVE a few hobbies and extracurricular activities I’m really interested in.

I LIKE it when adults listen to me and when their responses are fair.

I AM becoming more mature and like to have some responsibility and independence.

Academic

I WILL read and write a lot this year. I am expected to do oral and written book and research reports.

I AM learning about “W5 + 1” (who, what, where, when, why, and how) reporting and reading headlines and newspaper articles.

READING, word studies, and spelling help me improve my vocabulary.

IN MATH, I apply my knowledge to real-life problems.

I WILL add and subtract five-digit numbers and multiply by two digits.

I HAVE about 40 minutes of homework each night as well as free reading.

FIFTH GRADE**Social and Emotional**

MY FRIENDSHIPS are more important (and sometimes more volatile) than ever.

I AM learning to balance my time between friends, activities, and responsibilities.

SOMETIMES I WANT support from adults and other times I want independence.

I NEED adult support to manage my online time and content with friends (text messaging, e-mailing, instant messaging, video games, social networking sites, etc.).

WHEN ADULTS disagree with me I still need to know that they care.

I LIKE to help in my community or to volunteer in some way.

I KNOW a lot more about what I’m good at and what I need to improve upon.

MY BODY is starting to change and I have a range of feelings about these changes.

Academic

I LIKE learning about “real world” things— forensic science, the chemistry of cooking, and spoken word poetry slams are among the many things that hold my interest!

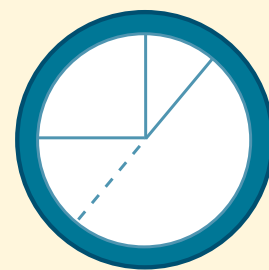
I’M STILL reading stories and books, but I am discussing themes, points of view, character traits, protagonists, and antagonists. I read memoirs, legends, and folktales as well as historical fiction at school.

SPELLING AND GRAMMAR count “big time” now!

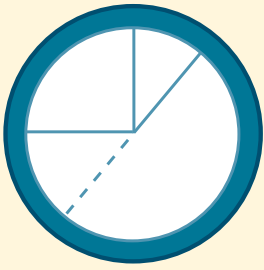
IN MATH, I must explain in writing how I solve a multistep word problem.

I AM multiplying and dividing large numbers—I use estimating to help me figure out how large or small an answer should be before I figure it out.

I AM converting fractions, decimals, and percents and learning about metric measurement. I understand common and lowest common multiples.



Good Relationships
and a Supportive
Community



Good Relationships
and a Supportive
Community

“You can help kids feel ready to take on new challenges by setting up a homework space . . .”



The Qualities of a Supportive Community

1. Capable
2. Connect
3. Contribute

Successful children need to be able to feel and do all three. Teacher and author Dr. Linda Albert writes: “Students feel good about themselves—and about their ability to succeed in school—when they believe they’re capable learners who can connect in positive ways with classmates and teachers.

They’ll also feel good about themselves when they find ways to contribute to the class and to the school.”¹² To ensure that every child feels capable, connects, and contributes, your afterschool program must be a supportive community in which everyone:

- Feels welcome
- Feels “in place” as opposed to “out of place”
- Feels safe physically and emotionally
- Is willing to take risks
- Shares skills they understand
- Admits when they don’t understand
- Is proud of their association with the program
- Knows that their presence or absence will be noticed by others
- Participates as an interested and interesting group member

Help Kids Feel Capable

Feeling capable relies on feeling safe and supported in your environment.

When we feel capable, we are willing to take the risks and make the mistakes that come with learning. You can help kids feel ready to take on new challenges by setting up a homework space that gives them the surroundings and materials that each one needs to feel capable.

¹² The 3 C’s model is found in Linda Albert’s *Cooperative Discipline* (AGS, 1996).

Work Space that Works

All learners are different. Some need lots of physical space to spread out. Others may do fine with a small area. It is important to respect kids' various working styles and accommodate those that are feasible within your given space. If possible, think about how you can use tables, desks, and floor spaces to provide a variety of work areas for kids. Some programs find that using placemats helps to define individual work space at a large table. You may even want to ask families if they have placemats to share.

Options for seating may be limited by your program's facility. Whatever your space, try to keep your group together in a defined area—around a table or in a cluster of desks. Some programs with large open spaces cut large cardboard boxes into accordion-folded space dividers to create study areas. Children decorate these cost-effective dividers to individualize their work spaces. Cardboard dividers have the added advantages of being light and can be folded flat to be tucked away during the day.

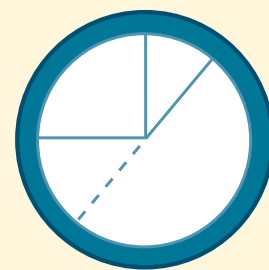
Sometimes assigned seating helps to keep the noise level down by separating chatty kids. The problem with assigned seating is that it *feels a lot like school*. Kids who have been in classrooms all day appreciate being given a choice of where and with whom they will sit, particularly those in third grade and older. (Of course, sometimes behavior problems require assigning seats.)

Homework Teams

Homework teams work!

An afterschool programming consultant, Susan O'Connor, suggests that homework help is best provided in small

learning teams of 8 to 10 children with a consistent adult. There are ways you can reach this suggested ratio by reaching out to retired people or middle and high school students in your community who look for opportunities to volunteer, and helping out during homework time is probably when you can use the extra assistance. Local colleges may provide a tutoring program, too. However you identify volunteers take the time to provide an orientation to SmartTALK. Consistency and small group size help create a supportive and relaxed "home base" in which children feel safe when they make mistakes and talk about how they are thinking and how to help



Good Relationships
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Community



Kindergartners

If kindergartners are part of your program, consider the unique needs of these younger children when designing an appropriate environment. For example, do the children know your policy about how to ask to use the bathroom, or where to find it? For many kindergartners the school-day bathroom is in the classroom and this might not be the case during afterschool time. Also, you might want to offer a quiet space where children can look at books or take a rest at the end of their school day, this can help kids transition to afterschool.

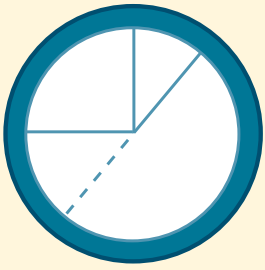


Teacher Tip

Some kids may need to sit alone to be able to focus on homework. Other kids will work best in groups.

Experiment with the seating arrangements and see what works best for each child in your program. **Ask them** what they think works best.





Good Relationships
and a Supportive
Community



Kindergartners

For kindergartners, basic supplies include:

- Construction paper
- Drawing paper
- Markers, pencils, pens, pencil sharpeners
- Glue sticks, white glue
- Scissors

one another. Learning teams of this size also prevent adults from “overhelping” one or two kids. A small group is ideal for introducing a “homework buddy” system in which children are taught to be learning resources for one another. Create groups of children at similar grade levels to help you know what type of homework support and materials will be needed.¹³

Homework Tools

Be sure to have basic materials organized and on hand for the kids in your program. If you are located in a school building, ask the school-day teachers if you can access some of the supplies the children are familiar with using. Discuss where you should leave the supplies at the end of the day, and expectations for replacing materials that get lost or broken. Your resources should include:

- Dictionaries
- Thesauruses
- Calculators
- Rulers
- Washable markers
- Pencils, pencil sharpeners and erasers
- Paper (colored, lined, blank, construction, manila and graph)
- Counters (bears, linking cubes, bingo chips, etc.)
- Scissors (with blunt tip), glue sticks, white glue etc.
- Kitchen timer.

Staying Focused: Noise Levels

Conversation is an essential part of learning, but the room needs to be quiet enough for kids to concentrate on their work. Consider the children with whom you are working and the type of work they are doing to determine the level of quiet your group needs.



Teacher Tip




Try using a ruler to help kids measure the volume of their voices. A **“three-inch voice”** means speaking so that kids can hear each other from three inches away. Give pairs of children rulers to experiment with the volume needed to communicate twelve, nine, six, and three inches away from each other. Practice until they know what each volume sounds like. Throughout the year, ask the kids to speak in “twelve-inch voices” or “three-inch voices” depending on level of noise appropriate for each project. (Citizen Schools’ leaders using a “three-inch voice” technique as an effective noise management strategy.)

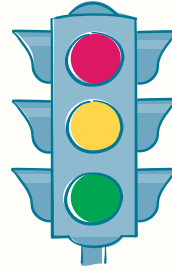
¹³ Workshop presentation by Susan O’Connor, Learning With Excitement Conference (Harvard University, 2003).



Kindergartners

Using a traffic light will help kindergartners understand the appropriate noise levels. Keep a picture of a traffic light in your room to set the volume:

-  Quiet Time
-  Transition Time
-  Indoor Play Time



Help Kids Connect

"My grandmother's in the hospital."

"Feel my tooth. It's wiggly!"

"I'm never playing with Rasean again. I hate him."

"I'm so tired!"

Sound familiar? These statements by children are expressions of trust, spoken aloud in the hope that an adult will hear—and care enough to respond.

They are signals that a child is seeking a connection with you. When you respond to statements like these, you tell a child that you would like to connect as well.

"That sounds upsetting. What if we take time today to write her a letter?"

"Let me see you wiggle it. You are really growing up!"

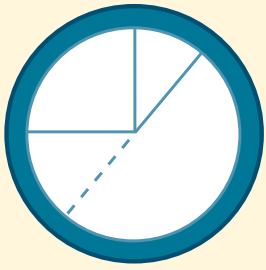
"You sound mad. Sometimes I have arguments with my friends too. Let's sit together and you tell me what you think caused your disagreement."

"You look like you could use an energizer! Let's see if we can come up with a fun activity that will get both of us moving."

Afterschool hours are less pressured than the school day and are a good time for longer conversations—and for building connections—between kids and adults.

At the beginning of the year, you may be tempted to focus first on homework routines. Remember that it is important to spend a few days playing "getting to know you" games and other activities that help your group feel familiar with one another and become a community. Throughout the year, tips and ideas from this guide will help you transition into and out of homework time in ways that continue building strong bonds between members of the group.





Good Relationships
and a Supportive
Community

Help Kids Contribute

You can create many opportunities for kids to contribute to your program. Staff can ask kids for their opinions and ideas.

Kids can plan special learning events. They can take on responsibilities that increase with age. When kids contribute, they know that the program is their community and that they are important members in it. When they are invited to contribute, you will find that their ideas reflect what is important to them, and can be very creative.

Most important, when kids contribute, the success of your program becomes a group effort. Think about groups you have been involved with—sports teams, drama clubs, orchestras, or community organizations. Which ones worked well and which did not? As a rule, groups succeed when they develop a shared set of expectations, rules, and goals.

Writing a Constitution

Once you have divided into homework teams, work with your group of children to create a list of shared beliefs. Begin by telling your group you have a strong belief that doing homework in a group helps the group to share knowledge and ask questions. You may also want to share your belief that while completing homework is important, it is secondary to the children's main job, which is to treat each other with respect, support, and fairness.

Ask kids to share their beliefs. Then you can, as a group, outline a community constitution—a shared set of beliefs and goals to which they all can commit. The constitution can remain in place to guide behavior throughout the year. When you give your group responsibility and voice, you make your own job easier.

