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HELPING WITH HOMEWORK

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Homework can be very challenging and potentially frustrating for children with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder. Doing homework requires attention and concentration, motivation, independence, organization, and parental support at a time when the child and family are often most harried or vulnerable. Many times there are competing activities (watching television or playing with a friend) which a youngster would much prefer to do. Conflict between child and parent about doing homework can expose underlying problems involving low frustration tolerance, parental overprotection or over-control, child noncompliance, etc. It is not uncommon for either the parent or the child to get angry about doing homework or to come to tears during the homework process. In helping parents and children with homework, we would encourage you to consider the following ideas or issues.

Please consider carefully the role of homework. Research shows that the best homework assignments are ones that allow for family participation or ones which help students relate school learning to life experience. Some degree of practice or mastery experience at home is also helpful. Often the best homework assignment is one which allows the student to be better prepared for the next day's lesson. One ADHD student who would get very frustrated by math story problems done in class did very well once he and his mother were able to work on the problems the night before class. He felt more confident and less anxious and did better in class.

Discuss homework philosophy with the parents and students, including how much time should be spent, what type of support from the parent is needed, mastery vs. learning homework, etc. Establish a homework routine so that students and parents know when things will be assigned and when they are due. Try to be consistent about the amount of work assigned from week to week and make sure that there is the opportunity for the children to work on their homework over the weekend if they wish (some families have very busy schedules during the week).

Please make sure that the work is within the student's ability level. Sometimes students are asked to complete homework assignments that they do not understand or cannot complete independently. Have parents review the work with the student before they begin, encouraging the children to ask questions before they start and then again after they have spent time working on a specific portion of the assignment. Some students need to do homework that is very easy, so that they can develop confidence and build positive habits and attitudes about doing the assignments.

Parents should work with their children to set goals for how much work is to get done. They should put the goals down on paper. It helps to start with very modest homework goals, a specific amount of work that can easily be accomplished in a particular period of time.

It is helpful to have a guideline regarding the amount of time a student should spend doing homework; have families set goals in terms of time spent. Keep the initial time goals short, with the child deciding whether to continue or stop when the goal is met. At first, it may be necessary that the families start off with only five or ten minutes of work at a time. If a half hour needs to be done a night, then it may take two or three sessions throughout the afternoon and evening. Have parents reevaluate the goals with their children at the end of each session to consider whether it was appropriate and beneficial.

Talk with the class about the different types of work environments: non-distracting situations (bedroom vs. living room vs. kitchen), adults present or not present, activity in the same room, background noise or music, etc. Draw parallels between work environments at home and at school. Talk about how the work area should be set up, what kinds of materials are necessary to get the homework completed. Encourage the children to experiment with different homework environments and report back on which one works best for which type of assignment.

Have parents review the work first and identify where students will need help ahead of time. Encourage the students to get started with what they can do and not focus on what they cannot do. If possible, review some of the more complex homework assignments with the students before sending them home.

Consider having parents set a goal for the number of questions or amount of time that the child can spend without help. Evaluating the purpose of the students' questions and discussing with the child whether they were "necessary" or "unnecessary" can help. Sometimes parents can set aside time to play a game with their child to match the time saved by asking only for necessary help. Some students do better asking their questions before they start their homework; some do better saving their questions for the end.

There should be a classroom routine for tracking and turning in assignments. Some teachers have developed a system where a student is given the job of writing down the master list of assignments due. That list is then posted on the window so that a student who forgets to bring his assignment sheet home can return after school, with mom or dad if necessary, and find out what the work is. Parents can also stop by after work to check to see what needs to be done. By the way, parents should consider charging their children for the time wasted if they need to drive their children back to school ("You owe me the ten minutes I spent driving, and you can pay me back by doing ____").

Perhaps the most important aspect of completing homework is a home routine or schedule. Students do better with a regular study time and place. They should get in the habit of doing work every day, even if there is no homework. Parents should establish with the child that there will be a time to read, write a letter, or study even if homework is not assigned. Having an agreed upon time for when homework gets done avoids or limits many arguments. It helps the children get into the right habit and it encourages a more positive attitude. (Parents should not assume that the best time to do homework is right after school, since some children need the break.)

Parents may need to be nearby but busy doing something productive. Having people working around us helps us stay on task. Working in front of a mirror is an interesting way to keep some children on task. Other children do well with a tape that contains beeps or other reminders to stay on task.

Sometimes the child is afraid that he or she will not get good feedback regarding the homework. Encourage parents to review work but to leave corrections and evaluations of assignments to the teacher. This helps establish some comfort with the product. It may help identify unresolved issues the child has about not wanting to turn work in to their teacher or not wanting friends to see the work they have done.

Review assignment completion progress with the student and parents. Frequent communication avoids too many late assignments and the pressure of falling behind. If there is a battle at home regarding homework, a teacher can often help the family to problem solve and find alternative ways of getting the work done (e.g., in the library after school, in a study hall). Sometimes homework hassles are old habits and parent-child interaction patterns which can be broken by changing the person who works with the child. Sometimes a tutor can be helpful.

Remember that uncompleted schoolwork may also be uncompleted homework. It is often counterproductive to send the work home to be done after a long school day. Home projects are sometimes better learning experiences than the homework that simply mirrors classroom assignments.

Getting homework done is only one phase of the process. Turning the work in is important too. To maximize return of the homework, parents can be asked to have their children place assignments in the same place every night. This increases the chance that the child will remember to bring it to school (put it near the door, by the lunch box, on the counter). It also helps to keep track of the assignments done at home so parents can be sure that they are reviewed after being checked (it also helps document that the homework was done in case it is not getting done in class).

Some students color-code paper for keeping track of assignments in notebooks. They may need a great deal of support in actually handing in the homework; some tend to keep the assignments buried in their backpacks. It helps if there is a routine that the class follows for turning in assignments; there should be a time and place where the students turn in their work on a daily basis. Even if there is no homework due, the children should get into the habit of turning in something (perhaps a note describing something they have read or a project that is coming due).

Some children need to practice the routines for writing down assignments, bringing them home and turning them in the next day. It may not be enough to talk about the routines, or even go through them once a day. Sometimes parents or school staff can actually rehearse with the children, using imagery and role playing to help build the habit.

Suggest family reward systems for completing homework. Ideally, the reward should relate to the homework topic. For example, doing math leads to an opportunity to play Monopoly or Yahtzee. Practice spelling, and you play Body Boggle or Monopoly. Read about Babe Ruth, and you watch a ball game.

Have parents arrange for fun time after finishing the homework. Time that is wasted or extra time used "hassling" about homework can be charged against that fun time.

I have known students who use a buddy system for tracking and completing assignments. They call each other after school and have a mutually shared goal/reward for completing the work. Parents are able to call each other just to update what has been assigned and what needs to be worked on. I also know of some schools who have established voice mail systems so that families can call in and find out what the work is for the day.

Suggested Readings

Quackenbush, R., & Gastineau, J. (1991). "Homework? My Locker Ate It!" Salem: Counseling and Workshop Professionals.

Dawson, P. (1993). Homework Survival Guide. National Association of School Psychologists.

Canter, L., & Hausner, L. (1987). Homework Without Tears. New York: Harper and Row.