How to help with a science fair project without doing it

Peabody blog · Science · updated 2026-10-30

How much a parent should help with a science fair project at each grade: what to do with your hands, what to leave to your child, and questions that teach.

Keep your hands on the safety and the schedule, and keep your child's hands on the science. You can read the steps aloud, hold the ruler, pour anything hot, drive to the store and ask questions. What your child should do is pick the question with you, make the guess, do the measuring, write the numbers and words, and decide what the results mean. How much of that they can do alone depends on their grade, and that's fine.

I built the science fair pages on Peabody with this split in mind. Every project marks the steps a grown-up does (cutting with a knife, pouring hot water), reads every other step aloud so a child can follow without you, and leaves the "because" in the hypothesis blank for the child. Here's how to think about the rest.

What a fair expects at each grade

- The question · 1st–3rd: one thing changed, one thing counted or seen · 4th–6th: one thing changed, one thing measured with units · 7th and up: then a second variable
- Tries · 1st–3rd: three at each level (one is fine at a first fair) · 4th–6th: three at each level · 7th and up: three or more
- The table · 1st–3rd: levels and tries, numbers or pictures · 4th–6th: units in the header and a mean column · 7th and up: a mean for every level of both tests
- A grown-up's hands · 1st–3rd: read, write down, hold the ruler · 4th–6th: check and ask questions · 7th and up: advise; the child runs it

That last row is the one to watch. With a first grader you'll write a lot of the words down, and that's normal: the words should still be theirs, even if your hand held the pen. By middle school, you should mostly be a person they ask.

Your jobs

- Safety. Anything hot, sharp or plugged in is yours. The projects on Peabody mark these steps; follow the marks.
- The calendar. Children are bad at working back from a date. Keep a project on the science fair page, set the fair day, and Peabody spreads five jobs (gather, test, repeat, write, board) across the days left.
- Supplies. Nearly every Peabody project uses what's already in a kitchen or junk drawer. The cost is on each project's page.

• Questions. Your best tool. See below.

Their jobs

• The question. Pick it together, but let them choose. Pick my project asks four questions with three big boxes each, so even a young child can do the choosing.
• The guess and the because. Wrong is fine. A hypothesis is a guess you test.
• The measuring and the writing down. Even if it takes three times as long.
• The board's words and drawings. One district's rules tell its judges to favour children's own language and drawings. Judges notice.

Questions that teach (and are what the judge will ask)

• "What are you changing? Just one thing?"
• "What are you keeping the same? Why does that matter?"
• "How many times will you try it?"
• "What do your numbers say?"
• "Were you right? How do you know?"
• "What would you test next?"

Asking these at the kitchen table is the best judge practice there is. Peabody's judge's practice asks them too, about the child's own project.

When it goes wrong

The car rolls off the table, the beans don't sprout, the hypothesis was wrong. All of these are results. Resist fixing it for them; instead ask what they think happened and whether to do that try again. Write it in the logbook. "One try was odd, so I did it again" is a sentence judges like.

Try tonight

Sit down with your child and the grown-ups' page open on your phone and the science fair page open on theirs. Let them tap through the picker while you read the safety marks on the project it picks. Agree the fair day, set it, and look at tomorrow's job together.

Questions grown-ups ask

My child wants me to do the board. Should I?

Help them cut and glue; let them write and draw. A wobbly board in their words beats a perfect one in yours.

Is it OK to choose the project for them?

Narrow it to two or three that fit your time and supplies, then let them choose. Ownership is half the point.

What if they lose interest halfway?

Shorten it. Three tries at three levels and an honest conclusion is a complete project. The weekend projects are there for exactly this.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up, and nothing your child taps on the science fair pages is sent anywhere. The library has stories for when the project's done.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-to-help-with-a-science-fair-project