Instead of writing a constitution, **draw a large hand, titled “Give Me Five”**¹⁴

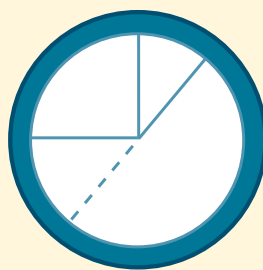
- Help children to **list all of the routines and rules** for homework time.
- **Agree on the top five “rules”** and state them in a positive way. For example: “walking feet inside” or “keep my hands to myself.” Create a picture or symbol that represents each of the five rules. Add the pictures to the fingers.



Kindergartners

Young children need to feel that they have a voice, too! Kindergartners are often enthusiastic about creating rules for behavior, and when they do, they will help remind one another of the rules.

¹⁴ Adapted from The Incredible Years Parents, Teachers, and Children Training Series handout (Incredible Years, 2007).



Good Relationships
and a Supportive
Community

Big Idea Here

Enforce the rules in your constitution by making it a habit to **catch kids doing the right thing**. Let them know the moment you see them following the rules. Soon you'll find them doing the right thing most of the time:

"Aha! I spy with my little eye thoughtful helping on that math homework. Thank you, Jasmine, for being a good buddy."

- **Review** the "give me five" hand at the beginning of each day's session.
- **Place** the hand where the children can see it. As you observe positive behavior offer your hand, comment on the behavior and say, **"Give me five!"**
- You may want to **make copies** of the hand and share them with families.

After writing the community constitution, ask everyone in your group to sign the document. Spend a few minutes each session reviewing what types of behaviors everyone agrees would make homework time successful. Always refer to the community constitution when talking about behavior.

If a group is young or immature, the children may need more help from you to create their constitution. The staff may wish to suggest words and phrases, asking kids if they agree, rather than asking the kids to come up with statements on their own.

Relationships and Community: Recap

- **Take time** in the beginning of the year, and then every day after, to build and maintain a caring community.
- **Welcome** each child every day; give the children ways to contribute; ensure everyone's physical and emotional safety; build pride and association with the program; connect with a child who was previously absent and come prepared with good conversation starters.
- **Know what to expect** from kids at each grade level.
- **Form homework groups** of 8 to 10 children with a consistent adult.
- As a team, **create a constitution**—a set of agreed-upon behaviors and rules.
- **Learn and practice** ways to manage and control your homework team.

Example

Homework Team Constitution

1. **We treat each other with respect:**
 - » Work quietly.
 - » Be a helpful homework buddy—show, don't tell!
2. **We come prepared:**
 - » Bring our homework and materials every day.
3. **We get organized:**
 - » Sit down and be ready to say what we have for homework.
 - » Make sure we have a teacher sign off on our homework.
 - » Put it away neatly.
4. **We do not give up:**
 - » Use the problem-solving strategy when we're stuck.
 - » "Ask three before you ask me!"—be sure we ask our homework buddy and two others before we ask a teacher.

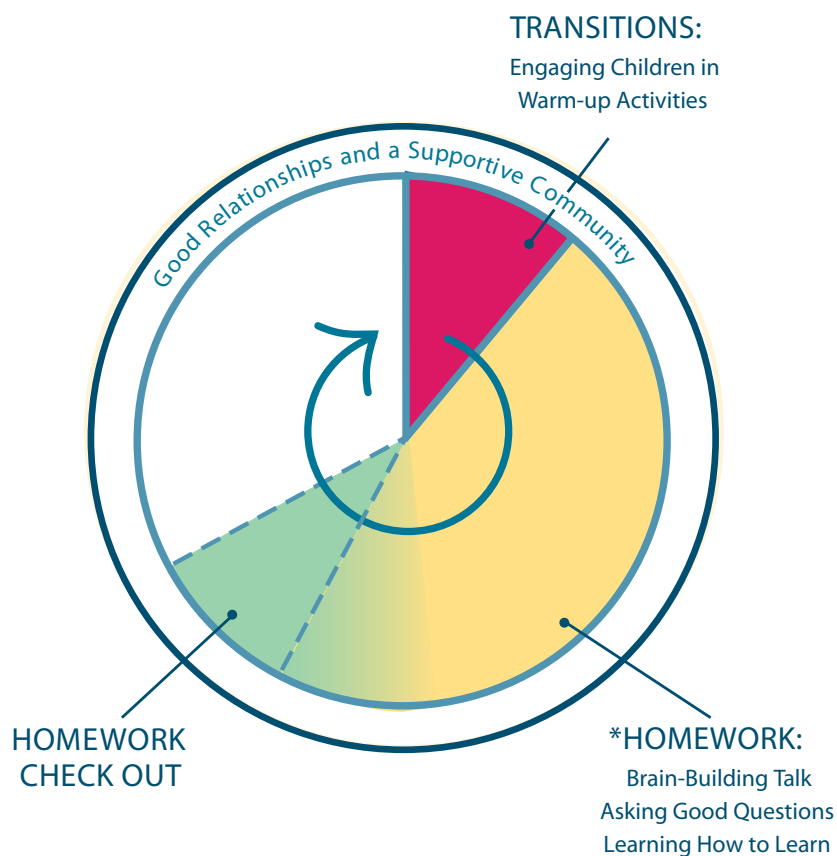
“There is no recipe for community building — no correlates, no workshop agenda, no training package. Community cannot be borrowed or bought. This reality makes the job of building community harder on the one hand but better on the other.”

– **Thomas Sergiovanni,**
Building Community in Schools
(Jossey-Bass, 1999)



Chapter 2

SmartTALK Homework Time



The purpose of homework is to review concepts taught in the classroom. Mastery of classroom skills, however, is achieved through routine practice over days and weeks.

Once your homework team's constitution is in place and you are on your way to building a sense of community with your group, it is time to turn your attention to establishing a homework routine.

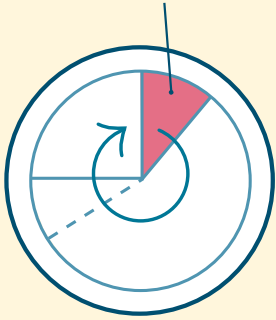
The SmartTALK homework routine consists of the following elements that focus on supporting kids with successful homework habits:

Transitions: A routine for moving into small homework groups, engaging children in warm-up activities and preparing for homework time.

Homework: Support through individual check-ins and problem-solving approaches that include brain-building talk, asking good questions and helping children learn how to learn.

Homework check out: A consistent routine of self check, buddy check, staff check, and putting all homework away.

Transition
into Homework



Transition into Homework

What do you do when you have work to do? Do you walk into a room, sit down and get to it? Probably not! Most of us need some transition time to prepare for more focused work.

For school-age kids, predictable transitions that help them orient to a new group, task, and space are essential if you want to get their best effort with homework. To help them transition to homework time, greet kids warmly and sincerely as they enter your group. Use their names, make warm eye contact, ask them how they are, and chat about something important to them. Before they begin their homework, ease the transition with a five-minute, team-focused, brain-boosting activity to motivate, energize, and connect your group.

Transition Activity Ideas

Transition Idea

GET READY . . . THINK FAST!

Think Fast® is a way to let the group know it is *SmartTALK Time!* Academically- focused games are ideal for transition time.

Identify academically-focused games you have access to that might be ideal for transition time. Below are several examples of games that you may find useful.

- ▶ Look for **Think Fast in a Jar®** where kids work in teams of two or three to list as many things as they can about a topic: *“How many words can you think of that relate to summer? How about cars?”*
- ▶ Or, **Think Twice in a Jar®** and **Choices in a Jar®** in which you read aloud a question and its two answers and pairs of kids discuss their personal choice and explain their reasons: *“Would you rather be a police officer or a firefighter?” “Would you rather compose a famous song or have your painting placed in a museum?”*
- ▶ Another game choice is **BrainQuest**, in which you read aloud academic questions to the team and in pairs they discuss answers that test and recall knowledge across subject areas: *“Can you tell the order from smallest to largest: lake, pond, ocean, puddle?”* Or, children can use pencils and paper for a quick math question: *“A potato has 90 calories. A yam has 155. How many more calories in the yam?”*

Transition Idea

TEAM PROBLEM SOLVING

- ▶ **Transition is the perfect time to revisit your team's constitution.** Having a brief period set aside at the beginning of homework time allows you to stay focused on your learning group goals and behavior norms.

Transition Idea

TRY OUT A TEAM-BUILDING ACTIVITY

- ▶ Especially good at the beginning of the school year or after a long break, team-building activities are fun and build good communication skills.

Transition Idea

BE CREATIVE!

- ▶ **Take turns telling an appropriate "Joke of the Day."** For example, "Did you hear what the zero said to the eight? Nice belt." Read a "Quote of the Day." Read an excerpt from a recent newspaper article and then ask each child to comment on it.

Transition Idea

INTRODUCE NEW GAMES

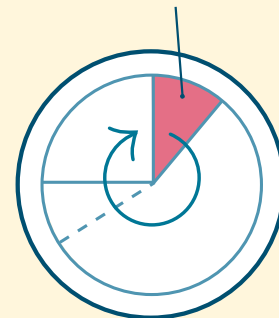
- ▶ **Use transition time for a full week to introduce a game or activity.** Or set aside one day each week to introduce a new game to your group. Once kids know how to play a game and have agreed on the rules, they can play it independently at a learning center.

Transition Idea

READ ALOUD TO YOUR GROUP

- ▶ **Read a chapter book.** Leave off at suspenseful parts to keep the kids wondering what happens next. When working with **kindergartners**, try to include a closing transition. Bring the children together at the end of *SmartTALK*, read a book and have a closing conversation. You may select a recommended book from the library, or even a book you wrote with the children.

Transition
into Homework



“To help them transition to homework time, greet kids warmly and sincerely as they enter your group.”

Transition Time: Recap

- Plan a transition time activity as part of your daily learning routine.
- Remember your goal is to motivate and energize the group— keep your activity fun and appropriately challenging.
- Don't skip transition time! Predictable routines are critical to getting kids' best effort with homework.



Homework Support

Now that your group is focused and ready, it's time to do homework!

This section will teach you how to make your homework time productive and effective. This section divides guidance on homework support into two areas: tactics and strategy. First we'll cover the tactics; simple management steps you can take to feel successful with your homework group. Tactics are the everyday activities all strong programs offer to address homework demands. Following tactics, we'll dive into strategies—the elements SmartTALK has identified that can expand learning for kids and help prepare them for success in school and in life. The SmartTALK strategies can take your homework support program from “good” to “great!”

Helpful Tactics to Make Homework Time Effective



Homework
Support



Kindergartners

For younger children, homework planning can be done in conversation. Keep paper handy and model for kids how to make a list as they tell you what they need to do. Showing them how to write a list supports literacy development and organized thinking. At the end of homework time, return to the list and check off the work that is completed.

Begin with a “Check-in”

Lead a quick but regular “check-in” routine to help children in your group become strong at organization and planning. Making a list is an important organizational strategy to teach kids. Ask the kids to put their homework in front of them, along with, if they have one, their homework assignment list. As they check in, ask, “*Do you have everything you need to get this work done?*” “*Do you need to make a list?*” As you do so, you teach kids how to organize themselves to learn—an important lifelong-learning habit that builds their independence. Younger kids may need more time and help to develop the habit of organizing that will become increasingly important in higher grades.



