

Homework Survival Guide: Parent Handout

A Place to Work

- **Find the right place.** In some families, having a central location, where all children in the family do their homework works best. This may be the dining room or kitchen table. In other families, each child has her own study place, usually at a desk in the bedroom. What works for you depends on your children. Some kids do best under the watchful eye of a parent, in which case the dining room or kitchen may work best. Others need a quiet of their bedrooms to avoid distractions. Some kids like to work with the radio on (and this helps them focus), while others do worse with this kind of background noise. Think about possible distractions that will need to be avoided (a nearby television, the telephone, etc.) when planning your child's workspace.

You may want to conduct "experiments" with your child to determine what setting works best under what circumstances. Try several options for a week each and see how your child does (rate the quality of the homework completed, the time it took to finish, and the child's subjective reaction).

- **Gather necessary materials**
Youngsters can waste a lot of time tracking down things like pencils, paper, rulers, etc. when beginning their homework. To avoid this, stock your child's study area with these materials and any other he is likely to need, such as a dictionary, highlighters, pens, scissors, glue, tape, colored pencils, stapler and staples, etc.

It may also be helpful to set up file folders for each subject your child is taking in school to keep track of necessary papers, such as long-term assignment directions, tests and homework that have been passed back (to help in studying for the next test), etc. These folders should not be used for storing homework, since your child is likely to then leave it at home and forget to take it to school. Completed homework should be placed in the child's backpack, trapper keeper, or notebook as soon as it is finished to ensure it gets to school.

A plastic bin may be an ideal place to store study materials; if you have more than one child, you may want to have one bin for each child. The advantage to this is that these are portable - just in case you have a child whose preferred study style is to work in a different place each night!

You may also want to have a second container (such as a dishpan) which your child can "dump" their school things in as soon as they get home from school. This will help avoid last minute frantic searches for permission slips, library books, messages from the principal, notices of meetings, etc.

Organizing Homework/Setting Priorities

A homework session should begin by reviewing what the day's assignments are. It is probably a good idea to draw up a list of assignments on a separate sheet of paper, so that you can then help your child prioritize and break down longer tasks into shorter ones. The steps to follow might be:

1. List out assignments.
2. Make sure the child brought home the necessary books, work sheets, etc.
3. Break longer tasks into sub tasks.
4. Check to see what other tasks the child has to do which should be included on the list - including

long term assignments, and tests later in the week for which the child should begin studying. Add these to the homework list.

5. Have the child decide what order she will complete the work. A good rule of thumb is to have the child begin and end with assignments she considers "easy," sandwiching more difficult assignments in between.
6. Estimate how much time it will take to complete the work.
7. Make sure you have allowed enough time for the child to complete all his homework allowing for break time as necessary.

Sometimes it is difficult for kids to complete homework because of other obligations they may have - sports events, doctors' appointments, scout meetings, chores, family events, etc. You may find it helpful to put together a weekly calendar to keep track of these activities. Once a week (Sunday afternoon sounds good), sit down with your child and fill out (or review) the weekly calendar together. Then, as you plan your homework time each day, you can reference this calendar to allow time for the other activities your child is involved with.

Getting Started

As mentioned above, it is usually best to have the child begin with a task that they consider "easy." Some children may want to start with the hardest task first to get it over with, and this is acceptable unless the child has a very difficult time getting started and will dawdle or avoid the difficult assignment even though it was his/her choice to start with it.

For many youngsters, just getting started on homework seems like an insurmountable obstacle. We have several suggestions for handling this problem:

1. Have the child specify exactly when she will begin her homework and then reward her for getting to work within five minutes of the time she has specified.
2. Sit with your child for the first five minutes to make sure he gets off to a good start.
3. Talk with your child about her assignments before beginning. This is particularly important for written language assignments or more open-ended tasks. Children often need to be "primed" or activated for their best efforts to come out. This is particularly true for youngsters who may have difficulties with verbal fluency or word retrieval.
4. Orient your child to his assignment; walk him through the first one or two problems or items to make sure he understands what he is supposed to do.
5. Build in a short break relatively quickly, if getting started is a problem.

