NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Homework: A Guide for Parents

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Homework has a long and surprisingly controversial history in the United States. Those who argue in favor of homework see it as a way to ensure practice and mastery of critical academic skills as well as a key way for parents to stay informed about their children's education. Those who criticize homework suggest it may lead to boredom and keep children from participating in useful leisure and community activities. While there are reasonable arguments on both sides of the debate, surveys show that parents overwhelmingly support homework because it gives them a way to monitor the quality of their children's education.

BACKGROUND

Research shows that the benefits of homework are more evident at the high school level than at the elementary or middle school level (Cooper, 1989). There is little question that parental involvement in homework has a strong positive effect (Van Voorhis, 2003; Xu, 2004). In fact, some research suggests that parental involvement in homework has a more powerful influence on achievement than either social class or the parents' own educational level. While parents may be tempted to throw up their hands when their children resist homework or lack the skills to do it, school success may depend on parents' willingness to help overcome obstacles to homework completion.

REASONABLE HOMEWORK EXPECTATIONS

It is generally agreed that children are expected to devote increasingly more time to homework as they get older. A general rule of thumb that is easy to remember is the expectation that children do 10 minutes of homework for each grade level (Henderson, 1996). Thus, first graders would be expected to do about 10 minutes of homework, second graders 20 minutes, third graders 30 minutes, and so on. If your child is spending more than 10 minutes per grade level on work at night, then you may want to talk with your child's teacher about adjusting the workload.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Parents can help children succeed with homework by providing clear messages about the importance of homework and specific support strategies.

Key Messages About Homework

There are three key messages about homework that parents need to give their children:

Homework is an important part of school. Expect children to complete homework and hand it in when it is due. Holding children accountable for homework builds responsibility and time management skills.

Parental support will be provided as needed. Some children are genuinely overwhelmed by homework, either because they find it too difficult or because they don't know how to work on their own. However, children are less likely to become discouraged or frustrated when parents offer encouragement and assure them that help is available when they get stuck. For some children, it is helpful just to have a parent nearby while they work.

Parents will not do homework for their children. This message lets children know that the parent role is to encourage and to help them get unstuck, while at the same time communicating that homework is designed to help *children* master skills that parents already attained.

Strategies for Supporting Homework

Beyond these messages, there are important ways parents can help children with homework:

Check in with your children every day. Studies show that students who have parental assistance in completing homework spend more time on homework. Parents can help motivate their children and give them strategies for sustaining attention and combating the negative emotions often associated with homework. While some children, particularly as they get older, resist help or supervision from parents, minimally parents can ask them about homework and plans for completing it. ''What do you have to do and when are you going to do it?'' should be a daily mantra for parents as they help their children plan for homework.

Establish clear homework routines. Tasks are easiest to accomplish when they are tied to specific routines. By establishing daily routines for homework completion, parents will not only make homework go more smoothly, but they will also foster a sense of order that children can apply to later life, including college and work. Setting up homework routines early in elementary school can build habits that will make it easier for children to adjust to the greater homework demands that middle school and high school present. The steps to establishing homework routines include:

- Identify a location where homework will be done.
- Make sure children have all the materials needed to complete homework assignments (e.g., pencils, erasers, paper, dictionary, calculator).
- Decide on the best time to do homework (e.g., right after school, just before or after dinner).
- Make plans for completing homework (i.e., list all the tasks to be accomplished, identify when children will begin each task, and have your children estimate how long it will take to complete each task).

Supervise but don't micromanage. Some children will need more help with homework than others, but a general rule of thumb is *provide the minimum help necessary for the child to be successful*. In other words, parents should do no more than is necessary for their children to succeed—but they should do enough to ensure success. If you feel you are doing your child's work for her because it's the only way she can succeed, you should talk with your child's teacher about modifying the work so the child does not require as much support at home.

Help children establish and maintain organizational systems. Help your children keep workspaces neat and set up systems to keep track of homework assignments. Homework sessions should end with children:

- Placing the homework in the appropriate folder or notebook and backpack
- Cleaning off the desk or workspace so that the next homework session can begin in an orderly environment

Parents may need to supervise their children during this phase of the homework routine, even after they have learned to do their homework by themselves.

Look for others to help. Homework can be time-consuming for both parents and children. Parents may find it helpful to take turns supervising homework, alternating by nights or by subject matter. They may also be able to enlist the support of other family members, including grandparents and older siblings. Some children are more cooperative working with other kids rather than adults, and parents may find it helpful to hire a high school student or pay an older sibling to supervise homework sessions.

Use incentives if necessary. For children who are not motivated by grades, parents may need to look for other rewards to help them get through their nightly homework routine. Incentive systems fall into two categories: simple and elaborate.