Teacher Tip

A great way to start homework time is to have all the kids get out their homework planners from school. It may take children a week or two to get used to this process of writing in their homework planners. Stick with it—homework time will be more productive when kids use their planners.

Set up a Homework Buddy System

Show kids how a homework buddy system can help them get their work done. At transition time for the first week, role play what effective “buddy help” is and isn’t. Ask pairs of kids to role play. Be sure to let them demonstrate how not to be a good homework buddy, as they’ll enjoy each other’s humor. For more information about Homework Buddies, check the Appendix.

Practice Using “Wait Time”

When problem solving homework with a child, wait at least five seconds before offering more help or clues. Recognize and encourage effort. By waiting, you are teaching a child that he or she will have the “space” to process information and give a thoughtful response.

Avoid “Overhelping”

Providing the right “intensity” of support to individual kids during homework time is important.¹⁵ Most adults tend to “overhelp”—so the key is to decrease support when you see the child is ready. When providing a child with support, always think of how you will “release” support and move from **I do → we do → you do**. When you are thinking about just how much support you should provide a child, it helps to remember that your main job is to help him or her get “unstuck” by asking good questions. (How to ask good questions is discussed more in the following section on Strategies for Effective Homework Support.)

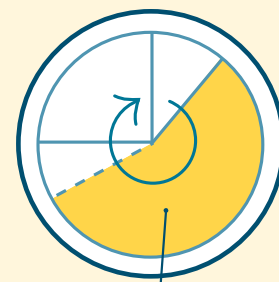
Keep the Group Focused

Stay on your feet, circulating among your team at the beginning of homework time. Once everyone is working effectively, put your own “work” in front of you—bringing a book to read is a good idea. Your behavior will model quiet concentration. Circulating regularly, and having your own book handy, also keeps you from “overhelping” with homework. Although there will be a child or two who requires more focused attention from you, remember that they, too, need you to release your support when possible. Look for opportunities for *every* child to demonstrate independence during homework time.

Avoid overhelping.

Think about releasing support.

I do → We do → You do



Homework Support



Big Idea Here

What homework buddies do:

- Check that their buddy has all the materials needed to do homework
- Help read instructions and explain them in their own words
- Ask good questions to help their buddy get “un-stuck”
- Say encouraging words to keep their buddy motivated to finish
- Show good ways to solve a problem (draw a picture, work a math problem backwards, estimate an answer, graph or chart, or make a list)
- Review and check their buddy’s homework before it is shown to the staff person assigned to their homework group

(The Homework Completion Card can be found in the Appendix. Homework Completion Card masters are provided in Spanish and English. Have volunteer parents or family liaisons translate cards into languages spoken by families in your program).

¹⁵ For a more in-depth discussion about intensity of homework help, see *School Style: A Notebook and Guide* (Foundations, Inc., 2004)



Homework
Support

“Having your own reading or other work will keep you from ‘overhelping’... homework time is a time for children to practice working independently.”



Help Read Directions

Don't make a struggling reader struggle through directions! Instead, read the directions clearly to the child and have him or her restate them in small chunks. Have the child tell you if there are words he or she doesn't understand.

Teach Kids the “Ask-Three-Then-Me” Rule

Kids should seek help first from their homework buddy, then from another pair in their homework team, and finally from you. This process frees you up to work one-one-one with children who are struggling. It also gives other children a chance to demonstrate their understanding of a topic.¹⁶



Kindergartners

You will need to circulate steadily when working with a learning group of young children, remaining consistently available to them.

Set Clear Expectations

Before you start working with a group, make sure the kids understand how you expect them to behave. If you've developed a team constitution, refer to it daily to help kids remember the behaviors they agreed on.

Intervene Quickly in a Low-Key Manner

Show the kids you will follow through on your agreed-upon rules every time. Keep your tone matter-of-fact, firm but friendly.

Provide Choices

If a disruptive behavior persists, take a child aside for a quiet one-on-one conversation in which you offer choices: “Maria, if it is too hard for you to work quietly beside Camilla, you can sit over at the individual desk. Which do you choose?”

¹⁶ The ask-three-then-me rule is an effective homework tactic used at Gardner Pilot Academy in Allston, MA.

Give the Child a Voice in Solving Problems

Disruptive behaviors can also be managed by asking the child for a solution: “Maria, I need you to work more quietly right now. What can I do to help you?”

Use the “When-then” Rule

Clarify your expectation and give kids a goal to look forward to with the “when-then” rule: “Maria, *when* you and Camilla have completed your work and I’ve signed off on it, *then* you two can play with the new games I’ve brought in for today.”

Remain Positive

It is okay to be firm: “I expect you to work quietly until everyone is done.” It is *not* okay to use language that shames children, such as “you’re acting just like babies today.”

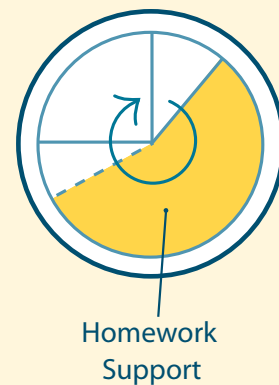
Be Realistic

Be sure your expectations are in line with the children’s ages and abilities. It is not realistic to expect a group of first graders to sit still and work quietly for 45 minutes. Experts recommend that kids have about 10 minutes of homework per grade.¹⁷ That is, a first grader can manage about 10 minutes of homework per session while a third grader should be able to handle about 30 minutes.

Don’t Give Up

It will take time for the kids to get used to the rules and routines. If you are consistent in your expectations, managing your group will become easier and easier. If something isn’t working, show the kids that you are a problem solver and try a different strategy!

“If you are consistent in your expectations, managing your group will become easier and easier.”



¹⁷ Cooper, Battle Over Homework. The author supports educators’ general “10-minute rule.” Multiply a child’s grade level by 10 minutes to calculate the optimum amount of homework he or she should complete on average per night.





Homework
Support

“This Group Is Out of Control! What Should I Do?”

Every staff person has faced group meltdowns. Conflicts and misbehavior happen and are a natural part of all communities. As the adult leader of your homework team, prepare yourself for these moments by knowing in advance what you’ll do when breakdown occurs. Here are a few ideas:

Stand Up and Clap a Pattern

Whisper, “If you can hear me, clap once. If you can hear me now, clap twice.” Increase the complexity of the clapping patterns to focus your group. Once everyone is clapping with you and paying attention, then move on.

Share Your Frustrations

Honesty, when shared positively and calmly, is often the best policy: “I don’t think we are doing a good job getting our work done right now. As I look around I see people chatting and playing. What should I see when I look around? What should I hear? What did we agree on that we wanted our group to look and sound like while working?” Let the group answer. Brainstorm solutions that address the cause of the problem. When you start over, let go of your frustration. Start fresh, feeling good, to show the kids that you can work together to solve the problem and then move on.

Get Everyone Up!

Schoolage kids need to move around! Try some quick physical energizers: jumping jacks, touch your toes, and more. (The *Sports4Kids Playbook: Inside Games and Minute Movers* is full of excellent “field-tested,” on-the-spot energizers you can do in smaller indoor spaces. Go to http://www.healthylausd.net/_pdfs/physicalActivity/downloadableActivities/sports4kids_playbook.pdf)



Kindergartners

With younger children, try this little rhyme:

“Put your hands on your head . . . put your hands on your knees . . . put your hands on your hips . . . put a finger on your lips . . . And, shhhhhhhh.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Gardner Pilot Academy afterschool staff use this catchy rhyme with movements to refocus young children’s attention.

Shoot Hoops

Give kids a quick break by taking turns shooting into a wastebasket or bucket. Keep a few soft squishy balls on hand—or simply make balls out of crumpled scrap paper.

Take a Walk

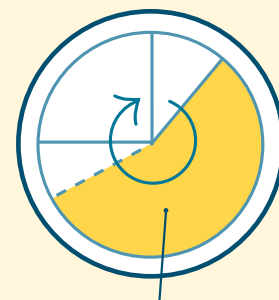
Round up the group and lead them on a detective walk. Look for objects A to Z, or objects of different geometric forms, textures, colors, and so on.

Pass an “Energy Impulse”

This is a fun and caring way to energize your homework team. Bring the group together in a circle (either standing or sitting, but close enough to hold hands). Gently squeeze the hand of the person to your right. This person passes the energy on by squeezing the hand of the person to his or her right. Continue until the energy pulse comes back to you. Ask: “How did we do? Do we have a boost of energy for the rest of homework time?”

Check in with the Team Daily

At the end of the day, review your successes and opportunities to improve. Ask your team: “How did we do today with our team goal?” Have kids give thumbs-up, thumbs-in-between, or thumbs-down (or go around the circle and have them give a number between 1 and 4). Ask: “What did we do well?” (For example, “We helped each other without bothering other people.”) Ask: “What should we work on for tomorrow?” (For example, “We will use three-inch voices.”) When discussing problems, be sure that you focus on overall group behavior. When solving problems as a group, be sure to remind children to talk about the problems without using names. This helps to keep a solution focus and avoids problems that can surface when some kids are singled out for discussion.



Homework
Support

**Try some quick
physical energizers:**

*jumping jacks, touch
your toes,
and more.*





Homework Support

SmartTALK Strategies for Homework Support

Strategies are the actions we take to meet a goal. They're the how part of what you are trying to accomplish. If you want to lose weight, learn a foreign language, or run a marathon, you will probably spend some time answering why you want to do that and then how you plan to do it. This is how you get to your goal.

SmartTALK offers the following strategies to help you help children develop the essential skills that they need to succeed as citizens and workers in the 21st century. The value of homework time goes beyond completing assignments. High-quality homework programs provide children with skills that promote success in school and beyond. As you provide homework help, you should focus on the following three strategies: 1) using "brain-building" talk, 2) asking good questions, and 3) helping children "learn how to learn."

Strategy #1: Brain-Building Talk

In recent years, researchers have found out that what adults actually do when they talk to kids, and what they actually talk about, has a great impact on kids' vocabulary, reading, and academic performance. The better ratio of adults to kids and the more relaxed atmosphere make afterschool academic time the perfect place to focus on improving the quality of talk with kids.



Words of Wisdom

"Learning and innovation skills increasingly are being recognized as the skills that separate children who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century, and those who are not. A focus on creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration is essential to prepare students for the future."

Partnership for the 21st Century

"In recent years, researchers have found out that what adults actually DO when they talk to kids, and what they actually talk ABOUT, has a great impact on kids' vocabulary, reading and academic performance."



Chatter is Good

What do we know about the importance of intentional talk? We now understand that kids who experience greater success in reading have adults around them who focus on talking to kids—during book reading, while playing games, and when eating together, for example. These adults are “balanced” partners in talk with kids, taking turns so that each partner has 50-50 air time.

