

Don't
Freak

Out!

NEIL MCNERNEY

HOME WORK

**A Parents Guide
to Helping Out
without
Freaking Out**

Homework:

A Parent's Guide To Helping Out

Without

Freaking Out!

By Neil McNerney, M.Ed., LPC

Homework – A Parent’s Guide To Helping Out Without Freaking Out!

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ISBN 978-0-9839900-0-0 Distributed by Pathway Book Service

www.pathwaybook.com

Published by:

Integrated Publishing

1984 Isaac Newton Square, Suite 204

Reston, VA 20190

703-352-9002

Special Note:

Please remember that this book is not intended to give specific advice to your specific situation. It is a general guide for helping families reduce homework stress. Please consult a professional counselor or family therapist for specific advice. All names and stories in this book are composites and are not real people. Any similarities are purely coincidental.

This Book Is Dedicated to My Wife

Colleen

Author's Important Links –

Websites:

www.reducehomeworkstress.com

www.neilmcnerney.com

Email:

neil@neilmcnerney.com

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Introduction

I'd like to risk an assumption about why you are reading this book.

The biggest reason is because you love your kids. Regardless of how prepared you were for having kids, the amount of love you feel for them still surprises you. Because of that love, you want to do everything you can to help them be as successful in life as possible. So when you saw the title, you said to yourself, "If I can help my kid succeed in school, I'd like to know how."

But even though you love your kids, it's sometimes tough trying to help them be good students. It seems that sometimes, attempts you make to help them be successful backfire, either by direct defiance or a passive "I'll do it later."

Like most parents, you have promised yourself that you will be a better parent than the ones you had. You want to give your children everything they need to be a successful student. But doing everything you can to assure academic success seems to be backfiring. Maybe it's not going the way you thought it would. Maybe the more that you try to help, the worse it gets. Maybe it's helping your child, but ruining the great relationship you used to have. Homework time has become the most stressed-filled time of the day. Helping and being involved sometimes just causes more hard feelings and doesn't seem to improve things. You hope there is a better way to do all you can to help your kids be successful without exhausting yourself or harming your relationship with your kids. You are interested in reducing your own stress about homework so that you can enjoy your kids again.

About Me, Neil McNerney, LPC

When I read a book, especially a parenting book, I want to know a bit about the author. I ask myself: "Is this person credible? Do they have the credentials and

experience to back up what they are saying?” If you are similar to me in this way, let me tell you a bit about myself:

I am a licensed professional counselor and have been licensed in the state of Virginia since 1994. I spent seven years as a school counselor, dealing with most of the issues in this book. I am on the teaching faculty of the Virginia Tech Graduate School of Marriage and Family Therapy, where I teach clinical techniques for working with children in a family context.

I speak and train nationally and regularly provide workshops and keynotes at state and national professional conferences. I have helped develop a parent training program that is being used by hundreds of professionals worldwide. The main focus of my work is increasing motivation in children and increasing the leadership skills of parents.

And, most importantly, my wife and I have two children, who constantly challenge my assumptions about parenting, especially when it comes to schoolwork. I am regularly amazed at the things they can accomplish on their own, and I am regularly challenged to use the right approach based on what is going on with them at the time.

What you will find in this book

A way to get rid of the constant cycle of worry, anger, temper, and guilt.

There is a reason why we are feeling more stressed, guiltier, and angrier than parents of previous generations. We have been sold a myth about parenting that doesn't create better kids and in fact tends to produce the very things we were trying to avoid. This book will help you understand these myths and provide a way to feel better about the way you are helping your child.

A refreshing, new way to look at your children's academics

There is a place between feeling anxious and responsible for your child's school work at one extreme, and cutting off and leaving it up to him on the other extreme. I will help you find this sometimes-elusive place, a place where you can be most effective as a parent.

A way to be an effective leader in your child's life that leaves you feeling good about your role in his life.

