

School Research Project Paralysis

“Have you finished your homework?”

“I just need to finish this research project about explorers.”

“How much do you have left to do?”

“I need to choose an explorer, research his life and explain why he was or wasn’t a great historical figure.”

“Oh. When is it due?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Good thing the public library is open on Sundays now, eh?!”

School research projects can be great opportunities for kids to develop and pursue their own passions as they practice skills they will need for life in the real world. They can also be great sources of frustration and family tension! Here are some tips that will help you and your kids make the most of these assignments.

Progressing through procrastination

As frustrating as it often is when kids put off these assignments, recent research has discovered that procrastination is common among researchers at all levels and of all abilities. Feelings of doubt, inadequacy and fear are reported by many people starting a research project, from kids and graduate students to professional researchers. Confronting these emotions is a valuable part of the process. Though knowing this is normal may not add any hours to a Sunday afternoon, being able to accept these feelings may help your child relax and make those hours more productive.

Starting to Make Sense

While teachers often assign specific research topics, choosing their own can help students develop valuable skills they can use throughout their lives and careers. Taking initiative, solving problems, thinking critically, processing and managing information and applying knowledge to new situations are all skills that students practice when doing research and will serve them well beyond graduation.

Deciding on a question to research is a critical first step. This is easier when there is time to explore a variety of sources of information such as books, videos, magazines and the internet as well as knowledgeable people. The information gathered will help your child establish:

- What they already know;
- What else they would like and/or need to find out;
- Where to get more information;
- What key words and phrases will help them locate the information they need.

Sometimes answering these questions is made even easier by brainstorming or creating a mind map of the topic. Kids benefit from asking themselves:

- What is important about my topic?
- What is the purpose or value of the topic, issue or idea I am researching?
- How can I organize my topic? What are its characteristics? How is it structured?

Studies into how our brains work and how we learn have found that answering these questions as kids do research helps them remember their findings long after they have handed in their final copy.

The Library or the Internet?

Finding sources of good information that meets your child's needs for a particular assignment is often a challenge. While there are lots of great websites for kids, most of the web is intended for adults. And younger kids need a lot of help to get more than pictures from the internet when they are doing more than surfing.

This is where libraries can make a huge difference. Librarians and Teacher-Librarians can save you and your child hours of work and frustration by directing you to the books, videos, websites etc most suitable for kids. While public libraries are often lifesavers on the weekend, their services are not intended specifically to support students' learning as are school libraries. The result is that public libraries, unlike a well-funded school library, may not have the number or variety of books etc your son or daughter will need to dig deep into their assigned topic. After discussing an assignment with your child's teacher, the school library and Teacher-Librarian are probably your child's best next stop.

Too Much Information!

Searching the internet has been compared to trying to drink from a fire hose. And a well-stocked school library should have enough books, magazines, videos etc on any commonly assigned topic to cover the average child's bedroom floor (unless the rest of the class got there first!) The challenge is often what to do with all that information. With the amount of information in the world doubling every five years these days, meeting that challenge is another essential life skill.

Teacher-Librarians specialize in helping kids develop these skills. From introducing the idea of a table of contents to skimming and scanning text, pointing out the value of subtitles, photos, diagrams, captions, quotes and italicized words, to how to use an index, Teacher-Librarians work with students to help them learn many of the shortcuts to finding information. Once your child knows how to find the information Teacher-Librarians are trained to help them make sense of it and make it their own.

Plagiarism – “What do you mean that's not my work?!”

Without sufficient opportunities to learn and practice these skills many kids feel as though everything they read about their topic is too important to leave out, so they write it down, often word for word. If these notes are reproduced in the final copy this is called plagiarizing – your child is presenting someone else's work as his or her own, even though he or she may not be trying to pull a fast one on the teacher. Many teachers and parents encourage kids to “put it in your own words”. This is a good start and well meant, but often more difficult and time consuming and less efficient than other strategies.

For instance, finding anything is a lot easier when you know what you are looking for. This is as true of information as it is of lost toys. When kids concentrate on clarifying their questions about their topics they will be much more likely to find the answers they are looking for and find them quickly. Teachers enjoy marking major research assignments

written by kids who have learned that more is not always better, but who instead focus their efforts on finding and presenting only the most useful and interesting information.

Another way to deal with the mountains of information students often encounter is to follow the 80/20 rule. Effective library researchers spend 80% of their time reading and only 20% of their time recording information. Researchers who do this stop periodically to record key words or phrases which are just enough to help them remember what they just read, never enough to enable them to plagiarize. Following the 80/20 rule also helps the researcher to internalize the information and consolidate their learning as they go.

And isn't that what research is all about?