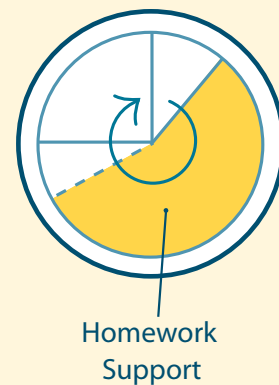
Good Chatter is Even Better¹⁹

We also know that kids who are strong readers by grade three have adults around them who talk in brain-building ways. These adults talk to kids about:

- How the world, and things in the world, work
- What words mean and other ways to say things
- Past shared experiences—what they did together (in lots of detail)
- A specific topic for an extended period, going deep and building on what kids are saying . . . stretching and mining the conversation as much as possible

Read on to listen for what good chatter sounds like in afterschool programs.

“ . . . kids who experience greater success in reading have adults around them who focus on talking to kids . . . while playing games and when eating together . . . ”



Homework
Support



Brain-Building Talk

Build a Shared Memory of Common Experiences

With the children, write and illustrate a book about fun experiences you've had together, like a trip to the library. The kids will enjoy reading this over and over. Here's what conversation may sound like with kids younger than first grade.

Adult: Remember all those stairs we climbed to the library entrance?
And then when we went inside the kids' room we saw . . .

Child: A BIG DINOSAUR!

Adult: Yes, there was a picture of a big dinosaur on the bulletin board.
Does anyone remember what kind of dinosaur we saw?

Child: It had a big head!

Child: And it was walking on two feet.

Adult: Yes, it did have a big head and walked on two feet!

Child: We saw an *Alloyorus*.

Adult: That's very close to the dinosaur's name. We learned that dinosaur is called an *Allosaurus* . . .

Talk During Every Activity

Talk during reading (for example, predict what may happen next, exclaim surprise, share a related experience, etc.), while playing games, while eating together, throughout the afternoon. What does it sound like in first grade?



Adult: Can I sit beside you for snack? Thank you. You went to your Nana's house for the weekend, didn't you? What did you do together?

Child: My brother and me went together. Nana took us to my auntie's and we cooked together and had a big party.

Adult: What was the party for?

Child: Lots of family.

Adult: That sounds like a family reunion—that's when lots of family gathers for a party or a big meal together. What did you help with for the meal?

Child: I measured flour for cornbread and I stirred the iced tea and put lemons in it.

Adult: You measured corn flour in a measuring cup? How many cups went into your cornbread recipe?

Child: I think four cups. That's a lot of flour, isn't it!?

Adult: It is! Four cups would fill this whole snack bowl, wouldn't it?

Adults Balance Talk with Kids

Take turns so that each partner has equal air time.

Here's how this may sound with a third grader.

Child: If he lands on this square, does that mean he gets an extra turn?

Adult: It looks that way . . . do you think the rule is different?

Child: Yes . . .

Adult: What makes you say that?

Child: Well, in the rules, it says that if you land on this square you hit the bonus square. So I think it means you get one of these coins.

Adult: That could work too . . . if you both agree to try it that way. Do you agree or disagree on the rule?

Child: We are sort of disagreeing about it.

Adult: What's a fair way to settle a problem where either way would work?

Child: Rock-Paper-Scissors?

Adult: Sounds good to me!

Stay with a Topic for a Long Time

As you talk, stay on one topic and build on what kids are saying. Stretch and mine the conversation as much as possible. It may sound like this in a conversation with a fifth grader.

Child: I can't believe my mom won't let me have a cell phone.

Adult: You sound mad—why do you want one so badly?

Child: They're cool. My friends all have them.

Adult: OK, so your friends have them. I'm sure your mom knows you like to feel cool with your friends. What are your top three reasons for wanting a cell phone that don't have to do with being cool?

Child: Letting her know where I am, one. Talking to friends, two. Texting friends, three.

Adult: And on her side, what are three reasons she'd give for not letting you have one?

Child: Three! She's got a million. Her top three? Cost, cost, cost.

Adult: She made that point clear! I bet she's got more reasons. Why don't you ask her? It might help you both get an idea for when she'd be ready to let you have one.

Explain How the World Works

Weave in your knowledge and balance the conversation with questions to explore the children's knowledge. This is what it may sound like in a conversation with a fourth grader.

Child: Is it true lightning never strikes in the same place twice?

Adult: Well, taller things are more likely to get hit so it's not true. Lightning strikes twice when a tall pointed object is the only thing around. Can you think of a place like this?

Child: Maybe a skyscraper or a mountaintop—those probably aren't good places to be in a rainstorm!

Adult: Remember, lightning happens even when there's no rain. I'll bet you've seen lightning flashes in the summer. Lightning can even strike a few miles from where it's raining.

Child: I heard you're not supposed to run under a tree in a thunderstorm. Why do so many people do it then?

Adult: Why do you think?

Child: I mean I guess because they don't want to get wet and they feel protected under the branches. Maybe they don't want to have to find good shelter.

Adult: You know a lot! It's smart to have safety skills like that!

Child: Yeah!

Strategy #2: Ask Good Questions

As a strategy for homework support and lifelong learning, asking good questions accomplishes a variety of goals. The interesting and complex questions you ask will cause a ripple effect—kids are likely to copy your behavior and start asking good questions too. A good question probes our understanding, encourages us to make connections, inspires us to reflect, and in general fires up lots of critical thinking. The other benefit is that good questions lead to strong problem-solving ability, which is exactly the kind of skill we want children to have.

“Good questions lead to strong problem-solving ability, which is exactly the kind of skill we want our children to have.”

Good, open-ended questions fall into these categories that encourage kids to:

RECALL what they know:

- When do people usually use this punctuation?
- Where could you find more information about bats?

APPLY what they know:

- What makes this answer so big?
- How else could you say this?

BRING TOGETHER (*synthesize*) several things they know:

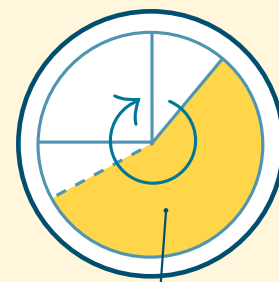
- Why do you think the boy was frustrated?

EVALUATE what they know:

- Which reading strategies help you the most when reading this passage in order to answer the questions at the end?²⁰

Good Questions Lead to a Four-Step Problem-Solving Approach

Help children improve their independent study skills by using a consistent step-by-step problem-solving approach when they're stuck. This question-asking sequence is especially well-suited for math homework.



Homework Support



Words of Wisdom

“Questions allow us to make sense of the world. They are the most powerful tools we have for making decisions and solving problems, for inventing, changing and improving our lives as well as the lives of others. Questioning is central to learning and growing.”

Jamie McKenzie,

Questions and Questioning: The Most Powerful Technologies of All

²⁰ The above examples are based on Bloom's Taxonomy—a way of framing questions and objectives to tap into children's higher order thinking skills. See the Critical Thinking Stems product from Mentoring Minds at www.mentoringminds.com



Homework
Support



Big Idea Here

Learning-how-to learn strategies are about learning what you know, learning what you don't know, and learning what to do about it.

Asking Good Questions* Leads to Problem Solving

1. ASK:

What do I already know?

What do I need to find out?

- Are there words I don't understand? How could I find out what they mean?
- Have I ever done any problems like this one?
- Do I need help with directions?
- Would an example help? Who could I ask?

2. THINK:

What are some different ways I can do this?

- Could I draw a picture? A chart or graph?
- Could I estimate or guess, and then check if I'm right?
- Could I use hands-on materials? Library books? The Internet?
- Could I work backwards to get the answer?

3. TRY AN IDEA!

4. LOOK BACK:

Did I choose a good strategy?

Is there a better way to do this?

**see Appendix for a handout that can be photocopied*

Strategy #3: Learning How to Learn

Teachers, especially in today's atmosphere of high-stakes testing, are ever mindful that they must stick closely to the curriculum— ensuring that kids have the knowledge and skills outlined in state and national standards. Most teachers will tell you, however, that the number one thing they focus on teaching their students is “learning how to learn” effectively. You can pick up on teaching this strategy in the afterschool homework program so that your children will slow down to make sure they understand what they read, pay attention to whether or not their answers make sense, talk themselves through a difficult assignment, and know when and how to ask for help. Here are some teacher-tested learning-how-to-learn strategies you can use when providing homework help.

Model how you talk yourself through problems using a “think aloud” technique.

Kids will learn the strategy by listening to you think through a problem out loud. Encourage them to think out loud, too, even if it's just in a

whisper. This builds their confidence and helps them see how their thinking can lead them to a good answer. It might sound something like this:

"Hmm . . . I don't get it . . . I think I read the directions too fast. I'm going to slow down and try again."

"No, that doesn't make sense . . . 10 dollars plus 18 dollars shouldn't give me more than 100 dollars! That's way too much."

Notice when a child's questions point to a lack of understanding.

Help children use hands-on materials to better understand an idea. Teach kids to make a list, draw a picture, or make a chart to help when they don't understand. Use real-life examples whenever you can to help children draw a strong connection between the concept and the everyday world.

Listen to not only the words a child tells you but what his or her body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions are telling you, too.

He or she may be "academically" fatigued or anxious. Don't let frustration win. If a child is starting to fall apart, take a time-out from difficult work. Play a game to build confidence in the subject area. It might sound like this:

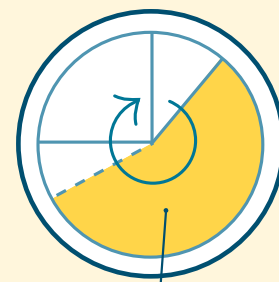
"You know what, Manny? I know a great game we can play together that's all about telling time."

A short game allows a child to get up and move around while feeling good about what he or she knows. A child is often willing to revisit difficult work after a short break, playing a game in which he or she feels successful.

By "walking" a child through his or her frustration using positive strategies, you are teaching him or her how to cope with stress and how to feel good again. Feeling positive is essential to getting back on track with difficult school work, so finding ways to build optimism and success is essential for learners.

Doing Homework: Recap

- Some successful everyday tactics include: check-in routine, homework buddy system, the ask-three-then-me rule, "I do → we do → you do."
- Be prepared for group meltdowns! Check out a few *SmartTALK* ideas for ways to re-focus and re-energize the kids so they can focus on homework.
- *SmartTALK* homework and lifelong learning strategies for 21st century skills include: brain-building talk, asking good questions, and helping kids "learn how to learn."



Homework Support

Big Idea Here



With classroom concepts, kids move from understanding ideas with real objects (e.g., coins) ► to pictures (e.g., pictures of coins on a page) ► to symbols (e.g., 25¢ or \$0.25.)

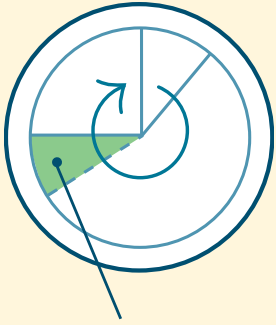
25¢

If a child doesn't understand a concept with symbols, try explaining it using pictures.



If he or she doesn't understand it with pictures, try using real objects.



Homework
Check Out

Homework Check Out

Kids work at different paces and will finish their homework at different times. The transition period out of the homework time, therefore, should be flexible. Allow each child's transition to happen naturally. Help establish good habits by following the exact same check-out routine every day.

1: SELF CHECK

As children move into higher grades it becomes more important to “look back” at work—making sure directions have been followed and assignments completed.