Getting Through It

Make sure adequate breaks are built in. Many children have a great deal of difficulty working for long stretches of time on homework without a break. Better to plan for a two hour homework session with frequent breaks built in than to try to cram homework into a one-hour, non-stop session. You can use a kitchen timer to keep breaks to a reasonable length (e.g., 5-10 minutes). Breaks might be used to get a snack, play a few minutes of a Nintendo game, or to shoot baskets or do some other form of exercise. Breaks should be scheduled when tasks get accomplished rather than after a set period of time, otherwise

your child can daydream the time away and still get his break. One child we know arranges homework sessions between TV shows he likes to watch. Thus, his schedule on any given day might look like this:

- 4:30 math
- 5:00 TV show
- 5:30 language arts
- 6:00 dinner
- 6:30 social studies
- 7:00 TV show
- 8:00 science
- 8:30 TV show
- 9:00 bed time

If he hasn't finished whatever task he was working on when his television program comes on, he either misses the program or tapes it watch at a later time.

Other suggestions for getting through homework:

1. Make a game out of work completion: have the child estimate how long it will take to complete an assignment, have her "place bets," set a kitchen timer where the child can't see how much time it was set for and challenge her to "beat the clock," or use a stopwatch to see how quickly she can do an assignment, one math problem, etc.
2. If a task takes longer than your child can sustain (even if it's broken down into smaller steps) or if he "gets stuck," have him switch to another assignment rather than stop working altogether.
3. Use a "beep tape" to help him stay focused. This is an audio tape which sounds an electronic tone at random intervals. When the child hears the tone, she is to ask herself, "Was I paying attention?" She can be given a form to fill out to accompany the tape. This has been quite effective with children who daydream or who get pulled off task easily. often without even realizing it. The tone brings them back to task. Alternatively, some parents make "nag tapes" where they tape messages at random intervals, again to prompt the child back to task.

Long Term Assignments

These are often the hardest homework assignments for youngsters to keep track of and to complete.

1. **Know what assignments are due when.**
In addition to having a weekly assignment book where daily homework is recorded, it is also advisable to have a monthly calendar on which long term assignments can be written as soon as they are assigned. With younger or more disorganized students parents may want to periodically send in this calendar and ask the classroom teacher to verify that it is up-to-date. Older students should be able to keep these themselves, transferring items as necessary from their weekly assignment book.
2. **Break long term assignments into sub tasks.**
Sit down with your child and read over directions or discuss the nature of the long term assignment. Make out a list of the steps necessary to complete the assignment. If desired, this can

be a fairly lengthy outline with notes attached providing more guidance about what is to be included for each step. For written reports, for instance, the steps might include taking notes, generating an outline, writing the introduction, the sections of the report and the summary, preparing a bibliography, drawing any necessary maps and charts, proofreading, preparing the final draft, and making a cover.

3. **Draw up a time line.**

Once the outline is developed, each sub task should than have due date attached to it and should be written on the monthly calendar.

Care should be taken to ensure adequate time is available for each step. A long report will require that more time be devoted to each step, particularly preparing the final draft and proofreading. If the long term assignment requires that your child use the library, visit a museum, or gather information from outside sources, include these trips on the time line, with dates attached. If materials need to be purchased, the time when this will happen should also be identified.

In the beginning, your child will probably need extensive help breaking down his assignments and developing a realistic time line. As time goes on, he can assume increasing amounts of responsibility for these. Time management is a skill of life-long importance. Developing increasing independence in planning for and executing long term assignments is an early opportunity for a child to acquire this valuable skill.

Incentive Systems

For many youngsters, homework is an exceedingly difficult task representing an ordeal they perceive at times to be insurmountable. For these children all the organization and planning in the world may not be enough to get them through the daily grind of homework. In this case, an incentive system may need to be put in place to make homework completion a more attractive task for them.

If this is the right approach for your child, we recommend a system whereby your child can earn points for completing tasks or for demonstrating other appropriate behaviors required for successful homework completion. The points can then be traded in for daily, weekly or long-term reinforcers. Steps involved in setting up a point system include:

1. With your child, draw up a list of privileges or rewards your child would like to earn. daily rewards might include an extra half hour of television, a special snack, the chance to stay up an extra half hour before bed. Weekly rewards might include a trip to the mall or McDonald's or the chance to go to a video arcade or rent a video. Longer term rewards might be going to a movie with a friend, inviting a friend over for the night, or the chance to buy a small toy.
2. Now, again with your child, draw up a list of "jobs" for which your child can earn points. Related to homework, such jobs might include:
 - Writing down homework assignments
 - Bringing home necessary homework materials
 - Getting homework started on time
 - Completing work within the specified homework time
 - Finishing homework without reminders (nags) from parents
 - Finishing homework without constant parental supervision or assistance
 - Completing work with an acceptable standard of accuracy (reviewed and defined ahead

of time for each assignment)

