

# Homework: Problems and Solutions

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## Homework: Problems and Solutions

### Introduction

Of all the challenges parents face as they guide their children through school, homework is, for many, the most daunting. Both parents and children often look forward to summer vacation each year because it means a truce in the homework wars. And they dread the return to school in the fall because they fear the battle will be joined where it left off in June. Sure, there are some youngsters who tackle homework with the same energy and enthusiasm that they bring to school each day. This guide is *not* written with those children—or their parents—in mind. No, this handbook is written for parents who struggle with children who struggle with homework.

The handbook is divided into three parts. Part One provides general guidelines for homework. It includes a brief discussion of the purposes of homework and a description of reasonable homework expectations in terms of the tasks assigned and the time children should be expected to spend on homework at different grade levels.

It then describes in some detail two key tools parents can use to help overcome the obstacles homework present to the smooth functioning of families. The first tool is establishing homework routines which, when implemented conscientiously, can help make homework sessions as natural a part of the daily family calendar as mealtimes, morning routines, and daily chores. The second tool—when routines are not enough—is the judicious use of incentives to help motivate or prod children to get through the work which, unfortunately, often seems more important to parents and teachers than to them.

Part Two will address specific homework problems and suggest strategies parents can use to tackle them. In most cases, the suggestions will be things parents can do on their own at home. In some cases, however, it will be suggested that parents work with teachers to negotiate modifications in homework load or expectations. Not all children can tolerate the normal homework demands at their grade level, for a variety of reasons. They may have a learning disability or an attention disorder, may have a slow working speed, or may lack the skills necessary to do grade level assignments. In these cases, it will be recommended that parents collaborate with the child's teacher to adjust the homework so that the child can experience success. The ultimate goal of schooling is for children to master a set of skills to enable them to function independently as adults. This goal is easiest to achieve if the child is able to experience success at every step of the way. Homework should be used to give children a sense of accomplishment and mastery. This should be an overarching goal that parents and teachers keep in mind as they steer children through their schooling, from the first day of kindergarten to the last day of high school.

Part Three will include a general discussion of the role parents may play in guiding their children through the homework process at different age levels—elementary school, middle school, and high school. Sometimes conflicts arise because parents, teachers, and children have different expectations for the role parents play in supervising, monitoring, or assisting their children with their assignments. These expectations change as children reach different developmental levels. This section will address the changing role of parents in homework guidance.

## Part I: General Guidelines for Homework

### What are reasonable homework assignments?

Homework has been around as long as public schools have, and over the years considerable research has been conducted regarding the efficacy of homework practices. While the results are not uniform, most current writers on the topic have drawn some common conclusions. Harris Cooper is the name most often associated with research on homework because he performed a large-scale analysis of the effects of homework in 1989 and updated this synthesis in 1998. He recently summarized his findings in a 2001 issue of *Educational Leadership*.

Based on an extensive analysis of over 100 studies on the effects of homework, Cooper concluded, first of all, that there is little evidence that assigning homework at the elementary school level has an impact on school achievement. This is true whether the research study compared the achievement of students assigned homework with students assigned no homework or compared students assigned homework with that assigned similar in-class work. The same results occurred when the studies were correlational in nature, looking at whether the amount of time students reported spending on homework correlated with achievement levels. When these same kinds of studies looked at the effects of homework at the junior high school level, some positive benefits of homework were found. By high school, studies found clear benefits for doing homework.

Despite mixed research on homework effects, many thoughtful educators believe that assigning homework offers other benefits besides contributing to school achievement. It teaches children how to take responsibility for tasks and how to work independently. In other words, it helps children develop *habits of mind* that will serve them well as they proceed through school, and, indeed through life. Specifically, it is said that homework helps children learn how to plan and organize tasks, manage time, make choices and problem solve—all skills which we would probably all agree contribute to effective functioning in the adult world of work and families.

It is also generally agreed that the younger the child, the less time they should be expected to devote to homework. For children in the early elementary grades, the school day is demanding and exhausting, and it is unreasonable to expect them to spend a lot of time after school or in the evening on school-related tasks. As children get older, it is expected they have the resources to spend increasing amounts of time on homework. A general rule of thumb that is easy to remember is the expectation that children do 10 minutes of homework for each grade level. 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 it might be reasonable to have a conversation with the child's teacher regarding workload and expectations.

What kind of work should children be expected to do? Again, it is generally agreed that homework assignments give children the opportunity to practice and consolidate skills they have been taught while in school. A general guideline is that children should be able to complete homework assignments independently with at least 70 percent accuracy most of the time. If your child is repeatedly falling short of this mark, then a conference with the child's teacher is recommended.

Children should not be expected, under normal circumstances, to *learn new skills* for homework. There may be times where a teacher will assign a new skill to encourage problem solving. When this happens, this should be clearly communicated to students in advance—along with the understanding that they will not be graded for accuracy. A math teacher might say, for instance, in assigning this work, "This is what we will be talking about tomorrow in math class. I don't

expect you to understand the whole concept, but just see what you can do with it tonight and come in with questions or problems in mind for a discussion tomorrow.”

Increasingly these days, teachers are assigning creative tasks or more open-ended tasks to children for homework. Very often they expect parents to be available to help their children with these assignments. Again, the nature of these assignments should be made very clear to students, with an invitation to those students who may have trouble with these kinds of tasks to see the teacher for extra guidance or support. In general, performance expectations should be looser or less stringent for these kinds of assignments than for “closed-ended” tasks (i.e., assignments with one right answer, such as math problems or fill-in-the-blank worksheets).

Finally, as children reach the upper elementary grades, a very common assignment is some kind of long-term project or report. Nowadays, teachers usually assign these projects along with a time line that breaks the assignment down into subtasks with instructions for completing each subtask and due dates for completion of each step in the process. If your child has a teacher who assigns long term projects without these components, this handbook will give you some suggestions for how to break down long-term assignments with your child. You may also want to consider talking with your child’s teacher about providing these elements for the whole class or for your child. From years of working with children—as well as raising two of my own—I have found that children are far more likely to listen to teachers than to parents when it comes to directions and due dates.

With these general guidelines in mind, let’s turn to two key strategies parents can use to reduce the stress homework can cause.

### **Strategy One: Establishing Homework Routines**

Tasks are easiest to accomplish when they are tied to specific routines. This is why teachers tend to have the school day follow a predictable schedule. It is also why most adults in the work setting follow a predictable daily schedule. By establishing daily routines for homework completion, parents will not only make homework go more smoothly, but they will also be fostering a sense of order that children can apply to later life, including college and work. How can you do this?

#### **Step 1: Find a location in the house where homework will be done.**

The right location will depend on the child and the culture of the family. Some children do best at a desk in their bedroom. It is a quiet location, away from the hubbub of family noise. Other children become too distracted by the toys, video games or televisions they keep in their bedroom and do better at a place removed from those distractions, like the dining room table. Some children need to work by themselves. Others need to have parents nearby, to help keep them on task and to answer questions when problems arise. To decide on the best homework center for your child, sit down and have a conversation about it. Talk about the pros and cons of different settings and see if you can arrive at a mutually agreed upon location. If you can’t agree, consider setting up an experiment. Start with the child’s preferred location and keep track for a week or two how long it takes the child to complete each day’s homework. Then try your preferred location and track completion time again. Although the time required to do homework fluctuates on a daily basis, keeping track over a week or two should give you some idea about which location works better.