2: BUDDY CHECK

Have homework buddies look over one another's assignments before bringing them to you. Peer-checking helps children to reflect on their efforts and completion.

3: STAFF CHECK

You have a role in communicating with the children's families and teachers. To keep the lines of communication open, fill out and staple a Homework Completion Card to children's homework each day.

4: PUT IT AWAY

Commit to having children put their homework away neatly in an agreed-upon place once it has been checked by you. Many schools have homework folders that are to be kept in children's backpacks. If your group doesn't have folders, make them together as one of your first group activities.



Teacher Tip

If you notice a child taking more time than expected to complete homework (more than approximately 10 minutes per grade or more time than others with the same or similar work), use the Homework Completion Card in the Appendix to communicate this message to the child's family and teacher. Most teachers value communication from parents and other homework support people. This feedback allows the teacher to work directly with the child to re-teach the concept or adapt the homework.²¹

²¹

The Homework Completion Card has been adapted from Susan O'Connor's postcard format.

Troubleshooting Homework Issues²²

“I don’t have any homework.”

What you can say:

- *If you don’t have homework, you can read a book for 20 minutes.*
- *If you don’t have a book, I have practice sheets prepared for you.* (If it is a policy that all kids will focus on quiet work during homework time, have practice sheets at various levels photocopied and organized in a file folder for kids who arrive without homework.)
- *I will send a homework card in your folder to let your parents and teacher know we’ve checked off “No homework given” for today.*

“I don’t feel like doing homework today.”

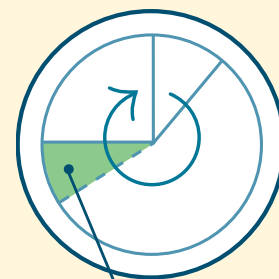
What you can say:

- *Talk to me about it . . . what’s going on? Do you feel like talking about your day? Let’s take a 5– to 10– minute break, and talk. After that, you can try again.* (This is especially useful for a child that normally does homework.)
- *What is the most challenging homework today? Let’s work on that part now so it is done before you go home. Then you can relax.*
- *Let’s just try doing one piece of the assignment. If we take it in bite-size pieces it will be easier.*
- *Is there a group working on the same homework? Do you want to join them?*

“I can’t remember what my assignment is.”

What you can say:

- Can you ask your homework buddy? What about someone from your group?
- Let’s look in your homework folder.
- *I have some work that you can do for now, but it is very important that you remember next time.* (Access the practice sheets described above. Bring some Post-it notes so that children can write themselves reminders. This situation may require a teacher/home communication if a child says this on a regular basis.)²³

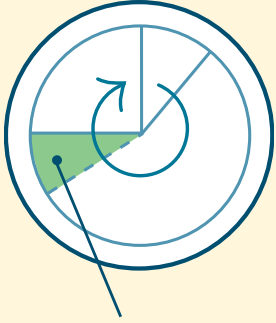


Homework
Check Out

²² The questions and answers listed here were adapted from a workshop presentation by Susan O'Connor at the Learning With Excitement Conference.

²³ The Homework Completion Card can be found in the Appendix. Homework Completion Card masters are provided in Spanish and English. Have volunteer parents or family liaisons translate cards into languages spoken by families in your program).





Homework
Check Out

"I don't understand these directions."

What you can say:

- Let's break the directions into bite-size pieces . . . read the directions to me. Stop when you come to a part you do not understand.
- Why don't I read the directions out loud, and you tell me in your own words what you think you need to do.
- Is there someone in your group who might know how to do this?

"I don't know how to start this writing assignment."

What you can say:

- I know it's hard to start. Let's start by free writing for five minutes— what do you know about this topic?
- Do you have your ideas together? Maybe I can help you think about organizing your thoughts . . . let's try making a web/outline/list, etc.
- Is there anyone else in your group who has already started?



Teacher Tip

Have a backup plan for kids who forget their homework. For example, create folders of math practice sheets with different types of problems (multiplication, addition, subtraction, fractions, etc.). It is easy to find worksheets on the Internet. Make sure you copy sheets at several different levels of difficulty so you can quickly find a few that will be at the child's independent working level. Try this website to get started:
www.superkids.com/aweb/tools/math/

“ The best afterschool programs do two things: they engage students in fun activities that create a desire to learn, and they build on what students are learning during the school day to extend the knowledge they already have. ”

Afterschool Training Toolkit,
National Partnership
for Afterschool Learning
(www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits)



Chapter 3

Learning Centers: Keeping the Learning Going

What are Learning Centers?

The previous chapter introduced some of *SmartTALK*'s strategies—the big ideas that guide you as you help kids develop 21st century learning skills during homework time. This chapter provides strategies to guide you after homework is done.

“You can teach students a lesson for a day; but if you can teach them to learn by creating curiosity, they will continue the learning process as long as they live.”

— Clay P. Bedford

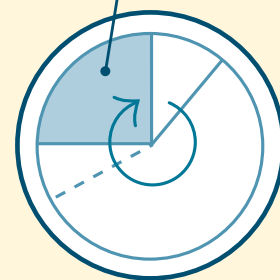
Kids want to play after school. We're glad they do because we know that playing is learning. Playtime doesn't mean that kids are done with academics for the day—in many ways, they've just begun. Hands-on experiences are keys to learning. Can you imagine learning to drive a car without practice time behind the wheel of a real car? *SmartTALK* Learning Centers offer time for purposeful play; a chance for kids to road-test the skills they learn in the classroom.

SmartTALK Learning Centers use games and activities grouped by a common learning theme (see games in the resource list). A common learning theme is a sub-domain, of a larger subject like Math or English/Language Arts. For example, a learning center that supports a sub-domain of math could be **patterns**, which includes various pattern-related games and activities. Check out the resource list for more ideas. You might have some of these games on hand, or you can begin a wish list of games to purchase from a local store or an educational toy company. When you use Learning Centers it will enable kids to practice the skills they need to succeed in school. This focus on “Keeping the Learning Going” supports *SmartTALK*'s three key learning strategies:

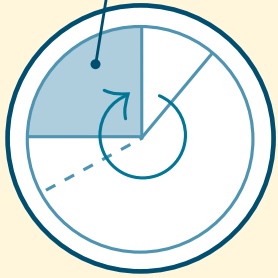
1. Brain-building talk
2. Asking good questions
3. Learning how to learn

In this chapter, you will learn about the following topics to think about when you create and use *SmartTALK* Learning Centers in your program: 1) identifying learning topics, 2) managing learning center materials, 3) group management and solutions, and 4) methods to introduce a new game.

Keeping the
Learning Going



Keeping the
Learning Going



1. Identify Learning Topics

Helping kids to succeed in school can be supported during afterschool time through game-based activities that reinforce school day learning. *SmartTALK* Learning Centers gives your program the option to use many different academically-focused games and activities that are engaging for children after homework time is completed.

When learning new concepts, practice is critical—whether it’s recalling math facts or recognizing letters and letter sounds. Afterschool provides a place where children can work on reinforcing a skill so well through practice and repetition that it becomes automatic, and this automaticity can transfer back to the school day! Of course, it is important for the afterschool staff to pay particular attention to the type of homework children bring from the school day; this will help you identify topics that complement the topics children are learning during the school day. For example, if children are learning about fractions in class, you could select games that are focused on fractions, or you could select games about multiplication or division, since you need those skills in order to understand fractions. The homework assignments, along with your observations about a child’s ability to complete an assignment, will help you select or create an appropriate *SmartTALK* Learning Center. If your program is located within a school, you could consult with school-day teachers to find out more details about what children are learning in class.

“You don’t understand anything until you learn it more than one way.”

– Marvin Minsky

2. Manage Learning Center Materials

Since there are lots of kids, and your program may have a lot of games with little pieces, you need to think through set up, management, putting away, and storing your program’s *SmartTALK* Learning Centers.



The *SmartTALK* Learning Centers can be set up at tables in work areas around the room and organized by learning topics. (See examples in the resource list). Ideally each activity or game will be played in a small area where children can work in teams of two to four or alone using the materials to explore one or more subject areas. The resource list outlines a variety of resources that will introduce, reinforce, and extend learning. Learning centers allow kids to continue developing thinking and learning skills after homework is done. While they play with the *SmartTALK* materials, kids:

- Practice their academic skills
- Talk about ideas and strategies
- Negotiate rules and solve problems

This section explains essential steps and management tips to think about when you create and use *SmartTALK* Learning Centers in your program. To get the most out of the learning centers you create, follow the steps described in this section.

Before building and using *SmartTALK* Learning Centers in your afterschool program, consider how you will store, care for, and access learning centers materials. Overall, you will want to be sure that:

- *You strive to make sure Learning Center materials are stored, organized, and labeled so that you have easy access to them.*
- *You teach kids to keep track of materials and game pieces, and that you are able to document and replace missing or broken pieces.*
- *You have a plan for materials cleanup, and are able to monitor that all items are put away properly after every use.*

Tips for Managing and Accessing

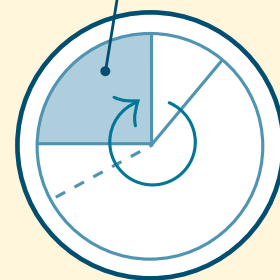
SmartTALK Learning Centers

Keep in mind you want two things to happen, which seem very simple at the start. You want the learning centers your program created to get used. And you want the learning centers to be returned, intact. Here are three methods used regularly by afterschool programs.

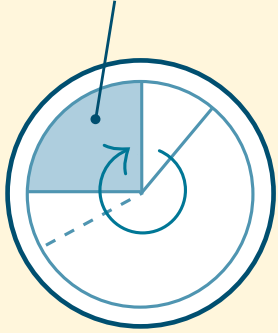
Check it Out!

If your program has created multiple learning centers, below is a system you can use so different groups within the program can check out learning centers or individual games (for a day, week, or month depending on what works best for your program). The most important part of this system is to *keep the borrower accountable*. Here are a few suggestions to help you set up a check-out system.

Keeping the Learning Going



Keeping the
Learning Going



- *A staff person creates a learning centers check-out form that can be stored with the resources.* The form should list all the learning centers and individual games or activities and provide space for borrowers' names and check-out and check-in dates. The borrower (a staff person) signs the check-out form and agrees to be responsible for maintaining and storing all contents in a secure place. This person is also responsible for returning the materials intact and on time.
- *Create a learning center folder that lists its contents.* Create a folder for each learning center and place it in a file-folder box. When someone borrows a learning center, game or activity, they complete a sign-out form and place it in the folder. Then you always have a record of where each learning center, game or activity is and who is responsible for it.
- *Another check-out method is to make a chart with library-style pockets for each learning center, game or activity.* Hang this in the storage closet or director's office. When a learning center is checked out, a check-out card goes into the pocket of that learning center. This system can be used for other materials as well, if necessary.

Rotate or Assign Learning Centers

If your program has built multiple learning centers, a program director or other staff member can rotate learning centers through groups or can assign materials based on age, skills or group preferences.

Create a Learning Center Request Form

Staff members can communicate to directors or lead staff what materials they would like to borrow based on the needs and interests of their group, and the availability of materials your program has available. Whichever system you select, ask one staff person to be responsible for ensuring that the system you choose is understood and used by everyone in the program.