Simple incentive systems include:

- Giving children something to look forward to once homework is complete
- Building in breaks along the way (either after a set period of time or after a set amount of work is accomplished)
- Building in choice, such as the order in which they will complete tasks or the schedule they will follow

Elaborate incentive systems involve more planning and more work on the part of parents, but in some cases are necessary to address more significant homework problems. These systems work best when parents and children develop them together. Allowing children to have input gives them a sense of control and ownership, making the system more likely to succeed. Steps to follow in creating a more formal incentive system include:

- Describe the problem behaviors (e.g., putting off homework until the last minute, complaining at length about homework, etc.).
- Set a goal (e.g., completing all homework by 7 p.m., complaining no more than once per night about homework).

- Decide on possible rewards or penalties (e.g., the chance to watch a favorite television show or play video games).
- Write a homework contract, identifying what everyone will do (parents and children) to carry out their part of the agreement.

Establish clear communication channels with teachers. For some students, this may take the form of a notebook going back and forth between home and school, or having both parents and teachers sign off on assignment books to ensure children are adequately supervised at home and at school. For most students, this level of communication will not be required, but parents should take advantage of school open houses and parent–teacher conferences, not only to understand the teacher's homework policies and practices but also as ways to communicate to their children that they consider homework an important part of their education.

Work with school personnel to establish necessary supports within the school. Parents alone cannot solve all homework problems. When students do not understand the assignment or lack the skills or knowledge to complete it, parents will have to reach out to teachers for assistance. Some students have trouble remembering to write down assignments, bring home all necessary materials, and/or hand in homework; some have trouble remembering due dates.

Often, parents and teachers assume that children are being willful in forgetting assignments or failing to bring home necessary materials. Rewards or punishments alone will not likely resolve the problem. While either may be an appropriate place to start, they are often insufficient for youngsters with attention or working memory deficits. Cues and supports need to be provided within the school setting. Students who have difficulty remembering homework assignments benefit from:

- Teachers who establish clear homework routines
- Supervision each day to be sure they have handed in all the homework from the night before, have written down new assignments, and bring home necessary materials
- Working with a coach to help develop planning, time and task management skills, and organizational skills necessary to stay on top of assignments

If failure to complete homework consistently results in failing grades or grades well below the student's potential, it might be helpful to arrange for after-school help from teachers, tutoring either through the school or privately, or referral to a teacher assistance team or to special education if it appears that an educational disability may be the underlying cause of homework difficulties. If a student has a disability, homework supports should be built into IEPs or 504 plans.

For more specific guidance on how to work with teachers to resolve homework problems, obtain a copy of the U.S. Department of Education publication, *Helping Your Child with Homework.* See Recommended Resources below.

ADAPTATIONS AND FURTHER SUPPORT

Suggestions provided in this handout will need to be adapted to the particular age of the child. Parents need to provide greater supervision and involvement with children during the elementary school years, while by high school, most parents find they can pull back and let their children take more responsibility for their homework schedules. Middle school is often the turning point, and parents will need to make decisions about their level of involvement in homework based on the developmental level and academic needs of their children. At any age, if problems arise that seem intractable, parents should consult their child's teacher or a school psychologist.

REFERENCES

Cooper, H. (1989). *Homework*. New York: Longman.

Henderson, M. (1996). *Helping your student get the most out of homework*. Chicago: National Parent-Teacher Association.

Van Voorhis, F. L. (2003). Interactive homework in middle schools: Effects on family involvement and science achievement. *Journal of Educational Research*, *96*, 323–338.

Xu, J. (2004). Family help and homework management in urban and rural secondary schools. *Teachers College Record*, *106*, 1786–1803.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

Dawson, P. (2001). Homework problems and solutions. Unpublished manual. [For information on obtaining a copy, contact Peg Dawson at her e-mail address, pegdawson@comcast.net.]

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2008). *Smart but scattered: The revolutionary "executive skills" approach to helping kids reach their potential*. New York: Guilford Press.

Garrison, D. R. (2005). *Ending the homework wars*. Cameron Park, CA: Leading Edge Press.

Schumm, J. S. (2005). *How to help your child with homework: The complete guide to encouraging good study habits and ending the homework wars*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

U.S. Department of Education (2005). *Helping your child with homework* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Author. Available: http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/homework/index.html

Online for Parents

National Education Association, *Help your student get the most out of homework*. Available: http://www.nea.org/parents/homework.html

Online for Students

Boston Public Library, *Kids page, Homework Help*: http://www.bpl.org/KIDS/HomeworkHelp.htm

HomeworkSpot: http://www.homeworkspot.com

Infoplease, *Homework Center*: http://www.infoplease.com/homework

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