- Proofreading written work/checking math problems
 - Handing in homework completed and on time
 - Successfully solving homework problems (e.g., calling friends or teacher when an assignment is not understood, knowing what to do when books or other necessary papers were left at school, discussing homework problems with the teacher or going to the teacher for extra help).
3. Decide how many points each of the homework "jobs" can earn and how much each of the privileges or rewards will cost. To determine how much the rewards should cost, add up the number of points you feel your child will earn each day. Be sure that your child has about one third of her points free to save up for special privileges.
 4. Get a notebook, and set it up with five columns, one each for the date, the item, deposits, withdrawals, and the running balance.
 5. Once a month or so, review the list of jobs and privileges and revise as necessary.

Described above is a fairly elaborate system that may be necessary with those children who are highly resistant to doing homework. When the problem is not considered to be so extreme, a more informal system (such as the opportunity to earn a small reward after all the homework is done each day) may be all that is necessary. Children can also be taught to reward themselves as they complete tasks, both major and minor ones. They can also adjust the reward depending on the size or difficulty of the task; half an hour of reading is worth a 10 minute break to shoot baskets; completing a term paper is worth a bike ride to the store to buy a favorite snack.

With some children, the use of natural or logical consequences alone may be sufficient. Not being able to watch a favorite TV program because the homework wasn't done in time is a logical consequence that arises from dawdling over assignments. For some children, a failing grade is a natural consequence for failure to complete homework, and this alone will be sufficient to induce them to work. However, it has been our experience that parents should not assume that fear of a failing grade alone will be sufficient to induce their child to do his homework.

Parents should resist the temptation simply to punish children for their failure to do homework. While it may make sense to cut down on the number of outside activities or the amount of time their child is allowed to play with friends after school in order to allow for sufficient time to do homework, a system in which incentives are built in for homework completion will likely be more effective than a system of negative consequences alone. Most children who have problems doing homework are not happy about their situation or the fights they draw their parents into. Rather, it seems to take these children considerably more effort to get down to work and to sustain attention to homework than it does the average child. For this reason, it makes sense to reward them for the extra effort it takes.

Parent Role: Help or Supervise?

Many parents, particularly those of children who may be struggling in school, wrestle with the question of how much help they should give their children on homework. The following suggestions are offered:

1. It is a good idea for parents to discuss with their children the nature of the assignment, to make

sure they understand what they are supposed to do, and to guide them as they do the first one or two items of an assignment. Parents should not have to remain by their children's side throughout the entire session. If your child seems to require this, then you should probably build in an incentive for working independently to wean your child off reliance on you for support or assistance. Setting the kitchen timer and telling your child to wait until it rings to show you her work or to ask questions is one way to gradually increase independence.

2. Parents may want to review homework assignments to check for either neatness or accuracy. If the handwriting is illegible (and your child is capable of writing more neatly without an inordinate amount of effort), it is acceptable to ask him to rewrite the assignment. If your child is ready to learn to proofread or to check for mistakes himself, you may want to hand a paper back with a comment such as, "I found three mistakes on your math page," or "Please look for spelling errors." If he's not ready for this, point to the specific mistakes and ask him to correct them (without giving him the correct answer).
3. Parents should keep in mind the overall purpose of homework: to give children independent practice with a skill they have already been taught. Parents should not have to teach the skills necessary for their children to complete their homework successfully. A good rule of thumb is that children should be able to get at least 70 percent of a homework assignment correct working on their own for it to be within an appropriate instructional range. If your child cannot achieve that level of success without a great deal of support from you, then the homework she is being assigned is probably inappropriate. Make an appointment with your child's teacher to ask for assignments that will better give her the practice she needs.
4. You may also want to talk to the teacher if your child appears to be spending an inordinate amount of time on homework even though he is successful at it. Ask the teacher how much time a child should be spending on homework, and if your child is working much more than that, ask for an adjustment in workload, such as reduced assignments.