#### **Step 2: Set up a “homework center.”**

Once you and your child have identified a location, fix it up as a “home office/homework center.” Make sure the child has a clear workspace large enough to set out all the materials necessary for

completing assignments. Outfit the homework center with the kinds of office supplies the child is most likely to need. These might include pencils, pens, colored markers, rulers, scissors, a dictionary and thesaurus, graph paper, construction paper, glue and scotch tape, lined paper, a calculator, spell checker, and, depending on the age and needs of the child, a computer or laptop. If the homework center is a place that will be used for other things (such as the dining room table), the child can keep the office supplies in a portable crate or bin. If possible, the homework center should include a bulletin board that can hold a monthly calendar on which the child can keep track of long term assignments. Allowing the child some leeway in decorating the homework center can help him or her feel at home there, but be careful that it does not become too cluttered with distracting materials.

Some children balk at doing their homework in the same place every night. For these children, the portable center is the answer. When making a daily schedule (discussed below), parents and children can identify where the homework center will be for that day.

### **Step 3: Establish a “homework time.”**

As much as possible, your child should get in the habit of doing homework at the same time every day. What that time is will vary depending on the individual child. Some children need a break right after school to get some exercise and have a snack before tackling homework. For others, the only way for them to do homework is if they can start it while they are still in a “school mode”—i.e., right after school when there is still some momentum left from getting through the day. In general, we recommend homework be done either before dinner or as early in the evening as the child can tolerate. The later it gets, the more fatigued the child feels and the more slowly the homework gets done. Occasionally, children have ample time before school to do homework, and for some children, their energy for homework is greater at the beginning of the day than at the end. If this is the agreed upon time, parents and children should agree that there will be no fighting about getting up in the morning. If fighting occurs, a return to an evening homework time is called for.

### **Step 4: Establish a daily homework schedule.**

In general, at least into middle school, it is recommended that the homework session begin with the child and parent sitting down together to draw up a homework schedule. This involves reviewing all the assignments, making sure the child understands the assignments and has all the necessary materials. The child should also estimate how long it will take to complete each assignment and should indicate approximately when he/she expects to start each assignment. If the child needs help with any assignment, this should be established at this point so that the start times can take into account parent availability. A daily homework planner to facilitate this planning process can be found in the appendix. This form also includes a place for the child to identify at what points he will be taking breaks and what kind of reward he will earn for following his homework plan. These will be discussed below in the section addressing the use of incentives.

Why is a daily homework schedule important? Because it teaches many important skills. It teaches children the value of planning and it helps them organize their work. It also teaches them to estimate time—a crucial skill throughout life for managing chores and daily work effectively. Finally, it helps children avoid procrastination, and it helps them learn to set goals and meet deadlines.

### **Concluding comments**

Habits take many years to develop. If you can help your child follow a daily schedule beginning in early elementary school, by the time they reach high school, the scheduling habit may be so ingrained that the child is able to manage his homework effectively all on his own.

If you are not a highly organized person, you may find this homework strategy very difficult to implement. I can only encourage you to do the best you can because the payoff will be great if you succeed. You may want to plan your own “homework” time to coincide with that of your children—i.e., a routine time to do paperwork, pay bills, or do other tasks which require you to sit at a desk or table and work quietly. If your children see you doing this, the effects of positive modeling can be great!

For many students, a daily homework schedule alone, following the steps described above, will be sufficient to get them through the daily assignments. For others, homework remains a tedious or aversive task, and “bigger guns” may be needed. For these children, some kind of incentive or reward is recommended. This is described below.

### **Strategy Two: Incentive Systems**

As parents, it is a fond wish that our children love learning so much that they dive into homework with enthusiasm. If we’re honest with ourselves, we’re likely to remember that that was not our own attitude toward homework when we were children and it is unlikely that our children will approach the task with any more glee than we did.

Many children who aren’t motivated by the enjoyment of doing homework are motivated by the high grade they hope to earn as a result of doing a quality job. Thus, the grade is an incentive (also called an extrinsic reward because the reward is external to the child him or herself) motivating the child to do homework with care and in a timely manner. Most children who are motivated by grades do not have the kinds of problems with homework described in this manual.

For children who are not motivated by grades, parents will need to look for other extrinsic rewards to help them get through their nightly chores. Incentive systems fall into two categories: simple and elaborate.

Simple incentive systems are just that—uncomplicated. The simplest incentive system is reminding the child of a fun activity they can do when they finish their homework. It may be a favorite television show they want to watch, a chance to spend some time with a video or computer game, talking on the telephone or instant messaging, or playing a game with a parent. This system of withholding fun things until the drudgery is over is sometimes called *Grandma’s Law* because grandmothers often use it quite effectively (e.g., “First take out the trash, then you can have chocolate chip cookies”). Having something to look forward to can be a powerful incentive to get the hard work done; when parents remind children of this as they sit down at their desks, they may be able to spark the engine that drives the child to stick with the work until it’s done.

Another simple incentive is building in breaks along the way. These are good for the child who can’t quite make it to the end without a small reward en route. When creating the daily homework schedule, it’s useful with these children to identify when they will take their breaks. Some children prefer to take breaks at specific time intervals (e.g., every 15 minutes), while others do better when the breaks occur after they finish an activity (e.g., when individual homework assignments are completed). Parents should discuss with the child how long the breaks will last and what will be done during the breaks (e.g., get a snack, call a friend, play one level on a video game). The Daily Homework Planner discussed earlier includes sections where breaks and end-of-homework rewards can be identified.

Elaborate incentive systems involve more planning and more work on the part of parents but in some cases they are necessary to address more significant homework problems. These systems

work best when parents and children together develop them. Giving children input gives them a sense of control and ownership, making the system more likely to succeed. We have found that children are generally very realistic in setting goals and deciding on rewards and penalties when they are involved in the decision-making process.

The steps in developing incentive systems are described below. Figure 1 provides an example of how the planning process might work. The Appendix contains the forms necessary to design an incentive system and write a homework contract.

### **Step 1: Describe the problem behaviors**

Here, parents and children decide which behaviors are causing problems at homework time. For some children, putting homework off to the last minute is the problem; for others, it's forgetting materials or neglecting to write down assignments. Still others rush through their work and make careless mistakes, while others "dawdle" over assignments, taking hours to complete what should take only a few minutes. In describing the problem behaviors, it is important to be as specific as possible. The problem behavior should be described as behaviors that can be seen or heard—for instance, *complains about homework* or *rushes through homework, making many mistakes* are better descriptors than *has a bad attitude* or *is lazy*.

Not all problem behaviors, by the way, are best solved by an incentive system. Part II of this handbook describes specific homework problems along with an array of possible solutions. Parents may want to review this section before deciding to design an incentive system.

