

Helpful homework habits

Parents lay down some rules to make sure students put priority on schoolwork

By GARY DEMUTH
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When it comes to doing homework at the Beck household, silence is golden.

When Ken Beck, 11, and his younger brother Sam, 9, sit down to do homework assignments, all distracting electronics are promptly shut off by their parents, Judy and Larry Beck.

"TV, radio and other electronics don't get turned on if there's work to be done," Judy Beck said.

Creating an environment conducive to doing homework isn't the only challenge faced by the Becks. Between sports events, fencing classes four times a week, Cub Scouts and church activities, the boys sometimes have to struggle to fit homework into their schedules.

"Homework is the number one priority, but sometimes we have to cram it in," Judy Beck said. "We've had some late nights to get things finished."

And often, there's a lot of homework to finish, according to Ken Beck, who will be a seventh-grader this fall at Lakewood Middle School.

"Sometimes, I have to stay up late to finish it," he said. "I had 14 book reports last year. I just have to plow through it."

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• Judy Beck

Homework can be a daunting task for families.

"It seems the expectations are higher now for what kids have to get accomplished in school," Judy Beck said. "I never had homework like this in elementary school."

Sam, who will be a fourth-grader this fall at Meadowlark Elementary School, often brings homework home four nights a week in reading, spelling and math, Judy Beck said.

So how can parents and students best navigate the homework maze?

Sandra Barker, a clinical social worker at Central Kansas Mental Health Center, has devised several guidelines for parents to encourage good study habits in their children.

"Sometimes kids are overbooked and don't make school and homework a

priority," she said. "There has to be a balance."

Barker's guidelines:

■ **Structure homework.** Keep school materials organized in a planner or calendar and schedule a time each day to complete homework.

■ **Develop a place in the home that promotes homework.** Sometimes that is the child's bedroom, or it might be the living room or a dining room table, where a child can be more easily supervised. Turn off the television, radio or stereo.

■ **Clarify your expectations.** Expect your children to do his or her best. Being overly critical can demoralize children and lead to apathy or resentment.

■ **Make sure children get enough sleep.** Proper sleep is critical to healthy functioning of mind and body. Avoid doing homework right before bedtime, especially with younger children.

■ **Talk with teachers.** Don't wait until parent-teacher conferences. Most teachers will share ideas and information year-round with parents.

Salina South High math teacher Candace Mahoney is a strong believer in open communication between parents, students and teachers.

"Taking time to talk to teachers right after school is important because a lot of teachers are available then," she said. "It's also important that parents find out when tests and quizzes are coming up, so they can review the material with their children."

In many cases, parents can go to individual schools' Web sites to check on their children's grades and track any missing homework assignments, Mahoney said.

Mahoney not only is a teacher, but also the mother of four children: three daughters, 17, 12 and 10, and a 14-year-old son. She knows firsthand that the amount of homework kids bring home can be daunting, especially when students have extracurricular activities, after-school jobs and family chores to distract them.

The best thing a parent can do for their children is to encourage them to do their best and be available to guide them and answer questions if needed.

"Encourage them to keep their grades up, but also let them know how proud you are of them for putting in the effort," she said.

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