I will share an approach to helping your child that will leave you feeling good about your job as a parent, instead of feeling stressed and unsure. I will warn you: It's not an easy approach. It will require some work—and especially, self-control. But I assure you that the rewards will be worth it.

An approach to leading your student that has passed the test of time and professional scrutiny.

There tends to be two types of parenting books on the market. Some have very strong roots in the parenting profession. Books such as *1-2-3 Magic*, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, and *ScreamFree Parenting* are what professionals call “theoretically valid.” They are based on proven theories of family systems and parent leadership. Other books, unfortunately, aren't so valid. As a teacher of the next generation of family therapists and parenting professionals, it is my obligation to make sure my book is not just helpful, but also stands up to the review of other professionals.

I have the pleasure of teaching at the Virginia Tech Graduate School of Marriage and Family Therapy, where my students are learning about family systems and becoming family therapists. When teaching some of the concepts about parent leadership, the students often ask: “Why don't parents know about this stuff? Why is it limited to graduate students?” Good question. This was one of the questions

and challenges that led to me writing this book. The ideas I will share with you are effective, challenging, and theoretically solid. If the ideas were not grounded in a valid approach to family systems, my students would tear me up in an instant!

A way to lead our kids without it all being about the kids

I began working with families in 1988 as an elementary school counselor. I soon realized that my fascination was more about family dynamics than it was about working one-on-one with kids. So I went back to school and got a degree in family counseling.

During those early years (way way back in the 90s), I began to see this slow but steady shift in how we parent our children. The Self-Esteem movement had begun in earnest, with the main concept being: If we can help a child feel good about himself, he will do better in life. We began focusing more and more energy on helping kids feel good, in hopes that they would then have the self-confidence to face challenges and be more successful.

Our focus became about the children. Teachers, parents, schools, everyone became very child focused. I should have started a bumper sticker company around then, because this was the time when we began to emblazon our cars with great things about our kids. Honor roll students, student of the week, winning school sports teams, and so on were made into stickers for everyone to see. Soon, everyone knew how well our kids were doing in school and what sports they were excelling at, just by looking at the back of our cars.

Our goal was to make our kids feel good about themselves. Nothing wrong with that, right? But then an interesting thing began to happen. We, the parents, started to blur the line between our kids' accomplishments and our own accomplishments. We have told the world (or at least our neighborhood) what great kids we have. "Look at the great things my kids are doing," is what we are saying. It was our cars

that sported the bumper stickers, not their bicycles or their backpacks. We, the parents, were the ones shouting the great news.

But then, we began to feel the pressure to keep it up. We started to look at every little slip as a possible worry point. Instead of focusing on how we could be a leader, we began to get more and more involved, increasing our own worry, and causing more conflict at home.

I remember overhearing a conversation as a father picked up his son at school. The dad was reviewing a social studies test and, obviously, the kid didn't do spectacularly. "Look out there at my car," the father told his son. "See the honor roll bumper sticker?" "Yeah," said his son, looking down and knowing what he would hear next: "Do you want me to rip that honor roll sticker off? Do you? I can't leave that on my car if this is the type of work you bring home."

I know. Pretty harsh dad, right? Absolutely. It's what I call, in a twisted way, a "feel good" story. No, the story itself doesn't feel good. The story makes me feel good as a dad, because at least I'm not as bad as that dad!

But if I told you that I don't feel the same worries as the bumper sticker dad, I would be lying. When my kids are doing well and they are on a roll academically, everything is happiness and rainbows. But let one paper come home that looks like a stumble, and I start to feel those same worries. I start to take my kids' work personally.

It was at that point, just a few years ago, that I happened to come across a book called *ScreamFree Parenting*. The author, Hal Runkel, put in writing what I have been slowly coming to grips with: When we become too child-focused, we lose our sense of self and end up taking our kid's ups and downs too personally. I have worked with Hal and The ScreamFree Institute for the past three years developing a professional training model that helps parents stay calm and connected. We have

had the good fortune to touch the lives of thousands of parents and train hundreds of professionals, especially on U.S. military bases and posts throughout the world.