### **Step 2: Set a goal**

Usually the goal relates directly to the problem behavior. For instance, if not writing down assignments is the problem, the goal might be: "Joe will write down his assignments in his assignment book for every class."

### **Step 3: Decide on possible rewards and penalties**

Homework incentive systems work best when children have a "menu" of rewards to choose from, since no single reward will be attractive for long. We recommend a point system in which points can be earned for the goal behaviors and traded in for the reward the child wants to earn. The bigger the reward, the more points the child will need to earn it. The menu should include both larger, more expensive rewards that may take a week or a month to earn, and smaller, inexpensive rewards that can be earned daily. Some parents have points serve "double duty"—that is, children can trade them in for daily rewards but also have them count toward longer term rewards. Rewards can include "material" reinforcers (such as favorite foods or small toys) as well as activity rewards (such as the chance to play a game with a parent). It may also be necessary to build penalties into the system. This is usually the loss of a privilege (such as the chance to watch a favorite TV show or the chance to talk on the telephone to a friend).

Once the system is up and running, if you find your child is earning more penalties than rewards, then the program needs to be revised so that your child can be more successful. Usually when this kind of system fails, we think of it as a "design failure" rather than the failure of the child to respond to rewards. If you are having difficulty designing a system that works, you may want to consult a specialist, such as a school psychologist or counselor for assistance.

Incentive Planning Sheet		
<b>Problem Behaviors</b>		
Arguing about homework Leaving it until just before bed		
<b>Goal</b>		
Complete homework without complaining before 8 p.m.		
<b>Possible Rewards</b>		
<b>Daily</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>Long-Term</b>
Extra tv show	Chance to rent video gram	Buy video game
Extra video game time	Have friend spend night on weekend	Buy CD
Play game with Dad	Mom will make favorite dessert	Go skiing
Extra half-hour before bed	Chance to choose dinner menu	Eat out
<b>Possible Penalties</b>		
Can't play with friends after school		
Loss of tv/video game time		
Begin homework right after school		

Figure 1. Sample Incentive Sheet

**Step 4: Write a homework contract**

The contract should say exactly what the child agrees to do and exactly what the parents' roles and responsibilities will be (an example is shown in Figure 2). When the contract is in place, it should reduce some of the tension parents and kids often experience around homework. For instance, if part of the contract is that the child will earn a point for not complaining about homework, then if the child *does* complain, this should not be cause for a battle between parent and child: the child simply doesn't earn that point. Along with points and rewards, parents should be sure to praise their children for following the contract. It will be important for parents to agree to a contract they can live with: they should avoid penalties they are either unable or unwilling to impose (for instance, if both parents work and are not at home, they cannot monitor whether a child is beginning his homework right after school, so an alternative contract may need to be written).



### Sample Homework Contract

**Student agrees to:** complete homework every night by 8 p.m. without complaining

**To help student reach goal, parents will:** set up a homework schedule after school each day

**Student will earn:** earn one point for each night he does homework without complaining and one point for each night he completes homework by 8 p.m. Points can be traded in for items on the reward menu.

**If student fails to meet agreement student will:** not earn any points.

Figure 2. Sample Homework Contract

### Concluding Comments

We have found that it is a rare incentive system that works the first time. Parents should expect to try it out and redesign it to work the kinks out. Eventually, once the child is used to doing the behaviors specified in the contract, the contract can be rewritten to work on another problem behavior. As time goes on, children may be willing to drop the use of an incentive system altogether. This is often a long-term goal, however, and parents should be ready to write a new contract if the child slips back to bad habits once a system is dropped.

Parents often ask how they can develop this kind of system for one child in the family and not for all children, since it may seem to be “rewarding” children with problems while neglecting those without. We have found that most siblings are understanding of this process if it is explained to them carefully. If there are problems, however, parents have several choices: 1) set up a similar system for other children with appropriate goals (*every child has something they could be working to improve*); 2) make a more informal arrangement by promising to do something special from time to time with the other children in the family so they don't feel left out; or 3) have the child earn rewards that benefit the whole family (e.g., eating out at a Chinese restaurant).

## Part II: Solving Specific Homework Problems

This section of the guide addresses specific problems youngsters encounter with homework. To use this portion of the guide effectively, parents should follow a problem solving process similar to that used when designing an incentive system. As with that process, the planning should be done jointly with the child to enhance the likelihood that the child will “buy into” the plan designed. The steps are described below. The Appendix contains a planning form you can use. Figure 3 contains an example of the process.

### Steps 1 and 2: Describe the problem behaviors and set a goal.

These are identical to Steps 1 and 2 for designing an incentive system (see page 7). Both problem and goal behaviors should be described as specifically as possible.

### **Step 3: Brainstorm possible solutions.**

Begin by reviewing the problem behaviors in this section to see if any of the proposed solutions sound feasible. If so, write them down on the planning sheet. Add others that come to mind that were not included in this manual.

### **Step 4: Select the solution(s) you want to try.**

Write it down in the space provided. “Keep it simple” should be a general rule of thumb, so if you can select only one solution, do so. At times, though, a problem may lend itself to multiple solutions used together. You may want to think carefully about whether it would be helpful to include an incentive. If so, you may want to go through the incentive planning process as well.

### **Step 5: Establish who will do what in order to implement the plan.**

Although most homework solutions include a role for the child, many solutions involve a role for other people as well, such as a parent, a teacher, or some other education support personnel such as a guidance counselor, aide, coach, or tutor. In many cases, the role these people play is simply cueing or reminding the child to follow the plan agreed upon. Other roles are possible as well. For instance, a parent may agree to sit with a child during homework sessions or may check homework for accuracy after it is completed. A teacher may clarify instructions to make sure the child understands assignments before leaving for the day. Or the parent and teacher together may agree to sign off in the child’s assignment book indicating they have both reviewed the child’s work for accuracy and completion. Although some homework problems may lend themselves to solutions that will only involve the child, it is probably unrealistic to think that a problem that is causing parents or teachers significant headaches can be solved without the participation of adults in the solution, at least in the beginning.

### **Step 6: Decide when the plan will be reviewed.**

Most plans don’t work the first time without the need for adjustments or tweaking. A review date should occur not long after the plan is put in place (usually within one or two weeks), so that trouble shooting can take place quickly before the plan fails and people become discouraged. When the review takes place, it may be helpful to identify subsequent review dates as well, with the understanding that the plan can be revised as success is achieved. Over time, in this way, parental and teacher support can be faded. It is strongly recommended that fading take place gradually; dropping support too quickly often leads to problems.

