

Type of maternal homework assistance affects child's persistence

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Type of maternal homework assistance affects child's persistence. Credit: UEF / Varpu Heiskanen

Different types of maternal homework assistance have a different impact on the child's way of completing school assignments in grades two to four of elementary school, according to a new study from the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Jyväskylä. Although homework assistance is intended to help the child, not all types of homework assistance lead to equally positive outcomes.

Researchers in the longitudinal First Steps Study found that the more opportunities for autonomous work the mother offered the child, the more task-persistent the child's behaviour. In other words, the child later worked persistently on his or her school assignments, which encouraged [mothers](#) to offer more opportunities for autonomous working.

However, when the mother provided assistance by concretely helping the child, the child's later behaviour became less task-persistent. This, in turn, made mothers offer more help. These associations between different types of maternal [homework](#) assistance and the child's task-persistent behaviour remained even after the child's skill level was controlled for.

"One possible explanation is that when the mother gives her child an opportunity to do homework autonomously, the mother also sends out a message that she believes in the child's skills and capabilities. This, in turn, makes the child believe in him- or herself, and in his or her skills and capabilities," says Associate Professor Jaana Viljaranta from the University of Eastern Finland.

Similarly, concrete homework assistance—especially if not requested by the child—may send out a message that the mother doesn't believe in the child's ability to do his or her homework.

Homework assistance should consider the child's needs

The findings also indicate that task-persistence is a mediating factor between different types of maternal homework assistance and the child's academic performance. This helps to understand some earlier findings on how some types of maternal homework assistance predict better academic performance than others. When the mother offers the child an

opportunity for autonomous working, the child will work persistently, which leads to better development of skills. If, however, the mother's homework assistance involves plenty of concrete help, the child will work less persistently, leading to poorer development of skills.

"It is important for parents to take the child's needs into consideration when offering homework assistance. Of course, parents should offer concrete help when their [child](#) clearly needs it. However, concrete help is not something that should be made automatically available in every situation—only when needed," Viljaranta says.

The First Steps Study is an extensive longitudinal study carried out by the University of Jyväskylä, the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Turku. The study examines student learning and motivation among approximately 2,000 children from kindergarten onwards. Children currently participating in the study are in secondary education.

More information: Jaana Viljaranta et al, Maternal homework assistance and children's task-persistent behavior in elementary school, *Learning and Instruction* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.learninstruc.2018.04.005](#)

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