The Parent's Dilemma – Too Little, Too Much

There are many dilemmas we face when it comes to parenting our kids. If we do too little, we might end up being neglectful. Our kids won't get all of the opportunities, structure, and discipline necessary to do well in life. If we do too much, we run the risk of decreasing their internal motivation. We run the risk of increasing our resentment, anger, and worry. And we run the risk of them actually doing worse in school.

Our goal is to find that “just right approach” that provides leadership but doesn't produce resentment. But in order to do that, we are faced with one dilemma after another.

I had to Google the word “dilemma” to make sure I was using the right word. Instead of giving you Webster's definition, I'll use the first definition that came up on the Internet. It was from, of course, Wikipedia:

A dilemma (Greek: δι-λημμα “double proposition”) is a problem offering at least two possibilities, neither of which is practically acceptable.

Dilemmas are the one constant thing we deal with as parents. They come up over and over again. Take, for instance, trust. I discuss this issue in detail in Chapter 9. Our kids want to be trusted. We want to trust them. But they keep being sneaky, and sometimes boldly lying to us. Here's the dilemma: “If I trust you more, you will just lie again and again. If I don't trust you, there will always be tension between us. I will always have my detective badge on, and you will always feel like a suspect.”

Sometimes dilemmas can go away, just by thinking about the issue in a bit of a different way. I am going to teach you how to look at a problem a bit differently.

I remember what a student told me once about seeing things differently. He was ten years old at the time. He and his parents were working with me on increasing his focus and motivation in school. Things had gone well and we were finishing up the counseling process. It was our last session, and we were reviewing what went well. The first thing he said was that he had begun looking at his problems differently than before. “In what way?” I asked him. “Well, whenever me and my mom and dad would come in with a problem, we were always looking at the problem front-ways.” I wasn’t sure what “front-ways” meant, but I didn’t want to interrupt. He continued: “And then you would say something or ask a question that made us look at the problem different. It was like you were looking at the problem side-ways. Instead of front-ways.”

“How did that help?” I asked. I wasn’t exactly clear yet what he meant, so I was stalling for time.

“When we started looking at the problem side-ways, we were able to see new answers instead of just the problem,” he said.

Now I got it. I was impressed. This ten-year-old had just captured what I try to do for kids and families: change how they see the problem. If we change how we see problems, solutions are just around the corner—or side street.

I will be asking you to look a bit differently at the problems you are having with your kid’s schoolwork. I will be asking you to do the same about how you are trying to deal with these problems. Your goal in picking up this book is to learn new ideas and new tools to help increase your child’s school success. If that is what you are looking for, you will be pleased. This book is not a rehash of what has been said in

the past by many competent educators and parent specialists. This is a new look at the problem, and a new look at the solutions.

A Few Words of Caution

1. **Don't try to change too much too quickly.** Looking at problems in a different manner, side-ways, can be a bit unsettling. The ideas in this book will stretch you and make you a stronger leader in your child's life. But remember: becoming stronger is hard work and often causes soreness at first. Just like trying anything new, it will get easier with time and practice.

2. Avoid "Yes, but" thoughts

"Yes, but" thoughts are those thoughts that get in the way of trying new things. They are a way for us to say, "Yes, I understand what you are saying, and it makes complete sense. But it won't work." It puts us in a closed-mind situation very quickly. If we are to improve the success of our children, it's pretty important to avoid the "Yes, but" as much as possible. Here are a few ways it might show up in your mind:

a. I tired that. It didn't work. There is a possibility that you have tried some of the suggestions in this book. I am pretty certain that most of the ideas will be new to you, or they way I will suggest you use the idea will be different than the past. In either case, try to avoid dismissing an idea because it hasn't worked in the past. One of the main reasons some approaches didn't work in the past is because there was some secondary benefit your kid was getting from the situation. The main secondary benefit for our kids: Our emotional reactivity. The more we freak out, the worse things get. The calmer we become, the more student success is possible.