<b>Homework Problem/Solution Planning Sheet</b>
<b>Problem Behavior:</b> Mary doesn't remember to bring home necessary materials and forgets to hand in completed homework assignments.
<b>Goal Behavior:</b> Mary will bring home all materials and to hand in assignments on time.
<b>Possible Interventions:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mary will earn a reward for remembering to bring necessary materials to and from school.</li> <li>2. Mary's teacher will make sure Mary places in her backpack all homework materials.</li> <li>3. Mary's mother will make sure Mary puts all her homework in her backpack after the homework session.</li> <li>4. Mary will use a checklist to help her remember what she has to do.</li> </ol>
<b>Intervention(s) selected:</b> With cueing/supervision by parent and teacher, Mary will use a checklist to help her remember to bring necessary homework materials to and from school.
<b>Will an incentive be included? If so, describe here or attach Incentive Planning Sheet</b> No incentive initially—will be added if necessary.
<b>Who will do what?</b> <b>Child will:</b> Mary will complete a checklist at the end of the school day and at the end of the homework session to make sure she has all the necessary materials in her backpack.
<b>Parent will:</b> Mary's mom (or dad, if mom is not available) will remind Mary to complete the checklist at the end of her homework session. She will help Mary fill out the checklist until she feels Mary understands the process.
<b>Teacher will:</b> Mary's teacher will remind Mary to complete the checklist at the end of her homework session. She will help Mary fill out the checklist until she feels Mary understands the process.
<b>Other will:</b> No one else will be involved.
<b>When will the plan be reviewed?</b> Two weeks after it's put in place.

Figure 3. Sample Homework Problems/Solution Sheet

## Specific Homework Problems

Through years of working with students with homework problems, I have compiled a list of the kinds of problems encountered most frequently. Each problem is described in some detail, followed by suggested solutions.

### Problems with forgetting.

This may include: 1) Forgetting to write down assignments; 2) Forgetting to bring appropriate materials to or from school; 3) Forgetting to hand in homework; 4) Forgetting deadlines.

These are among the most challenging and frustrating problems parents confront, and to solve them requires coordination with the child's teacher(s). It is usually not solved simply by *making the child remember* but generally requires prompting and cueing by both teachers and parents—sometimes over a long period of time—in order for the child to overcome these problems. This monitoring may need to include:

- Having an adult check in with the student at the end of the class period or school day to make sure the student has written down all assignments or at the end of the day to make sure the student has all the necessary materials to bring home.
- For older students, it may be more feasible to establish a weekly monitoring system, designed to keep parents informed of missing assignments. In most cases, this system should not be dependent on students themselves, since they are often unreliable informants. An alternative monitoring system is to have a case manager (such as a guidance counselor) on a weekly basis collect from all the student's teachers itemized accounts of missing assignments. These are written on a weekly homework report that a parent can pick up. This works best when the progress report is collected on a Thursday or a Friday, since this enables the student's parents to determine how the weekend will be spent (with desirable activities postponed until homework is completed). A sample weekly homework report is included in the appendix.
- Developing and using checklists to lead students through the steps they should follow at the end of the day to make sure they're bringing home all the necessary materials to complete homework assignments. See the appendix for a sample checklist.

In the home setting, parents can help students keep track of things by:

- Checking their assignment books each day to help the child stay on top of assignments.
- Posting on a large family calendar due dates for long term assignments.
- Keeping a spare set of textbooks at home so that the child doesn't have to remember to bring home books.
- Creating checklists for materials that routinely go to school each day to which the child can refer when getting ready for school in the morning.

### **Problems with losing things.**

This might include losing worksheets, assignment books, other necessary study materials (texts, calculators, directions for assignments), or losing homework after it is completed but before it's handed in. The obvious solution to this problem is to help the child develop an organizational system that enables them to keep track of all the school-related materials they are likely to lose. Organizational systems are a dime a dozen, and what works for one student may not work at all for another. The trick is to get your child to consistently follow whatever system you have decided on.

Before we get to that, here are some suggestions for systems or tricks that might work:

- Try a two-folder system, one of which contains assignments that are yet to be done and one for completed assignments. Color-coding the folders can make it easier for the child to keep track of assignments (e.g., green for incomplete assignments, red for completed assignments).
- Some children prefer having a separate spiral notebook for each subject, while others prefer a large three ring binder to hold everything. If your child prefers separate spiral notebooks, buy the kind with pockets in the front so that there is a place for loose papers. You can also buy pockets to go in three ring binders, but you may find it helpful to purchase a 3-hole punch that can be kept in the binder itself.
- Identify a place in the house for school-related materials. Parents may want to set a crate or plastic container in a specified location in the house and have the child place in the container everything that has to go to school each day (e.g., backpack, gym clothes, lunchboxes, etc.).
- Supervise the child at the end of the homework session to make sure the assignments go in the proper folders or notebooks.

Organizational systems are relatively easy to design and often exceedingly difficult to follow. If you think it's important for your child to maintain a system for organizing and keeping track of school work, you will need to be prepared to supervise the use of this system on a daily basis for many weeks or months (and, to be honest, for years with some children) in order for your child to internalize the system. In general, this means spending time every day to make sure your child's backpack is in order and notebooks and folders are organized. This may take no more than 10 minutes, once the system is in place, but it will be a crucial 10 minutes every day. A few pointers may make the process go more quickly or smoothly:

- Involve your child in designing the organizational system. Do this for two reasons: 1) what works for you probably won't work for your child, since everybody manages information a little differently; and 2) the more your child can be involved in the design, the more ownership he/she will feel for the system. People in general are motivated by having a "problem to solve." If you can convince your child this is an "engineering problem" which requires an individualized design solution, then he/she will like become a more active participant in the design process.
- Develop a checklist to accompany the scheme. Then your daily check-in can be simply a matter of going through the checklist.
- Build in incentives for following the system—first with supervision and then independently.
- Periodically review the system to see if it can be improved. Again, this hooks the child's active problem solving capacity into the process which enhances motivation and effectiveness.
- Keep it as simple as possible! This cannot be overstated. You may decide that there are really only one or two critical pieces to the system and you can relax with respect to optional elements. For instance, you may decide that being able to locate homework assignments is

the most critical part of the system, so that you don't worry so much that your child's notebooks are kept neat and orderly. An elaborate system that is not followed accomplishes nothing. A simple system that addresses one or two key problems is more likely to be successful.

### **Problems with time management.**

This may rival problems with forgetting in terms of being a source of frustration to parents. This includes: 1) problems with procrastination and getting started on homework; 2) working inefficiently; 3) difficulty estimating how long it takes to complete tasks; 4) running out of steam/difficulty sustaining attention until the task is done; 5) not having enough time to do homework. Let's take these one at a time.

***Procrastination, slow getting started on homework:*** This is best addressed by helping children learn to develop work schedules. Establishing a set time each day to begin homework may do this. Finding the best time is a critical piece of this. Some children do best when they do their homework as soon as they get home from school before the energy and momentum from the school day is lost. Others need a break to get fresh air and exercise before sitting down to work. Ideally, setting a homework schedule should be done jointly by parents and children together. A very effective approach is to ask the child to identify each individual task to be done and to name the time he/she intends to start each one. This can become a daily mantra for parents: *What do you have to do? When are you going to do it?*

***Working inefficiently.*** Some children can't work for more than 5 minutes before they're up and out of their seat and finding something else to do—getting a snack, sharpening a pencil, calling a friend to clarify a homework assignment, doing some other chore or task that pops into their head either because they're afraid they'll forget it or because they're looking for any excuse to set aside their homework for a time. Other children dawdle over their work—they may not appear outwardly distracted, they just work *very* slowly. Ways to address these problems:

- Write start and stop times on assignments to help the child begin to monitor task efficiency.
- Set a kitchen timer and challenge the child to complete the task by the time the bell rings.
- Build in breaks when specific tasks are accomplished.
- Build in incentives for completing homework by agreed-upon deadlines.

