

Homework: Making it Proactive and Positive.

Homework is an integral part of every child's education, but for children with AD/HD and their parents, it often becomes an area of family stress. Children may feel that they have given their effort to attend during school and that attending to homework after school is beyond their capabilities. As parents, you can work with your child and his or her teacher(s) to make homework both proactive and positive.

Being proactive means taking an active approach to understanding the nature of AD/HD and creating an environment where your child feels supported and encouraged. Children do best with homework when parents and teachers anticipate circumstances that may be troublesome and plan positive ways to circumvent homework difficulties. Being proactive helps avert the need for reactive comments such as, "You have WHAT due tomorrow?" Being positive means providing your child with the structure, assistance, encouragement and reinforcement that facilitate his success.

WHY IS HOMEWORK IMPORTANT?

Homework becomes increasingly important during a child's educational career. In the elementary years homework helps students develop good study and learning habits that are important as they progress through the grades. In middle and high school, homework increasingly influences academic achievement, providing an opportunity to practice skills and strategies and to review information that has been taught in class.

When children have AD/HD, learning how to get organized and then do homework is often viewed as "mission impossible." Children may be aware of how important homework is for success in school, yet somehow their intentions do not quite connect with their actions. When children have difficulties completing or turning in homework, parents and teachers need to communicate and develop proactive homework strategies.

MAKING HOMEWORK PROACTIVE

Parents having a positive attitude toward homework and school will help their children have a more positive attitude too. When planning, communication, and cooperation between home and school occurs, students with AD/HD have the best opportunities for school success (Bos, Nahmias, & Urban, 1999).

When the new school year begins, parents, students and teachers need to establish an understanding of homework policies and expectations. How often will homework be given? When is homework due (daily, weekly, specified for each assignment)? How much time will each assignment take to complete? How much does homework count toward grades? Often teachers send home a copy of homework

policies at the beginning of the year. If not, request this information from the teacher or check the school web site. To be proactive, talk with your child and the teacher about these policies and general strategies for doing homework. Also discuss roles and responsibilities (Urban, 1999) such as the following:

Parent Responsibilities

Set the stage for homework by providing a quiet place, time, and necessary materials.

Assist your child in understanding directions.

Take into consideration your child's learning style and provide short breaks to help her focus.

Obtain a second set of textbooks from the teacher or a book-store if your child has difficulty bringing them back and forth from home and school.

Alert the teacher if your child consistently receives homework that is too difficult (i.e., does not have the skills to complete) or takes far too long to complete.

Teacher Responsibilities

Use homework as practice for material that has been covered in class.

Provide a class assignment calendar or write assignments on the board and provide time for students to copy them. Use "homework hotlines."

Correct and return homework as soon as possible with positive and corrective comments.

Modify assignments (e.g., reduce the amount of copying by photocopying problems from the text, shorten spelling lists, allow students to dictate responses using a computer voice program or tape recorder).

Keep homework assignments separate from unfinished class work.

Student Responsibilities

Keep an assignment calendar or sheet in the front of your notebook.

Write down or highlight on your assignment sheet assignments that are due.

Make sure you understand the homework directions before you leave class.

Do your homework and ask for help when you need it.

Hand your homework in on time!

MEDICATION

Many children with AD/HD take medication to assist with focusing and maintaining attention during the school day. When your child takes medication during the school day and has difficulty with attention after school, it is important to communicate with your child's physician. Jeff, an active fifth grade student, was able to attend to and complete his work at school, and he received positive reports from teachers. When he came home, however, his mother was concerned because Jeff could not get started on his homework or would open the book but do everything but homework. She called his physician, who adjusted Jeff's medication to allow its effects to assist him during homework time. Jeff's mom says, "I still have to direct him to look at his assignments, help him with directions, and stay near him, but it's much less of a fight to have him complete the work he understands."

SETTING HOMEWORK GOALS

You may find that your child has difficulty maintaining her motivation toward homework. Goal-setting and self-monitoring are ways you and your child's teacher can help increase your child's homework completion. Sam, a fourth grader, rarely completed even half his homework. His parents and teachers met with Sam and developed a homework assignment and goal sheet (Figure 1). For the first week, Sam chose the goal of completing three-fourths of his homework. His parents and teachers agreed that this goal was appropriate given his current performance. During the week, Sam met his goal for math, but only completed half his spelling. Even though Sam did not reach his spelling goal, Sam's parents and teacher gave him hearty congratulations for his completed math. The important part about Sam's goal setting and self-monitoring is that he chose the goals, saw improvement, and was encouraged by himself and others. The next week, Sam chose the same goal and met it, and within a month was regularly completing all his homework. He was also more motivated to begin and complete his work.

MAKING HOMEWORK POSITIVE

Although being proactive about homework keeps your child and you ahead of the game, it is just as important to work together to make homework a positive experience. You can use a number of strategies to change homework from a dreaded activity to a routine activity that is challenging yet rewarding. These strategies include arranging the environment and creating a study atmosphere; organizing homework assignments; and using motivation, encouragement and reinforcement.

Homework Environment

In thinking about the homework environment, it is important to consider both when and where. In considering when, you may want to answer the following questions:

Does my child need time for active play or sports right after school?