b. That would never work with my child. Don't bet on it. If I had a nickel for every time I have heard a parent say, "That wouldn't work for my child," I would be rich. Well, not exactly rich (it takes a lot of nickels to be rich), but I'd have

enough money for a nice dinner for my family! When it comes to your child, don't assume that you have her figured out and know what might work and what might not work. You might be surprised.

c. My kid has special needs. That won't work for special needs kids. I have developed these ideas of parent leadership with the help of hundreds of special needs students and their parents. Some ideas might have to be adjusted a bit for your child, but the concepts will still be effective regardless of the need. This is not a book about differentiated instruction, or any specific educational approach. This is a book about how we can tap into those basic desires that all kids have: A desire for success, a desire to make others proud, and a desire to be trustworthy. I will help you find ways to help your child make those desires a reality.

d. That idea doesn't match with my parenting philosophy. Preconceived ideas sometimes get in our way. But in actuality, there are no such things as preconceived ideas. We were not born with these parenting ideas. We conceived them as some point after taking in lots of information. All I am asking you to do is to take in additional information that might change your conception of your job as a parent.

3. Change is hard, especially on you. Adjust your life accordingly. In Chapter 11, you will learn about the willpower fuel tank, a powerful new way to look at willpower that explains a lot about why change is hard to sustain and why students have difficulty maintaining focus. Until you read that chapter, remember this: Try to simplify your life a bit while attempting to make these changes. If you can, reduce the number of challenges you face so that you have the willpower to try a different approach.

So try to keep these ideas in mind as you read the book. I think it will greatly improve the chances for success.

And although it goes without saying, your kids are worth it.

Chapter 1: Don't Freak Out!

Why Staying Calm Does Wonders

One of the best ways to help your child be successful in school is to be under control. You notice that I didn't use the term "in control," but "under control." The difference is huge. By under control, I mean that **you** are in control **of yourself**, instead of someone else being in control.

When you are under control, you are saying that, regardless of what grades come home, regardless of how much homework gets done; you will decide how you feel and how you react. The benefits of staying calm, regardless of what happens, are many:

When we stay calm...

...we keep the focus on our child.

Why do we want our kids to do well in school? Seems a pretty obvious question. We want our kids to do well so that they will be successful. When we can stay calm, we are increasing the odds of success. The calmer I am, the more likely my kids' energies will be focused on their own actions instead of mine.

If I am not calm, then their thoughts and emotions are focused on me, instead. My emotional reactivity is saying to them: "Calm me down." So, instead of thinking about doing well in school for their own success, they think they should do well in school to change our emotions.

When we are over-anxious or losing our temper, we have lost a chance to help with self- motivation.

I remember a teenager I worked with who was struggling in school. Every time he missed a homework assignment or got a bad test grade, his mother went ballistic. When I would ask him why he wanted to do well in school, he would tell me “so that Mom won’t yell at me.” When I would ask if there were other reasons, he would just shrug. All he was focused on was doing well to calm his mother. So what do you think happened when he went away to college? You guessed it. He lasted one semester and dropped out with failing grades. He told me: “When I went to college, it was great! I was having fun, meeting new people, and the biggest part was not having Mom yell at me and check my homework all the time. The problem, though, was that I never really learned to study in order to be successful. The only reason I studied was to get Mom off my back.”

So when Mom was not around anymore, neither was his motivation to do well. He never learned self-motivation, only how to manage his mother’s moods.

When we send the message to our kids that it’s their job to calm us down, it sometimes makes the immediate situation better (like the story you just read), but doesn’t make any long-term change. Sometimes, though, it will have the exact opposite effect and make things worse. There are some kids who deal with the “calm me down” message very differently. Instead of rising to the occasion and working to calm their parents, they will do the exact opposite, guaranteeing that the parents will get even more upset and angry.