***Difficulty estimating how long it takes to complete tasks.*** This may seem like a simple problem; it's actually quite complicated and can be a significant obstacle to homework completion. Youngsters who can't estimate how long tasks take tend to procrastinate and may be forced to hand in assignments late or stay up well past bedtime to complete assignments. The intervention for this is to train the child to better estimate how long it takes to complete tasks. The Homework Planning Sheet, included in this manual, is one mechanism that can be used to teach this skill. Having the child estimate how long it takes to complete a specific task and then comparing the estimate with the actual time can become a game parents and children can play together. An incentive can be added as well: for instance, the child could earn points for completing the work within 5 minutes of the amount of time predicted; points can be exchanged for small rewards.

***Running out of steam:*** While some youngsters have a hard time getting started on homework, others have a hard time sticking with it long enough to get it done (some students, of course, have trouble with both!). Ways to address this problem:

- Find high energy times to do homework.

- Build in breaks after tasks are completed (rather than after a certain amount of time).
- Break tasks down to small, manageable pieces.
- Give the child something to look forward to doing after they finish their homework. This might include the chance to watch a favorite tv show, play a video game, play a game with a parent or sibling, or—on weekends, go someplace fun or do something special.
- Encourage children to switch tasks when they run out of steam rather than quitting altogether.
- Think about the sequence with which homework assignments are done. Have the child sandwich the most difficult tasks in the middle (use easy assignments as a warm-up, and don't save the hardest for last).
- Make sure children get a good night's sleep, particularly on school nights.

**Not enough time.** Youngsters don't have enough time to do homework for many reasons. These include: 1) working very slowly (slow processing speed); 2) being assigned an unreasonable amount of homework; or 3) having too many other tasks/responsibilities/extracurricular activities outside of school, leaving insufficient time for homework. Parents with children who by nature work slowly probably should negotiate with teachers for a reduced homework load, possibly combined with deadline flexibility. Similarly, if you feel your child is assigned an unreasonable amount of homework, try negotiating with teachers. It may be helpful to talk with other parents of children in the same class(es) and to set up a meeting as a group with teachers or the principal. With children who are over-scheduled, parents need to help their children make good choices about how they spend their free time so they have enough time left over to get homework done without undue stress or fatigue.

### **Problems with planning/organization**

Children with planning and organizational problems find homework difficult for a number of reasons. They tend to lose and forget things and to have difficulty managing their time. They tend to put things off, to have difficulty estimating how long it will take to do tasks, and they often give up before the work is done. These issues have been addressed in separate sections. This section addresses the problems associated with planning and organizing long-term assignments. Children who have difficulty in this area most likely need to be led systematically through the steps involved in planning the project or paper. Many teachers today provide guidelines for helping students break tasks down, but if your child has a teacher who does not do this, you will need to help. The planning process has three steps, outlined on a Project Planning Sheet in the appendix. The steps are:

**Step 1: Select a topic for the project.** At this point, you and your child together should brainstorm possible ideas. After creating a list of possibilities, review each one and have your child identify what he/she likes and dislikes about each topic idea. This should lead to a single topic appearing more attractive than the other choices. If it doesn't, then you may want to continue talking about the topics in terms of how much material they will be able to find, how hard it will be to find material, and how easy or difficult it will be to write about the topics of interest. This step is completed when your child has settled on a single topic.

**Step 2: Identify the materials needed to complete the project.** It may help to ask your child to picture what the finished product looks like. You can then ask what materials will be needed to make the product look like the child's mental picture. If your child is new at thinking like this, you may have to use prompts and suggestions to help him or her to make a complete list. You should have your child list where and when the materials can be obtained. Again, your child may need help with this step of the plan, too.

**Step 3: Break the project down into individual tasks and assign a completion date to each task.** At this point, it may be helpful to look at a calendar so you and your child can picture the entire project duration. Sometimes it's helpful to plan backwards—start with the due date and work back from there. As you plan what will be done when, keep in mind other activities or family obligations the child will be involved in so you can work around them.

Once the plan is in place, your child may still have some difficulty following the schedule. You may want to think of an incentive he/she can earn if the timeline is followed. Or you may want to think of penalties for not following the timeline. We usually recommend taking a positive approach, but there are some children who need both rewards and penalties in order to be sufficiently motivated to work on this kind of task.

If you find that this kind of planning, along with supervision and encouragement along the way is insufficient to get your child through a project, then you may want to talk to your child's teacher about whether there are supports in school (such as an after school homework club) that could be accessed. Additionally, if your child is unable to do this kind of project without the final project being primarily the result of your efforts as parent, then you should also talk with the teacher about modifying the assignment so it is something your child is able to do more independently.

### **Not knowing how to complete assignments.**

This can be due either to not understanding the assignment or lacking the skills necessary to complete assignments. Let's take the two separately.

**Not understanding assignments:** If this is a chronic problem, parents should talk with teachers about it. It might be solved by having the teacher review with the child each homework assignment to make sure it is understood before the child leaves for the day. Alternatively, parents may obtain permission to telephone teachers in the evening to clarify assignments. It may also be helpful to identify a trustworthy student in each class that the child can call to clarify assignments. The purpose of homework is to allow the child to practice skills learned in school. If the child has not learned those skills, then arrangements should be made for this to happen, either through setting up tutoring sessions with the child's teacher or a peer tutor, or accessing special education services or other tutoring help.

**Lacking skills to complete assignments:** If this is an intermittent problem, parents may be able to teach the child the missing skills. If it is a chronic problem, however, this will need to be discussed with the child's teacher. As stated previously, a general rule of thumb is that children should be able to complete homework assignments independently with at least 70 percent accuracy. If this is not the case, then the homework assigned is too difficult and modified assignments should be arranged. Modified assignments could include easier assignments, additional cues (e.g., if answering end-of-chapter questions is assigned, the child could be told where to locate the answers), or allowing the child to dictate responses to parents.