Does my child need a snack?

When do we usually eat the evening meal?

For how long can my child work if given periodic short breaks?

How should we balance homework time between weekends and school days?

Answering these questions and balancing your child's other activities are a necessity for setting regular times for homework. A regular schedule can go a long way in making homework a more positive experience and can help eliminate the need for discussions about when and whether to do assignments.

Just as important as when is where. Homework is best completed in an atmosphere that is conducive to quiet work and study, yet does not necessarily isolate the child from the rest of the family. Particularly with elementary aged children with AD/HD, it is important that parents are nearby to assist, answer questions and provide support. We have often found that a table in or near the kitchen is a good location because parents can be nearby and assist when needed. It is important to preserve the study atmosphere by working on quiet tasks such as preparing a meal, doing paperwork or reading. As students move into middle school, they often want to study in their rooms and will more consistently need access to a computer. While the rest of your teenager's room may be cluttered, set the standard that the study area be organized. This can make a significant difference in the time it takes a student to get started.

Organizing Homework Assignments

Making homework a positive experience also entails organizing the homework so that it is more manageable for your child. For example, consider "chunking" repetitive assignments – breaking them into smaller amounts with the option of a short break after the completion of each section (Figure 2). This is particularly helpful when your child is working on a number of math problems, spelling words, or questions. Have him complete the first few problems with you, and check the work after each portion. In this way, you have a good idea if he can do the task, and you can catch mistakes before he completes a large portion of work incorrectly.

Always encourage your child to ask questions about anything that is unclear. If you find that assignments consistently have a large amount of redundant work, be proactive and contact the teacher to discuss accommodating your child's attentional needs by reducing the amount of work. An important question to ask is, "Can my child demonstrate his/her proficiency with this task by doing less repetitive work?"

It is helpful to break up not only repetitive homework, but also assignments that involve complex tasks. Assignments such as a book report, science project, or written story or essay become more manageable when broken into smaller tasks. This was the case for Jon and Ms. Boling when Jon was working on his book box project. After discussing book boxes with her third-grade students, Ms. Boling prepared a checklist for them to mark at home when they completed each step in the project (Figure 3). This made a big difference for Jon as well as his mom, who commented, "Having the checklist along with a due date for the project really helped Jon see the need to do some work each day on the project and helped both of us stay on target."

Ms. Boling and the other third-grade teachers at Manzanita Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona, also accommodated the need Jon and other students with AD/HD had for novelty by providing varied homework assignments. Rather than limiting the students to only one way to report on the books they had read, the teachers provided the parents and students with a list of possible projects that they could use to "demonstrate what they learned and thought about the book." The list also included an option to use a student's own idea.

advertisement	newspaper story
brochure	poster
collage	poem
collection	timeline
comic book	TV report
diagram, map, web	write a new ending
demonstration	written report
dramatization	your idea
game	

Games are another excellent way of making homework positive, particularly when your child needs to learn the information and then recall it quickly and easily (e.g., math facts, spelling words, reading words, set of facts for social studies or science). For

example, playing the game "War" with playing cards is a fun way for you and your child to practice math facts. To practice addition facts, do the following:

Use the number cards only or include the Jack as 11, Queen as 12, and Kings as a wild card.

Deal the cards so that each player gets an equal number.

One at a time, each player turns over two cards, adds them and gives the sum.

When both players have added their cards, the player with the highest sum collects the cards.

Repeat this until one player gets all the cards and wins.

The same game can be used for subtraction (subtract the lowest number from the highest number), multiplication, or addition using three cards turned over at a time and added together. The game can also be played so that each player turns over one card and the cards from each player are added, subtracted or multiplied. One parent reported that the timed version worked best for her son when he knew all his facts and was only working on giving the answers quickly.

Using Encouragement and Reinforcement

You can be a powerful force for making homework positive through providing encouragement, motivation, and reinforcement to your child. It is important to recognize your child's effort and improvement, show your confidence in her, demonstrate your acceptance of her work, and appreciate her contributions.

Use and adapt the phrases in Figure 4 to encourage your child and compliment her effort. You can also help your child gain confidence by discussing how effort makes a difference and helping her recognize accomplishments. For instance, when Misty sits down with her middle-school daughter, Jennifer, once a week to discuss homework and plan for the next week, she has Jennifer ask herself, "Did my work show my best effort?" and talk about her accomplishments. Research has shown that focusing on effort – in addition to achievement – is critical for building positive self-esteem and persistence.

It is also important that your child see that homework pays off both in terms of accomplishments in school and privileges and/or rewards at home. Homework is just what it says – "work" – and your child should see the benefit of her effort. For example, Misty coordinated with Jennifer's teachers so that she received extra computer time at school when her homework was turned in and well done. At home, Jennifer got to select an extra activity or privilege

such as renting a movie, having a friend spend the night, or going to the mall on Saturday.

It Makes a Difference!

Turning homework into a proactive and positive experience will make a difference for both you and your child. Anticipating your child's needs, creating a study atmosphere, organizing the assignment for success, providing encouragement and rewarding your child's accomplishments are all strategies you can use to make homework the positive learning activity it is meant to be.

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