“Don’t Rattle My Cage!!”

I have a small zoo not far from where I live. When my kids were younger, we went there quite a bit. It was a great zoo because you could get really close to the animals. In one section, they had a large cage about the size of a small house, and it was filled with monkeys. These monkeys were pretty excitable, so about every six feet the owners had posted signs saying: “Please Do Not Rattle The Cage.” So

whenever a group of boys came by and saw that sign, you know exactly what they did. They rattled the cage! The sign was like a major invitation to the boys. They had to see what would happen, even though I'm sure they had a good idea that the monkeys would go nuts. And that's exactly what did happen. A boy would pick up a stick, rattle it against the bars, and the monkeys would go nuts.

Some kids view our own temper as parents in the same way. They get a bit of power out of being able to rattle our cage. Some kids, especially kids that have little motivation to do well in school, have given up trying to make their parents proud and instead focus on making them angry. "You get that upset over a C? Let's see what you do when I bring home an F." It's the proverbial cutting off their nose to spite their face. But in this case they are giving you the exact opposite of what you want just to spite you. They will give you the exact opposite of what you want just to prove that they cannot be controlled.

Especially with kids like this, staying calm can be very powerful. When we take our emotions out of the equation, they don't have anything to push against. If I, by being calm, send the message "I am going to be calm, regardless of how you do in school," I take away a huge motivating factor for underachieving. I have taken away the thing that they are rebelling against.

When we stay calm...

...it feels much, much better

I have never, ever felt better after losing my temper with my kids. Sure, I feel a bit of a release immediately after, but that feeling goes away very quickly. It's then replaced with guilt, regret, remorse, you name a negative feeling, and I'm probably feeling it. Sometimes I'll try to justify my actions by saying "Well, he deserved it." But I don't really believe that.

There has been some very compelling research about what happens to us when we lose our temper. It used to be thought that losing our temper was a type of “release.” That we were releasing the pressure, which would lead to calm. We used to think that if we bottled up our emotions, it would somehow be bad for us.

But recent research is actually telling us the opposite. In our brains, we have two major types of mood chemicals: endorphins and cortisol. Endorphins are the good mood chemicals. They help us relax, stay focused, decrease pain, and lots of other good stuff. Cortisol tends to do the opposite. They are released during stressful times and increase blood pressure, decrease mood, increase inflammation, and other not-so-good stuff.

When we lose our temper, the amount of endorphins being released in our brains decreases, and the amount of cortisol increases. The increase has been shown to last up to four hours after someone loses his temper. So for four hours after I lose my temper, it’s pretty likely that I’ll actually feel worse, not just because of guilt and regret, but because I just shot my brain with a big dose of bad mood.

When we stay calm...

...we keep the focus on the child, not us

Think about the last three times you have lost your temper about schoolwork. Go ahead and write down what you did or said each of those times:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now, think about what probably was going on in your child's head after each of your outbursts. I would predict that, when we lose our temper, it is pretty likely that our child's focus is now on us, not on himself. When I lose my cool with my kids, I have given them the option to no longer look at their own issues, but to look at my issues instead. If I yell: "Go upstairs and do your homework!" he might actually go upstairs, but instead of thinking about getting the work done, he will be thinking about what a jerk he has for a father. Instead of telling himself, "I've got to get this done," he will ask himself "Why is my dad so worried about school all the time?" Whenever we lose our temper, we have taken away a chance for us to lead.

A true leader is a motivator. Actually, a true leader is someone who can help foster self-motivation. When our kids do their schoolwork because they are worried about how we will react, they are certainly motivated. But they are "other-motivated," not "self-motivated." An other-motivated student has to be continually pushed to get work done and stay on task. A self-motivated student learns how to keep the motivation going without having to rely on someone else's actions to jump-start it. We are much more able to instill self-motivation by being calm than by being reactive.

What kind of wake do I want to leave?