### **Problems with careless mistakes or messy/sloppy work**

Many children rush through their homework. For these children, the primary goal is usually to get it done as quickly as possible. These same children often care little about either the appearance of their work or its accuracy. As a parent, you have a decision to make up front when confronted with this problem. Essentially, you have two choices: 1) you can leave the problem alone and assume the classroom teacher will apply an appropriate consequence (e.g., giving the assignment a poor grade or requiring the child to redo it); or 2) you can work with your child to



improve appearance or accuracy (or both). If you make the first choice, you may want to have a conversation with your child's teacher to clarify what his/her expectations are and what the consequences will be for poor quality homework. If you decide you want to try to address this problem at home, here are some things you can try:

- Tell your child that if the work doesn't pass your inspection for neatness, you will ask that it be redone. This approach works best when you can compare the child's homework to a model. Use as a model a neat piece of work your child has done in the past. If you decide the work your child doesn't "pass inspection," give him feedback both about what he/she has done well as well as what could be improved. Be as specific and non-judgmental as possible. You might say, for instance, "I like the way you put spaces between your words, but I can't read many of the words you wrote." Or you might say, "I see that you spelled everything correctly. That's great! But there are a lot of cross-outs and smudges that makes the page hard to look at."
- Use a rating system in judging the work's quality. You and your child can rate the work separately and see if you agree. You might use a 5 point scale, with 1 being "Unreadable" and 5 being "The neatest ever." Higher ratings could be tied to rewards (e.g., 1 point for a rating of 3, 2 for a rating of 4, etc.) or to acceptability (anything rated 1 or 2 will have to be redone).
- If your child's problem is primarily careless mistakes, first of all, make sure the mistakes really are due to carelessness rather than due to your child not understanding the assignment or the procedure. If carelessness is the cause, have him/her correct the mistakes before putting homework away at the end of the session. With some children, finding mistakes (e.g., on a math paper) is so tedious they can't bring themselves to do it. In this case, you might want to circle the mistakes for them. Or you might say, "There are 7 words misspelled on this page. See if you can find them all."
- Both problems of carelessness and sloppiness lend themselves to an intervention that uses incentives. Use the Incentive Planning Sheet to design a system that works for your child.

### **Problems with work refusal.**

Occasionally, children will outright refuse to do homework. If this doesn't happen very often, it may occur either because: 1) the child doesn't understand the assignment and doesn't want to admit this; or 2) some factor that has nothing to do with homework is interfering—such as fatigue or preoccupation with some worry or concern. Before going toe-to-toe with your child over his/her refusal to do the work, make sure you've ruled out either of these possible causes. If you've done this, and your child is still refusing to do the work, consider the following options:

- Try to stay calm. Say something like, "It looks like you need a night off. How about if I wake you up a little early tomorrow morning and you can do it then?"
- Consider imposing a penalty. Again, do this in a calm voice, without a fight. You might say, "I guess if you don't want to do the work tonight, we'll have to set aside tomorrow afternoon instead of soccer practice for you to do it."
- Consider having the teacher impose the penalty. Let your child know you'll call (or email) his/her teacher to let the teacher know you were aware the child had an assignment but that the child elected not to do it. This is a better step to take than just leaving it up to the teacher to mete out a punishment. This is because it tells the child you think homework is important enough to give the teacher a call. It also communicates to the child's teacher that you are not uninvolved in your child's homework.

If your child routinely refuses to do homework, this is a more serious problem. Again, it could be because your child does not understand the assignments (or a large percentage of them), so it's important to rule this out. It could also be that even though your child *is* technically able to do the

work, he/she doesn't think so. If this is the case, then you can offer sufficient support so the child can gain confidence that he/she can do it. If your child doesn't accept this help, then you should talk to your child's teacher about how the assignments may be modified for a time to make them easier until your child's confidence can be built up.

Some children just refuse to do homework simply because they don't want to do it. Frequently, these are children who also refuse to do chores around the house or take on other responsibilities. Sometimes parents have given up asking these children to do chores—either because it's too punishing for them to battle their children or because they have trouble following through with consistent consequences. If this is the case with your child, two steps should be taken:

1. You should probably seek help from a psychologist or therapist. For children to grow up well adjusted, they need to learn to do tasks that don't appeal to them such as homework or chores. In my experience, when younger children have problems with work refusal, they challenge their parents—and often teachers, as well—in more serious ways as they get older. A skilled counselor can work with you and your child to address the defiant behavior.
2. You should arrange a conference with your child's teacher to let him/her know that homework completion is an area of conflict that you are working on but you will need support and modifications from the school until the problem is solved. The kind of support schools can offer might include: a) requiring the child to participate in an after-school homework club; b) having the child go to a "homework room" either first thing in the morning or during recess where they are expected to complete assignments; or c) reducing (but not eliminating) homework expectations to reduce the conflicts and to increase the likelihood that the child can complete the work during the school day.

### **Problems with getting upset when doing homework.**

Some children are quite willing to do their homework but they become easily upset in the course of doing it. Upsets often occur when children 1) don't understand the work; 2) don't think they know how to do it; or 3) are afraid they won't be able to meet their own performance standards or those of a parent or teacher. Children who are described by either parents or teachers as "perfectionists" tend to get upset when doing homework.

Since this problem overlaps with the previous problem (refusing to do homework), some of the suggestions there are worth repeating. First of all, make sure the child understands the assignment. Secondly, if the child understands it but doesn't think he/she has the skills to do it, then offering support or negotiating with the teacher to simplify the assignment as a confidence builder may be in order. Some other suggestions for children who don't think they can do the work or may not believe they can meet quality standards are:

- Praise the child for effort rather than quality. Also, praise him/her for sticking with the work in spite of being frustrated. Say something like, "Jimmy, I saw how it was making you mad, but I was impressed with the way you stuck with it anyway."
- Have your child take a break or switch to another task. Walking away from a frustrating task often allows a child to regroup so he/she can return to it with fresh ideas or a calmer manner.
- Build in a reward for when the homework is done—give the child something to look forward to when task is done.
- Many perfectionist children have parents who are also perfectionists. These parents often say to me, "But I don't put any pressure on my child. I don't know how he gets that way." But when I ask them, "Do you set high standards for yourself? Are you hard on yourself when you make a mistake?" these same parents often give me an embarrassed smile. I then encourage

them to model for their children making mistakes and handling them calmly or using the mistake as an opportunity to learn something.

- If children set such high standards for themselves that they almost become immobilized, a more drastic intervention may be needed. Have a conference with your child's teacher. Arrange for the teacher to make a deal with a child that he/she won't actually read or grade their homework for a period of time: all the child is required to do is show the teacher that it was completed. Reviewing and grading can be gradually re-introduced, one step at a time (e.g., the child might be told what the grade would be if the assignment were graded and then given the option of having the grade added to the rank book). Your child's classroom teacher may have other creative ways homework can be modified to reduce stress. You may also want to have your child work with a therapist to learn relaxation techniques or other coping strategies.

### **Difficulty doing homework alone.**

Children who don't know how to do the work or don't believe they have the skills to do it are often very reluctant (or unable) to do their homework on their own. Sometimes they just want a parent nearby to encourage them, answer questions, or calm fears when problems arise. Sometimes they need a parent to actually "walk them through" their assignments. Children with attention problems also often have difficulty doing homework alone, but for different reasons. Without supervision, they become so distracted that they have difficulty finishing their homework at all.

