

## NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

# Stop the Stalling

Tired of hearing “I’ll do it later?” Help your kids quit procrastinating.

BY SHARLENE K. JOHNSON

**B**rushing your teeth only takes two minutes. Really. So why is it that a 7-year-old can stretch even that basic task into a 20-minute stalling fest? To the parent of a budding procrastinator, few things are more frustrating than watching the creative delay tactics of a child who’s doing anything and everything other than what she’s supposed to be doing—whether that is getting ready for bed, picking up her toys, or sitting down to do homework. Sometimes it’s all you can do to stop yourself from screaming, “Just do it already!”

Procrastination often becomes a problem at this age because kids start to have more responsibilities and more power over their own time. Happily, you can nip it in the bud before it becomes a lifelong habit. “Procrastinating is clearly a learned behavior, and if something is learned, it can be unlearned,” says Joseph R. Ferrari, Ph.D., professor of psychology at DePaul University, in Chicago. How can you help? Think about what’s behind the behavior, and then try these strategies—starting today.

## “I DON’T WANT TO.”

Kids often procrastinate for the simple reason that they have different priorities than we do. So if your son’s must-do list includes beating his brother’s video-game score and doodling dragons on his notebook, studying spelling words and writing birthday thank-you notes are not going to get done without your involvement.

**How you can help:** Forget about making your child want to do the more important task. Things like good grades and manners



are abstract concepts to school-age kids, and no amount of nagging is going to change that. Instead, move the task up on your child’s priority list by connecting it to a privilege he values, suggests George M. Kapalka, Ph.D., author of *Parenting Your Out-of-Control Child*. For example, if you allow TV and video games only after the day’s homework is completed, your child will learn that privileges come with responsible behavior.

## “I CAN’T DO IT.”

Don’t take a “can’t” at face value—find out what’s really going on behind your child’s negativity. If the project is something you know she can do—say, cleaning her room—she may be dragging her feet because the size of the task seems daunting and she doesn’t know where to begin. But if she’s perpetually putting off homework and seems to struggle with what she does do, you need to investigate. Procrastination with schoolwork can sometimes be a

★ *Left unchecked, procrastination can lead to real problems with jobs and relationships as your child gets older.*

sign of a larger problem, such as a learning difficulty, according to Dr. Kapalka.

**How you can help:** First discuss the situation with your child's teacher. If you've ruled out a possible learning problem and "I can't do it" really means "I'm intimidated but totally capable," it's a matter of teaching Project Management 101. "Show her how to break things down into small tasks," says Rita Emmett, author of *The Procrastinating Child*. Instead of saying "Clean your room," help her identify each step along the way—making the bed, picking up the trash, clearing off the dresser—and then ask her to focus on one thing. "Tell her to ignore everything else," says Emmett. "If you're picking up clothes, this is not the time to stop and sort through your books." The same goes for multiple homework assignments: Ask her to pick one very specific task and forget the rest until that one is done.

## "I HAVE PLENTY OF TIME."

Yes, your son really does plan to put on his pj's and get ready for bed—in his own good time. Truth is, it's easy for children to postpone things indefinitely when they don't feel any sense of urgency (yours doesn't count).

**How you can help:** Help your child set deadlines, and then dole out extra incentives for finishing before the agreed time. "We're quick to punish for getting things done late, but we're not always quick to praise for getting things done early," says Dr. Ferrari. If your son is supposed to be ready for bed by 8 P.M. and he's done by 7:45 P.M., you might say, "We have time to read an extra book tonight because you got ready for bed so quickly." Eventually, he'll learn that doing something on time is good, but doing it early is even better.

## "I MIGHT DO IT WRONG."

Your child may be putting off learning or doing something new—even things she enjoys—because she's afraid of not doing it perfectly. So even if your daughter begged for music lessons, she might postpone practice because she doesn't play as well as she thinks she should or imagined she would.

**How you can help:** "Let your kid know that making mistakes is part of doing anything well," says Emmett. "Excellence is doing our best, and that's achievable. Perfection isn't." Also make sure that you yourself aren't caught up in results over process. Emphasize the point that the getting there is more than half the battle in anything you undertake.

## Pick Up the Pace

"You have to help children learn to be organized and manage their time, but you don't want to be too rigid," says Laura Stack, a time-management expert in Highland Ranch, Colorado. Here's the strategy that works with her three children, ages 6, 8, and 12:

### ► Set clear expectations.

Print a chart that outlines each child's responsibilities every day of the week, from piano practice to putting away the silverware. Your kids know exactly what they have to do each day. When it's done, they check it off.

### ► Encourage them to do the worst first.

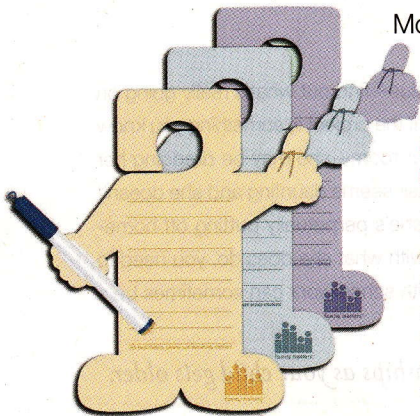
Tell them to get dressed before breakfast and that homework must always be completed before the TV is turned on.

### ► Make it easy.

If your kid is having trouble getting ready for the day, create a checklist with pictures of things to do in the morning. Sometimes what appears to be procrastination is really confusion.

# Time Managers

Motivate kids to get things done with these clever helpers.



### Erasable Door Reminders

Hang one on every doorknob, and kids can forget about saying "I forgot." (\$10 for five; [dayrunner.com/familymatters](http://dayrunner.com/familymatters))



### Ladybug Timer

Encourage your child to "beat the clock" with the promise of a small reward if she finishes the job before the timer dings. (\$8; [theorganizedparent.com](http://theorganizedparent.com))

### Closet Clothing Organizer

Stash five complete outfits, plus shoes and accessories, in this hanging organizer to help kids make quick work out of getting dressed for school. (\$25; [theorganizedparent.com](http://theorganizedparent.com))