The first time I heard someone ask this question, I thought they meant "wake" as in funeral. But it was actually referring to the wake a boat leaves. When a boat moves through the water, it leaves a series of waves behind it, called a wake. Up to a point, the faster a boat travels, the bigger a wake it leaves. There are places that have signs that say, "No Wake Zone," because a boat's wake can cause damage to the shore, damage to anchored boats, and can actually capsize canoes.

When I am calm, there's a pretty good chance I will leave a calm wake behind me. When I am not calm, my wake might cause some damage. I love this quote from Maya Angelou:

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

How to Stay Calm:

OK, Neil. Stay Calm. But that is easier said than done. It's actually **much** easier said than done. I'll put it right up there with some of my other easy to say and hard to do suggestions like eating right and exercising regularly. In order to stay calm we've got to look at what is churning us up in the first place.

Get Control of Your Worries

I would suggest that almost all of our feelings that cause us trouble when it comes to our kids' schoolwork is based on one emotion: worry.

Worry is a good emotion at times, especially when it activates us to do something different about our actions. For example, if I am worried that a project is not as good as it could be for work, my worry could motivate me to spend more time on it to make it better. If I'm worried that I haven't been paying enough attention to my wife, it could lead me to taking her out to dinner. So worries can be good, but only when we focus on ourselves and the worry lead us to change OUR actions.

But most of our worries, when it comes to schoolwork, are not based on our actions. Our worries are based on our kids' actions (or lack of). We worry about how their actions will affect their future. And often times we allow our worries to go unchecked, which will lead us to the "My child is going to live in my basement forever" thoughts.

Suggestion: Put a Fence Around Your Worries

Just like most dogs need a fence in order to stay where we want them to stay, our worries need a fence as well. If we don't put a fence around our worries, then we have lost control of them—and who know what type of havoc they might cause at that point and beyond?

Suggestion: Create a Pause Between Action and Reaction

Step 1 – What are your pre-temper indicators?

Think about yourself for a moment: What might be the first indications that you are getting ready to blow? Think about whether it might be a thought, an emotion, a physical sensation, or something else. For me, I notice that I begin to shake my head, like “I can't believe you just did that!” I will also sigh pretty loudly and then often say my kid's name in an unflattering tone!

What about your indicators? Write down the three things that happen inside when you are beginning to feel like you might lose your temper:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

My next suggestion is to write these three things down on a small card and keep it with you for the next week. Whenever you notice the card, review the three pre-temper indicators. The more that you take the time to remember what they are, the more likely you will be able to take the next step.

Step 2 – Pause

When you notice that your pre-temper indicators are happening, stop whatever you are doing. Don't say anything. Don't do anything. OK, if you are driving a car, keep driving! But wait, wait, wait, and don't say anything to your child at that moment.

For example, you are driving home from practice and are almost home when you child says: "Oh, by the way, I need to get some poster board for a project that's due tomorrow." Instead of yelling, "You're telling me this now???" just pause. Keep driving and wait until you have gotten completely calm before you decide how to respond. The only way you will be able to know which leadership style to use in this particular situation is by being calm. So take the time and calm down first.

Don't Freak Out Summary

There is no denying it: We are better leaders when we are calm. It's our responsibility to keep ourselves calm, not our child's responsibility.

The two ways to keep your worries under control:

1. Put a fence around your worries
2. Pause between action and reaction

Don't Freak Out Resources

One of the best ways to get the most out of this book is to personalize the information for your particular situation. I have added additional information online that can help you make the most of this book. For instance, I have developed a say to set goals for change. Go to

www.reducehomeworkstress.com/fence

for an exercise in putting a fence around your worries. On this web page, I will help you determine what your major worries are when it comes to your child; develop a strategy to stay calm, and a way to remind yourself of your goal.

Thanks for taking the time to read the sample chapter of “Homework – A Parent’s Guide To Helping Out Without Freaking Out!” The final book can be ordered online in early November 2011. Please go to: www.reducehomeworkstress.com for more information!

Neil