In the early stages of addressing this problem, it is generally helpful for the parent to offer as much support as the child wants or needs, short of doing the work for them. Kids with handwriting problems or problems with written production may even need to be able to dictate their work to a parent or someone else acting as a "scribe." This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

After offering a high level of support for awhile, parents are usually able to wean their child off the need to have them present while they do their homework. This can be done by:

- Gradually fading the role parents play in homework oversight. Initially, helping them plan their homework (using the Homework Planner in the Appendix) and checking in at the beginning and end of each homework assignment may replace sitting them while they do the work. Eventually, check-ins can be more random and less frequent. When check-ins take place, parents should be sure to offer words of praise and encouragement rather than criticism or correction. If the goal is to build more independence in work completion, then placing less emphasis on neatness or accuracy at first may be advised. It's best to focus on only one problem at a time.
- Creating an incentive system to reward the child for working independently or for completing work in an efficient manner.
- It may be possible to establish a family homework time so that everybody convenes around the kitchen table to work on homework or, in the case of parents, paperwork such as bills or correspondence. In this way, the child who has trouble working alone can feel part of a supportive group without needing individual support.

### **Problems with written production.**

I've saved the most complex problem for last. Some children have trouble with homework because they *just can't get words down on paper*. The reasons for this are many: 1) they may experience muscle fatigue in their writing hand when they have to do a lot of writing; 2) they may write extremely slowly; 3) the disparity between the quick speed with which they think and the

slow speed with which they write may be very frustrating for them or may lead them to lose their train of thought; 4) they may have word retrieval problems; 5) they may have problems coming up with ideas for what to write about; 6) they may not know how to organize their ideas; 7) they may be fearful of making mistakes (those perfectionist children again!); or 8) any combination of the above, combined with the fact that they don't really *care* about writing and don't think it's worth the effort they have to expend to pull it off.

Unfortunately, for most children with written production problems, incentive systems alone are insufficient to get them to do their homework. They may be worth a try—even the child may get excited about the chance to earn a reward—but if the problem is not just a motivation deficit but includes a skill deficit, other interventions will be necessary.

If the writing problem is simply a matter of slow speed or motor fatigue, then allowing the child to dictate homework may solve the problem. Many older children are able to develop good keyboarding skills, and since typing is easier and faster than writing when a child has learned to type, this may help reduce the resistance to writing tasks. Especially in this day and age, when from middle school on (if not before), children spend a good deal of time “instant messaging” their friends on the Internet, they are often able to develop good keyboarding skills just with the practice that comes with “IM.” Although the quality at present leaves something to be desired, voice activated computer software may be worth investigating as an alternative to having the child write either by hand or at the computer.

But for children who have trouble retrieving words, thinking of ideas, and organizing their thoughts, writing tasks pose a greater challenge. Many of these children need support at the “pre-writing” phase of a writing assignment. They may need help, for instance, brainstorming ideas for what to write about, generating enough content to fulfill the length requirements, and organizing those ideas into a reasonable sequence to accomplish a coherent written product. Here are the steps parents might follow to help their children at the prewriting phase.

**Step 1: Brainstorm topics.** If your child has to come up with a topic to write about, you should make sure you understand the exact assignment requirements before beginning. This may necessitate a phone call to the teacher or a friend of your child to clarify directions. The rules of brainstorming are that any idea is accepted and written down in the first stage—the wilder and crazier the better because wild and crazy ideas often lead to good, usable ideas. No criticism by either parent or child is allowed at this point. If your child has trouble thinking of ideas on his/her own, throw out some ideas of your own to “grease the wheels.” Once you and your child run out of topic ideas, read over your list and circle the most promising ones. Your child may know right away what he wants to write about. If not, talk about what he/she likes and dislikes about each idea in order to make it easier to zero in on a good choice.

**Step 2: Brainstorm content.** Once a topic has been selected, then the brainstorming process begins again. Ask your child to “Tell me everything you know or would like to know about this topic.” Again, write down any idea or question, the crazier the better at this point.

**Step 3: Organize the content.** Now look at all the ideas or questions you've written down. Together with your child decide if the material can be grouped together in any way. If the assignment is to do a report on aardvarks, for instance, you might find the information clusters into categories such as what they look like, where they live, what they eat, who their enemies are, how they protect themselves, etc. Create topic headings and then write the details under each topic heading. Some parents find that it's helpful to use post-its for this process. During the brainstorming phase, each individual idea or question is written on a separate post-it. The post-its can then be organized on a table under topic headings to form an outline of the paper. The paper can then be written (or dictated) from this outline.

**Step 4: Write the opening paragraph.** This is often the hardest part of the paper to write. The opening paragraph, at its most basic level, describes very succinctly what the paper will be about. For instance, an opening paragraph on a report about aardvarks might read:

This paper is about a strange animal called an aardvark. By the time you finish reading it, you will know what they look like, where they live, what they eat, who their enemies are and how they protect themselves.

The one other thing that the opening paragraph should try to do is “grab the reader”—give the reader an interesting piece of information to tease his/her curiosity. At the end of the paragraph above, for instance, two more sentences might be added: “The reader will also learn the meaning of the word *aardvark* and what language it comes from. And if that hasn’t peeked your interest, I will also tell you why the aardvark has a sticky tongue—although you may not want to know this!”

Children with written production problems will have trouble writing the opening paragraph by themselves and may need your help. You may be able to help by asking general questions, such as “What do you want people to know after they read your paper?” Or “why do you think people might be interested in reading this?” If they need more help than that, you may want to give them a model to work from. You could write an opening paragraph on a topic similar to the one your child is working on, or you could use the paragraph here as an example. If your child needs more guided help writing this paragraph, give it to them. Then see if he/she can continue on without the need for as much support. Remember, the first paragraph is often the hardest part of the paper to write.

**Step 5: Write the rest of the paper.** To give your child just a little more guidance, suggest that the rest of the paper be divided into sections with a heading for each section (sort of the way this manual is written). Help him or her make a list of the headings and then see if he/she can continue on with the writing task alone.

In the early stages of learning to write, children with written language or written production problems need a great deal of help. You may feel like you’re writing half the paper in the early stages. It should get better with time, especially if you end each writing session by giving your child some positive feedback about something done well. Note in particular any improvement since the last writing assignment. You might say, “I really like the way you were able to come up with the headings on your own this time, with no help from me.”

If you don’t see progress over time—or if you feel you lack the time or skills to teach your child to do this kind writing, then you should probably talk with your child’s teacher to see if additional support can be provided in school. Even if you are willing to help out in this way, you may want to ask for more help in school if you believe that your child’s writing skills are significantly delayed compared to other children of the same age.

### **Part III: What Role Does the Parent Play in Helping Children Manage Homework?**

The role parents can play in helping children with homework problems depends both on the age of the child and the willingness of the parent to intervene and to expend time and energy. No matter the age of the child or the level of parental involvement, however, it is important for parents to communicate to their children that homework is a responsibility they need to take seriously. They may not always agree about the kind, amount, and quality of the homework their children have been assigned, but if children get the message that, in their parents' eyes, homework doesn't matter or is a waste of time, then not only will that affect how their children approach homework, but it will also likely have a negative effect on how they view schooling as a whole. And since doing well in school is the best way to open doors to possibilities for life after school is finished, then parents are advised to communicate the value of both schoolwork and homework to their children.