An Inviting Space to Play: First Impressions Last Forever

Get your kids excited about the games and activities you've selected just for them. The first step is to make the learning centers space inviting. No rug? Lay down a cozy blanket and put a game in the center of it. Sticky cafeteria tables? Cover them first with colorful plastic tablecloths, using a different color at different tables to mark separate learning centers. These small steps show you care, that you recognize that afterschool is an important community for the kids—their home away from home. (Just like home, remember to wash the blanket weekly and wipe down the tablecloth daily.) How you set

up your learning centers will depend on the space and equipment considerations of your afterschool program. However you go about it, be sure that:

- *Each learning center space is clean and clearly marked.* A clearly defined space helps kids to know where their bodies need to be when they are at the learning center without adult reminders. Picnic mats are a good way to provide a clean surface on which to sit, rather than on floors at the end of a day of school. You can also designate a space using masking tape.
- *The game boundaries for each learning center are established.* Marking a clearly defined space on which materials must stay prevents game pieces from getting scattered across a wide area and makes clean up quicker and easier. When children can see the space defined for them, it removes questions regarding play area.

3. Group Management Problems and Solutions

Because they're fun and exciting for kids, your program's learning centers can produce management challenges for staff. Other afterschool programs have encountered a range of issues—and invented practical solutions. Anticipate kids' movement and noise by reading below about real problems and real solutions from other afterschool programs. You can use these solutions to avoid chaos and create systems that ensure order.²⁴

Here are five common problems and solutions:

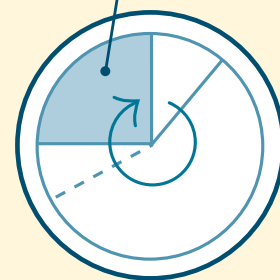
Problem:

Noise Level

Because of space issues, our program must use the same room for homework and for learning centers. The way we're organized, we have up to 25 kids in one room with only two teachers. When we set up games centers, the noise in the room felt out of control for those kids who were still working on homework.

²⁴ Elementary afterschool staff and volunteers from Boston and Cambridge provided thoughtful feedback and creative ideas about how to troubleshoot common issues when setting up learning centers.

Keeping the Learning Going

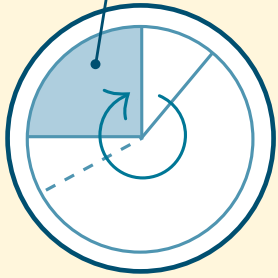


Teacher Tip

Give kids a sense of ownership over the materials in the learning centers by asking them to help set up the play spaces. If your program has more than one learning center, ask them where they think the different learning centers should go and listen to their ideas about how to best set them up. Can the kids answer each of these questions?

- *How many kids should be at each center?*
- *How long should we be at each center?* (Older children might choose a time period. Younger children might say: "Until I finish playing a game two times," or "Until I finish a painting.")
- *How should we change centers?*
- *How should we introduce center games to the group before we put them out for independent play?*
- *How will we make directions kid-friendly? Where will we post them so that kids can easily see them?*
- *What noise level is acceptable in our room? How should I let you know if the noise level is too high?*
- *How will we keep high-activity centers as far away as possible from where children need quiet?*

Keeping the
Learning Going



Solutions:

“Three-Inch Voice”

Before even starting our learning centers, we taught our kids what a three-inch voice sounds like. That’s about as long as half a kid’s hand, that’s up-close talking. Once they got it, you just have to stay on them, reminding them we’re quiet to respect others’ learning.

Noise Control Poster

We made a poster with pictures showing how quiet or loud the kids could be. It’s kind of fun for them, because we made it look like a remote control and we added a “mute button” just like a TV remote. We also added “pandemonium,” which they love! We cut out a large arrow to stick on the poster and show how much noise they’re allowed to make. We also cut out a red exclamation point to put on the poster to show when it’s too loud and they need to tone it down. When they don’t quiet down within a minute of a request to lower their voices they have to stay on “mute button” for two minutes.

“ Always provide more opportunities than the number of children in the group—this allows everyone to have more than one choice. ”

Problem:

Transition from Homework to Learning Centers

So many things are happening in the same space at the same time. Too much of my time is taken up by helping children transition and get started over and over again. With limited staff, we spend most of the time helping with homework and it’s hard to assist with the transition to learning centers time.

Solution:

Show–Don’t Tell–How Many Can Be At Each Center

We wanted a nonverbal way of showing kids how many can be in one center at a time. This took some advance preparation, but it was worth it! First, we cut out circles and laminated them. Then, at each learning center table or floor area, we laid out the number of circles to show how many children can be there at a time. This way, after homework check out, children walk to a learning center and simply pick up a circle and put it on a tray we set out in a central part of the room. When a child picks up a circle, he or she can see how many other kids will be able to play that game with him or her. If there are no more circles, a newcomer can easily see the learning center is full and he or she will need to look for another group to join. When a child leaves the activity, he or she needs to get the circle from the tray and return it to the learning center so that others can see there



is a space available. Keep the numbers even for each learning center, as games are most often played in twos and fours. Always provide more learning center opportunities than the number of children in the group—this allows everyone to have more than one choice.

Problem:

Movement During Game Play

It is hard to get games started because some children are moving all over the place or starting a game and leaving quickly after it starts.

Solution:

Use a Timer to Control Traffic Flow

We wanted a way to help them focus on one thing at a time. What we came up with is now everybody's favorite job of the day: timekeeper. That person gets a stopwatch and some instruction on how to use it. Basically we wait until about half the kids have done homework check out, and then we start a timed rotation. I decide the rotation time and base it on the kind of learning centers or games and activities that are out and whether they take awhile to set up and get into or whether they're quick. The timekeeper holds up a finger to show when two minutes are left, and is responsible for asking everyone if they're ready to start again at their new centers before the timer is re-started. Since everyone has a turn at the job, they tend to pay attention to the timekeeper because they want that respect when it's their turn.

Problem:

Missing Pieces and Cleanup

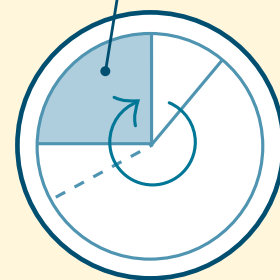
It is great to have games in your program, but sometimes a lot of pieces go missing and parts are getting broken . . . just one missing piece and a game is no good.

Solution:

Respect the Materials

We learned that you can't assume children know how to put the games away correctly. It's like making a bed; somewhere along the line somebody probably showed you how to make it. Well that's what we did with the games. We showed them how to put a game away piece by piece and how to check the area for any missing pieces. Now we know to spend 10 minutes at the end of learning centers time monitoring how games are put away. When you introduce a new game, take the time to look at the materials and packaging with the kids. Ask them to tell you why things are packaged in such a way. The correct way to clean up games will become more natural to them when they understand the arrangement of the pieces.

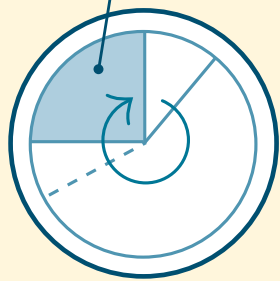
Keeping the Learning Going



Kindergartners

Use a kitchen timer. Introduce it at group time and discuss what it means when the timer rings. On the first day that children use the learning centers, set the timer for approximately 15 minutes. When the timer goes off let the children know they will have two minutes to put things away before they change centers or clean up for the end of the day. **Over time, the children will begin to internalize the sense of 15 minutes and sometimes they will anticipate clean-up time!**

Keeping the Learning Going



Teacher Tip

When game pieces do get lost, you can usually order more at no or minimal cost.

Look online for the address of the game manufacturer or distributor. Call, e-mail, or write to the source in order to receive new game pieces. Toward the end of each school term is a good time to inventory games to ensure they are in play-ready condition for the next term.

Tell them these are their games!

If pieces get broken or go missing, we all lose out.

Problem:

Alone Time is Hard to Find

Some of our kids just want to do something by themselves when they finish their homework.

Solution:

Quiet Choice Area

When we started learning centers we saw right away there were a few kids who floated between centers, not really eager to get involved. When we asked, they sometimes said they wanted alone time. Now we always have a Quiet Choice area with activities like Brain Quest, Tangles Jr. and Tangrams, Jenga, Pattern Blocks and Color Cubes, Mad Libs, and Dominoes. We put the quiet area away from the social hubbub of the group, but within clear view of staff. Children can go there by choice when they want to do something quiet and independent. Sometimes we use the area for children who need to calm down and reflect on their actions for a single timed rotation, or until they are ready to rejoin the group.

Problem:

Competitive Games Create Tension

We often have one or two kids who become really competitive in games. We want to offer the games, but when every day there's an argument, it's not worth it.

Solution:

Play Against the Clock

When our kids became too focused on winning every game, we changed the rules to eliminate head-to-head competition. We had pairs or teams of kids work against the clock, using the stopwatches and sand timers. Learning centers time became less competitive and more cooperative.

Encourage Partner or Team Play

We encourage our children to play as partners or in teams so that children who struggle with reading or numeracy concepts don't feel singled out. Playing in teams seems to get the kids talking more about concepts and also makes the center a more relaxed and sociable place. If necessary, assign partners based on who you feel will work well together. If you don't



Kindergartners

Try offering Moon Sand play or Play-Dough when a child needs to release some energy during a quiet choice rotation. Sensory activities can be very helpful for young children who are having difficulty managing their behavior.

want the children to know that's what you're doing, say: "Joshua, I see you just put your homework away, do you want to ask Abraham if he'd like to join you at this math activity?"

4. Introducing New Games

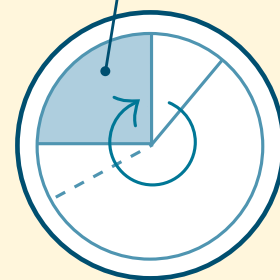
We know it's often a challenge to get kids to try a new game, which your program may have recently added. This section covers how to teach new games and incorporate them into your program. Even though individual experience is the best teacher, here are some useful ways we've found to introduce new games that your program purchases:

- **Take 10 Minutes.** At the beginning of staff meetings, take 10 minutes to teach other staff how to play a new game. Ask one staff member to teach a game as a warm up to each meeting.
- **Take it Home.** Allow staff members to sign out the new game on weekends. Playing a new game with friends or family members in the comfort of home builds interest and confidence.
- **Use Fridays.** On a day in which there is no homework given (often Fridays), keep homework time on the schedule but use it as a time to practice and play new games. Set up games in centers format with a staff member at each center. Have staff or a volunteer teach one game at each table. Have kids rotate through the tables so each group learns three games or activities every Friday.
- **Use "Transition to Homework" Time.** Introduce and play the new game for just five minutes each day for one week. By the end of the week you can put it out for independent play.
- **Set up a Game Club.** Have a staff person or volunteer who likes to play games lead a game club. Kids can choose to be in the club and have a separate time in the afterschool program to get together and learn new games. These kids become "Game Masters" for the program. Game Masters' names can be posted so kids who have questions about game play or rules can go independently to a Master for help.

SmartTALK: Next Steps

The SmartTALK guide is meant to orient you to the SmartTALK approach to homework support in afterschool. Now that you have a sense of the method, dive into additional resources listed in the Appendix to plan your afterschool program's component of SmartTALK: Homework Support for Kids. In addition, be sure to read some specific examples of ways to support children's math and English Language Arts learning.

Keeping the Learning Going



“Playing in teams seems to get the kids talking more about concepts and also makes the center a more relaxed and sociable place.”



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Appendix.....55

Using Learning Materials to Support Homework Time

- Four Steps to Problem Solving

- What do Homework Buddies do?

- Homework Completion Form - English

- Homework Completion Form - Spanish

Math Education

English Language Arts (ELA)

Resource List: Learning Centers

Appendix

Using Learning Materials to Support Homework Time

Helping kids succeed at homework starts by providing access to the right materials. Basic supplies such as pencils, rulers and dictionaries are critical for kids to complete their homework, while hands-on materials such as counters, snap cubes and hundreds boards can help students understand more challenging concepts. In this section, we share what homework supplies can support children during afterschool time as well as some tips on ways to create homework baskets for your program!

Gathering and providing homework materials will support children in your program by giving them the hands-on supplies they may need to work on and complete school-day homework assignments. Whether you have these materials in your program already or are using materials borrowed from a school-day teacher, it's important that they are ready and accessible to kids during the designated homework time. In preparation, set out the materials in a central location or divide the materials so that each group has a selection of appropriate materials to complete homework.

Check to make sure there are plenty of sharpened pencils and scrap paper for everyone. Many of these items may need replenishing throughout the year so be sure to keep a list of needed or missing materials on hand. Organizing your supplies before the children arrive will help to decrease the disruptions that may occur when children need to continually ask for supplies.



The following are some examples of how you can create **SmartTALK Homework Baskets** for your program. The suggestions below provide homework materials for up to 12 children. In some instances, this includes materials for every child and others suggest items such as rulers, counters and calculators that are meant to be shared by a small homework group.

A **SmartTALK Kindergarten Homework Basket** can include many of the following items, as well as art materials that kindergarten children sometimes need to complete homework assignments.

SmartTALK Kindergarten Baskets include:

- *First Dictionary, The American Heritage* (1 book)
- Thesaurus (1 book)
- Calculator (10)
- Counters (bears, linking cubes, bingo chips, etc.)
- Glue Sticks (10)
- Kitchen Timer (1)
- Pencil Sharpeners (4)
- Pencils (24)
- Manilla Drawing Paper (1 ream)
- Multicolored Construction Paper (1 package)
- Rulers (6)
- Scissors, Blunt Tip (4)
- White Glue (6 bottles)
- Washable Markers (2 sets of 8)

A **SmartTALK Grades 1–2 Homework Basket** can include materials children use during the school day such as snap cubes, counters, hundreds boards and number cards. In addition, you can add materials to assist with homework related to telling time and using money, typical assignments for grades 1 and 2. If a child appears frustrated when working on an assignment, teach the child to make a list, draw a picture, or make a chart. When children use everyday examples it helps make a stronger connection between concept and real life.

SmartTALK Grades 1-2 Baskets include:

- 2-Color Counters (set of 200)
- *Children's Thesaurus, Scholastic by John Bollard* (1 book)
- Coin Collection (1 set)
- *First Dictionary, The American Heritage* (1 book)
- Four Steps to Problem-Solving (2 sheets)
- Hundreds Boards (5)
- Pencil Sharpeners (4)
- Pencils (24)
- Primary Number Cards (1 deck)
- Rulers (6)
- Snap Cubes (set of 300)
- Tape Measures (5)
- Teaching Clocks (5)
- Transparent Color Counters (set of 200)

A **SmartTALK Grades 3–5 Homework Basket** can include many of the materials children use during the school day such as array cards, counters, hundreds boards and digit cards. In addition you can include additional materials to assist with homework related to fractions and place value, typical assignments for grades 3 to 5 (sometimes a quick review with picture cards can help a child that is feeling stuck). If a child appears to be frustrated when working on an assignment, teach the child to make a list, draw a picture, or make a chart. When children use everyday examples it helps make a stronger connection between concept and real life.

SmartTALK Grades 3-5 Baskets include:

- Array Cards (4 sets)
- Calculators (4)
- *Children's Dictionary, The American Heritage* (1 book)
- *Children's Thesaurus, Scholastic by John Bollard* (1 book)
- Digit Cards (2 decks)
- Four Steps to Problem-Solving (2 sheets)
- Fraction Tower Card Game (2 decks)
- Hundreds Boards (5)
- Pencil Sharpeners (4)
- Pencils (24)
- Rulers (6)
- Snap Cubes (set of 100)
- Transparent Color Counters (set of 200)

Making Homework Baskets for Your Program

If you decide to create homework baskets, think creatively about how to acquire the supplies:

- Is there a parent-teacher organization in the school that might raise money or purchase materials?
- Is there a local business that might donate money or materials?
- Can your program borrow materials from one or more classroom teachers?
- How might the children be involved in fundraising or organizing homework baskets for your program?
- Are there some everyday items such as paper clips or game pieces (from broken games) that might substitute for counters?

Whatever method you choose, it is important to help children understand that all materials— borrowed, donated or purchased — should be cared for well. And don't forget, thank you notes go a long way!

The following forms can be used during homework time and are also provided below:

- **Four Steps to Problem Solving:** this form can be copied and placed at tables during homework time. The words/symbols remind children of a step-by-step problem-solving approach to use when they are stuck. This is especially well-suited for use during math homework. (Chapter 2)
- **What do Homework Buddies Do?:** this form can be used after you introduce homework buddies as suggested in Chapter 2 (You can copy this form and place it on homework tables to remind the children about how to be a good homework buddy).
- **SmartTALK: Homework Completion Form (English):** this form offers one way for afterschool staff to communicate with a child's family and school-day teacher. (Chapter 2)
- **SmartTALK: Homework Completion Form (Spanish):** a Spanish version of the form. Use this form for Spanish-speaking families.

Four Steps to Problem Solving



1. **ASK:** What do I already know?
What do I need to find out?

Are there words I don't understand?

How could I find out what they mean?

Have I ever done any problems like this one?

Do I need help with directions?

Would an example help? Who could I ask?



2. **THINK:** What are some different ways I can do this?

Could I draw a picture? A chart or graph?

Could I estimate or guess, and then check if I'm right?

Could I use hands-on materials?

Library books? The Internet?

Could I work backwards to get the answer?



3. **TRY AN IDEA!**



4. **LOOK BACK:** Did I choose a good strategy?
Is there a better way to do this?

What do Homework Buddies do?

Homework Buddies help each other to:

- ☐ **check** that they have all the materials needed to do homework
- ☐ **read** instructions and say them in their own words
- ☐ **ask** good questions when one buddy gets stuck
- ☐ **say** encouraging words when one buddy gets stuck
- ☐ **show** good ways to solve a problem (examples: draw a picture, work backwards, estimate, draw a graph or chart, make a list)
- ☐ **check** each other's homework before showing it to an adult



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- ☐ **check** each other's homework before showing it to an adult



_____ worked on this assignment at:

_____ After-School Program

☐ Finished the homework independently in _____ minutes

☐ Needed some assistance and finished in _____ minutes

☐ Required direct support to complete assignment

☐ Did not finish within allotted time

Notes: _____

Tutor: _____

_____ worked on this assignment at:

_____ After-School Program

☐ Finished the homework independently in _____ minutes

☐ Needed some assistance and finished in _____ minutes

☐ Required direct support to complete assignment

☐ Did not finish within allotted time

Notes: _____

Tutor: _____

_____ hizo esta tarea al:

Programa extra-curricular de _____

☐ Completó la tarea independientemente en _____

☐ Necesitó alguna ayuda y la completó en _____

☐ Requirió apoyo directo para completar la tarea

☐ No la completó en el tiempo permitido

Notas: _____

Tutor: _____

_____ hizo esta tarea al:

Programa extra-curricular de _____

☐ Completó la tarea independientemente en _____

☐ Necesitó alguna ayuda y la completó en _____

☐ Requirió apoyo directo para completar la tarea

☐ No la completó en el tiempo permitido

Notas: _____

Tutor: _____

Math Education

Teaching math in elementary school focuses on helping children develop a strong understanding of how to use numbers to solve real-life problems. Although math equations and procedures are still an important part of student learning, teaching math in elementary school has shifted to helping children talk about solving problems, and finding answers. In today's classroom, there are many right ways to solve a math problem, and there is a lot of talk! You'll see students working in small groups or pairs, helping one another to understand problems and correct mistakes. Teachers are nearby, listening to how students are talking about solving math problems and are ready to help them come to a better understanding. Teachers provide hands-on materials, like snap cubes, counters, and hundreds boards to help children 'see' a math problem. It is still important that kids are fluent with basic math facts. When children know these math facts quickly and easily it helps them become better at mental math, or figuring out an answer just by visualizing it in their head.

“As important as it is to have a strong number sense, teachers know it is vital for children to be fluent in their basic facts.”

SmartTALK Learning Centers are an opportunity to provide hands-on math activities that support these strategies and skills. Each center focuses on math concepts and skills that fit well in afterschool programs.

Here is a snapshot of key strategies and skills that improve elementary children's fluency with math.

The Need for Speed!

In first, second, and third grades, children need to learn and then master how to count rapidly and accurately. Equipped with these strategic counting skills, they will be prepared to tackle math in fourth grade and beyond.

Skip count

For example:

2, 4, 6, 8, 10 . . .

3, 6, 9, 12, 15 . . .

6, 12, 18, 24, 30, 36 . . .

Make 10

For example:

$0 + 10 = 10$

$1 + 9 = 10$

$8 + 2 = 10$

$7 + 3 = 10$

$6 + 4 = 10$

$5 + 5 = 10$

Doubles to 10

For example:

$1 + 1 = 2$

$2 + 2 = 4$

$3 + 3 = 6$

$4 + 4 = 8$

$5 + 5 = 10$



Big Idea Here

As children enter fourth grade, their **ability to quickly draw on the skills** they've learned in first, second, and third grades comes in handy. For example, if they can count on and back by 5 and 10 from any number, they will solve the following problems using that skill.

$$24 + 30 = ?$$

"24 . . . I'll count on by 10s . . . 34, 44, 54 . . .

the answer is 54!"

$$35 - 15 = ?$$

"35 minus ten is 25 minus five is 20 . . .

the answer is 20!"

Count on and back by 5 and 10 from any number

For example:

3, 8, 13, 18 . . .

84, 79, 74, 69 . . .

18, 28, 38, 48 . . .

122, 112, 102, 92, 82 . . .

Count by 5, 10, 25, 50, 100

For example:

5, 10, 15, 20 . . .

10, 20, 30, 40 . . .

15, 30, 45, 60 . . .

50, 100, 150, 200 . . .

100, 200, 300, 400 . . .

Count on and back by 1, 2, and 3 from any number

For example:

$$26 + 27 + 25 = ?$$

You can talk a child through the solution like this: "You know $25 + 25 + 25 = 75$. Then *add one*, then *add two* . . . so the answer is 78."

$$35 - 17 = ?$$

You can talk a child through the solution like this:

"Let's break this down to what you know. 35 minus ten is 25 . . . take away five more is 20 . . . take away two is 18 . . . so the answer is 18."

Solve Strategically

There are many “right” ways to an answer. As children gain these skills, they will apply them in solving problems. You can help them get over feeling stumped by a difficult problem by teaching them to ask themselves, “How can I break these numbers into easier parts?”

$18 + 12 = ?$

You can walk a child through the solution with a tree diagram, saying, “Let’s break this down into what you know. Add the 10s together first, that makes 20. Then $8 + 2$ is left, which makes 10. Now, add $20 + 10$ and the sum is 30.”

Use Estimation

In real life, and in the elementary math curriculum, exact answers are not always required. This is when estimation skills come in handy. Estimating can be done quickly if children can count strategically and know their basic facts. You may find you need to point out to children when estimating an answer is all that is needed.

$282 \times 4 = ?$

You can talk a child through estimating the answer like this: “You know that 282 is close to 300. And you can figure out that $300 \times 4 = 1,200$ because you know $3 \times 4 = 12$ and $30 \times 4 = 120$ so $300 \times 4 = 1,200$. The exact answer would be under 1,200 but close to it because 282 is less than but close to 300.”

Get Comfortable with Fractions

Starting in first grade, children are introduced to fractions by playing with, coloring, and labeling parts of a whole. In second, third and fourth grades children learn to add and subtract fractions, and in fourth and fifth grades, children learn to represent fractions as a decimal and a percent.

Divide a whole into fair shares

Children need to be able to make fair shares by cutting up a whole (for example, a pizza) into equal pieces. Help them see that the fewer pieces they divide a whole into, the bigger each piece will be.

Divide a group of items into fair shares

Children need to learn how to make fair shares by dividing a group of items (for example a bag of 25 pretzels) into fair share parts. Help them see that each fair share needs to be the same number of items (for example, five people would get five pretzels each), and that the fewer people keep it, the more items each person gets!

Visualize fractions

Children need to be able to visualize fractions in order to compare sizes, to know, for example, how $\frac{1}{5}$ compares to $\frac{1}{3}$. Help children become familiar with fraction sizes using different shapes (for example pie slices, parts of a rectangle, units on a ruler).

Place fractions on a number line in correct order

When children truly understand fair sharing, they know which fractions are bigger and which are smaller. Help children to practice and show what they know by putting fractions in order on a number line.

Learn how to represent fractions in decimals and percents

In fourth grade, children learn that fractions can be shown in decimal form, too. For example: $\frac{1}{4} = 0.25$. In fifth grade, children compare fractions, decimals, and percents and need to learn the most common equal forms. For example: $\frac{1}{5} = 0.2 = 20\%$.

Play with Money

Money is a part of everyday life and every child knows it! Helping children gain familiarity with coins and counting takes little encouragement because they all see money skills in use regularly and they want to be good at counting and using money. Afterschool conversations are perfect times to talk about what things cost, making change, and other money matters that come naturally from children's questions.

Identify coins and bills and learn their values

Kindergartners should be able to identify all US coins by name. In first grade, children learn coin values and should be able to add groups of coins. By second grade, children should also be able to identify \$1, \$5, \$10, and \$20 bills, and should be able to use coins and bills to show different ways to make up to \$5. Fourth graders should be able to handle money problems that total up to \$1,000.

Solve money problems using estimation

For fourth graders, this is what a money problem might look like: You have \$20. Estimate to find out if you have enough to buy all four items below. Explain how you made your estimate.

• Comic: \$3.79 • Pen: \$1.49 • Key chain: \$5.49 • Binder: \$4.95

Learn to Tell Time on Analog (Face) Clocks and Digital Clocks

Telling time and measuring are everyday skills like using money that children are motivated to learn, especially if you start in the early grades. Instead of telling the time whenever children ask you what time it is, point to a clock or a watch and talk through how to read it. Within afterschool programs, staff can help children to notice what

time daily activities begin and end and have them estimate how long various regular activities take.

Tell time to the minute on digital and analog clocks

Second graders should be able to tell time on digital and analog clocks at quarter-hour intervals (fifteen-minute intervals). By third grade, children need to be able tell time to the minute!

Compute elapsed time and convert between hours and minutes

By fourth grade, children are expected to give the amount of time that has elapsed between a start and stop time. They should be able to do this with both digital and analog clocks. For example, if the movie is 95 minutes long and it starts at 6:30 p.m., at what time will it be over?

Estimate, measure, and compare lengths

Second graders should be able to measure and compare objects using rulers and tape measures. By fourth grade, children need to be able to carry out simple conversions between yards, feet and inches.

Create and Talk about Patterns and Shapes

Playing with, drawing, comparing, and talking about patterns and shapes helps children learn basic geometry skills and gets their brains ready for more complex math and spatial reasoning.

Play with repeating patterns: identify, copy, describe, extend, and create

From kindergarten through second grade, children build the foundation for algebraic thinking by repeating patterns with shape, color, sound, words, and numbers.

Find repeating patterns on a Hundreds Board or multiplication table

For example, on a Hundreds Board, first graders will learn to start with a number, like 3, and skip count by 10s to 100. They will color each answer red (3, 13, 23, 33, etc.) to see the pattern.

Play with shapes

From kindergarten through fifth grade, geometry is an active, hands-on experience. Children develop a spatial sense and precise language related to size, shape, position, and orientation. They talk about sides, faces, edges, vertices, slides, flips, and turns while having fun with spatial games. They identify, describe, draw, and compare two- and three-dimensional shapes. In second, third, and fourth grade, children rotate (turn), reflect (flip), translate (slide), and enlarge shapes.

English Language Arts (ELA)

Time for Sharing and Talk

- Develop thinking and language together through interactive learning—learning that extends thinking.
- Develop children’s oral language and literacy through a variety of language activities.
- In the primary grades, provide practice in applying decoding skills and in the ability to pay attention to the component sounds of language.²⁵

SmartTALK ELA Learning Centers

Whether you are helping with homework or supervising learning centers, remember how valuable it is to talk purposefully with groups of children. *SmartTALK* Learning Centers encourage you to use “brain-building” talk, to ask good questions, and to use strategies like “wait time” and “think aloud” to help children become independent learners. Here is a snapshot of key strategies and skills that improve elementary children’s ELA fluency.

Talk, Tell & Write

Storytelling activities are extremely motivating for small groups. While building a story together, children practice story structure, elements, and sequencing. They actively predict and make connections while creating or developing their stories. As children add details and descriptions to their stories, they begin to tell their tales with intonation, expression, and excitement. Meanwhile, activities that encourage talk provide opportunities for children to learn new words and expressions. Most importantly, they have the opportunity to try new words out among friends. As vocabularies grow, children are able to make more precise and creative word choices in their storytelling and writing.

²⁵ Massachusetts Department of Education, Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework, June 2001, p. 2.

Storytelling activities reinforce:

Story structure/sequencing:

- Beginning (set up)
- Middle (crisis, problem, climax)
- End (problem solved)

Story elements:

- Setting
- Characters
- Events/plot
- Conclusion

Sentence Building

Sentence building and grammar activities help children understand what they read and improve the quality of the writing they produce. When children understand how words function in sentences, they can use this knowledge to predict what words mean. As children better understand how parts of speech work, their own sentence structure and composition becomes more refined.

Sentence-building and grammar activities are fun ways to help children practice important skills:

Parts of speech:

- Nouns
- Pronouns
- Verbs
- Adjectives
- Adverbs
- Conjunctions

Basic sentence patterns:

- The girl smiled. *Subject-Verb (S-V)*
- The dog drank water. *Subject-Verb-Object (S-V-O)*
- The twins are acrobats. *Subject-Verb-Noun (S-V-N)*
- His brother is kind. *Subject-Verb-Adjective (S-V-Adj)*
- Shaleen is here. *Subject-Verb-Adverb (S-V-Adv)*

Word Building & Word Games

Word-building activities help children become more efficient readers

and writers. The more high-frequency words and word families children can recognize and use easily, the more fluent their reading becomes. Fluency allows readers to read fast enough so that they can concentrate better on the meaning of what they are reading.

Word-building activities are fun ways to help children recognize:

- High-frequency words (also called sight words)
For example: and, the, by, for, have, many, about
- Initial sounds and ending sounds
For example: s—ing, pr—oud, str—ain
- How to break apart and blend words
For example: s-it, sit
- And hear word families or rhyming words
For example: t—ake, fl—ake, m—ake, r—ake; b—ake

When you develop your *SmartTALK* ELA Centers there are opportunities to talk with children about words, sentences, stories, and language in playful ways while deepening their language skills. Remember that every afterschool program should also have access to an engaging and appropriate set of books. Read-alouds are especially appropriate for afterschool, as well as for opening and closing activities.

Resource List: Learning Centers

Kindergarten – Grade 5:
English Language Arts (ELA)

Sentence Building

Mad Libs

Mad Libs, Jr.

Magnetic Boards

Magnetic Poetry: Adventure Story Maker

- Magnetic Boards

Magnetic Poetry: In Other Words

- Magnetic Boards

Man Bites Dog

Silly Sentences

Talk, Tell & Write

Apples to Apples Junior®

Creating a Color Wheel

- Modeling Clay: Blue, Red, Yellow

I Spy a Mouse in the House

Make a Sign

- Lowercase Alphabet Stamps
- Uppercase Alphabet Stamps
- Washable Ink Pad

Play Dough Fun

- Lowercase Dough Stampers
- Plastic Mat
- Play Dough
- Uppercase Dough Stampers

Scrambled States of America

Silly Starters Write-Abouts

Zingo

Word Building

Boggle

Chunks

Two Way

Word Games

Chip-O!

What's GNU?

Kindergarten – Grade 5:

Math Learning Centers

Count & Compare

Addition Dominoes

Clip Itz Number Set

Grocery Store and Pizza Shop

- Cash Register & Play Money
- Guest Checks
- Multicultural Play Food
- Shopping Baskets

Estimate, Multiply & Divide

Multiplication Pairs

- Array Cards
- 6, 10, 12 Sided Dice (2 of each)
- Jumbo Place Value Dice

Multiplication and Division Machine

- 2 10 sided dice

Fractions

Fraction Dominoes

Fraction Tower Card Game

Fraction Tower Equivalency Cubes

- Magnetic Fractions

Moon Sand Fun

Pizza Fraction Fun Junior

Money

Buy it Right Game

Number Play

1-2-3 OY!

Mancala

Rat-A-Tat-Cat

UNO® Original

Patterns & Shapes

Blink®

Do You Sudoku? Game for Kids

Squint Junior

Place Value

Place Value Bingo – grades 1 - 3

Skip Count, Add & Subtract

Math Machine, Addition

- 6, 10, 12 Sided Dice (2 of each)

Math Machine, Subtraction

- 6, 10, 12 Sided Dice (2 of each)

Spatial Relations

Color Cubes

- Color Cubes Task Cards

Pattern Blocks

- Pattern Block Activity Cards

Tangoes Jr.

- Puzzle Pack: Animals
- Puzzle Pack: Objects
- Puzzle Pack: People

Making a Small World

- Block Play People
- Geoblocks

Time

Time Bingo

Visual Challenges

Blokus® Classic

Serpentiles

Top This!