This is not to say that parents should never question the kind, amount, or quality of homework their children are assigned. When homework is continuously stressful or when the work children are expected to do does not match their skill level, then parents should talk to teachers or principals about the nature of the work assigned. Parents have a legitimate role in advocating for their children, and they often see signs of stress or unhappiness that children hide from teachers. By sharing these observations with teachers, it is quite likely that ways can be found to relieve the stress or reduce the unhappiness.

Beyond communicating to their children that homework is important and they expect that it will get done, the specific role parents play changes somewhat as children continue through school. The remainder of this section will address the roles parents should play at different age levels.

#### **Elementary School**

During the early years in school, homework assignments tend to be brief and are usually designed to give children practice at skills they have been taught in school. The most common assignments in the early grades are math and spelling. When longer assignments are introduced, book reports and eventually content area reports (i.e., science and social studies) are the most likely assignments.

In the early school years, parents can do two things: 1) communicate the importance of homework; and 2) establish homework routines. Now is the time to establish a time and place for homework. By building it into children's schedules as a "given" from first grade on, children will view homework time as part of their day, as predictable as meals and bedtime.

In the beginning, parents may need to sit with their children as they do their homework. As soon as possible, however, they should look for ways to reinforce children for working independently. For some children, sitting with them for the first five minutes (or the first 2 math problems) may be enough to have them off and running on their own. For other children, it may take a little more time and encouragement. Parents should remember to praise children for working on their own. If they check homework to assess quality, the emphasis should be on providing positive feedback. Parents should not feel obligated to correct every mistake a child may make on a homework assignment. Teachers need to see the kinds of mistakes children make on homework so they can assess whether additional instruction is needed. If, as time goes on, parents feel a child is rushing through the work without sufficient attention to accuracy, they can address quality then, but until they see this as a recurring pattern, they should look for ways to praise a child for positive attributes rather than point out negative ones.

By late elementary school, most children are able to complete most homework assignments independently, with little assistance from parents other than reminders that the homework time has arrived. At the same time, it is quite normal for children to need help and support for longer term projects or for the occasional assignment where they may be confused or failed to grasp the concepts when they were explained in class. If your child is requiring further explanation or instruction for most homework assignments, then a conference with his/her teacher is recommended. The same is true if each night deteriorates into battles between parent and child which leads everyone in the family to dread the end of each day.

## **Middle School**

Homework often becomes a more complicated issue at the middle school level—but then, parenting in general becomes more complicated as children enter the early stages of adolescence! Youngsters at this age change rapidly—physically, emotionally, and cognitively—and there are developmental tasks appropriate to the age that may make it difficult for parents to supervise homework effectively. Breaking away from parental authority is one such task, and the importance of the peer group takes on greater prominence. As youngsters begin to discover that their parents don't know everything, they may start to question whether they know anything, and resistance to their guidance regarding homework may be part of the fallout from this discovery (or adolescent "conceit").

While it is appropriate for parents to loosen the reins a little at this age so that their children can learn to make good choices and develop a greater sense of responsibility, the middle school years are a critical period that can affect how the rest of adolescence progresses. Although their children may be pushing away parents, research shows that youngsters who live in families that maintain close ties and continue to spend time together are more likely to be successful students throughout the remaining school years.

If values around homework have been well established before now, parents may be spared greater problems during the middle school years. But many youngsters need extra support as they transition from elementary to middle school. This transition usually involved adjusting to greater homework expectations—in part because youngsters for the first time may have several teachers assigning homework and homework assignments are not always done in a coordinated fashion. Using an incentive system for a brief time to help a youngster adjust to the increased homework load may help ease this transition.

Having multiple teachers also increases the organizational demands placed on students, as each teacher may have different routines and requirements surrounding homework. For youngsters who don't manage these increased organizational demands well, a coordinated effort by parents and teachers to help them adjust may be necessary. This may mean designing a home-school communication system to enable parents and teachers to keep better track of homework (using the Weekly Homework Report included in the appendix or something similar).

Most middle school youngsters resist having their parents hang over their shoulders while they do homework. It is appropriate to ease up on the level of supervision if reports from school do not indicate problems. If parents are concerned about whether their child can work independently, they may want to contact the child's homeroom teacher or guidance counselor and have them monitor the situation for awhile to make sure major problems do not arise. With less supervision some youngsters dig themselves into a hole at this age, especially if they have teachers who are somewhat lax or intermittent in collecting homework assignments. Mid-term progress reports are designed to catch most of these problems, but if parents are concerned that a mid-course correction may be too late, they may want to arrange for more frequent progress reports.

Another change in homework expectations that occurs at the middle school level is an increase in long-term project assignments. Many youngsters are unable to manage these assignments without help with planning. Creating a calendar or schedule which includes breaking down the assignment into subtasks is the best way to help students manage. A project planning sheet is included in the Appendix to help parents do this. If youngsters resist having parents do this, then it may make sense to contact the youngster's teacher to see if timelines can't be built in when the assignments are given.

For youngsters with problems with written production, middle school is a particularly challenging time. Parents may find they need to increase their level of support to help their children through these years. This may include allowing the child to dictate some assignments if the tasks seem too overwhelming to them.

Finally, if the homework wars at this age place more stress on the family than it can comfortably bear, then consultation with the child's teachers may be warranted. Many schools offer after school homework clubs that reduce the burden on parents. Some schools build in homework rooms where youngsters who fail to do their homework the night before go to complete the work before going to their classes. There are times when it makes the most sense for the school to impose the penalties for unfinished homework rather than the parents.

## **High School**

By high school, the majority of students have developed independence with respect to organizing their homework and completing assignments. For some students, however, particularly those with learning or attention disorders, homework problems continue. For youngsters with more significant homework problems, home-school collaboration to address the problems will likely be necessary. The following interventions should be considered:

- Building in a communication system for parents to track homework completion. This system should not be dependent on the student, since youngsters with more significant homework problems tend not to be reliable informants. This kind of system tends to work best when one teacher takes responsibility on a daily basis, preferably just before the student leaves for the day, of checking the agenda book to make sure all assignments are listed. An alternative monitoring system, which is easier to implement, is to have a case manager on a weekly basis collect from all teachers reports and specifics of any missing assignments. These are written on a progress report which a parent can pick up. This works best when the progress report is collected on a Thursday or a Friday, since this enables the student's parents to determine how the weekend will be spent (with desirable activities postponed until homework is completed).
- Developing a behavior plan that is geared to the students' interests and preferred activities. This should be developed with the full participation of the student in a collaborative manner to increase ownership over the plan. Access to preferred activities (such as telephone time, trips to the mall, or the use of the family car) can be built in as rewards. It is often helpful to work with a third party mediator (such as a school psychologist, counselor, or therapist) to develop a plan.
- Accessing after school homework clubs or building time into the student's school schedule (e.g., supervised study halls) so that homework is completed before the student comes home from school.
- In extreme cases, reducing and modifying homework expectations. This could be built into a special education or 504 Plan which could be developed to formalize the process.



- Finding a tutor or “coach” to work with the youngster on problems associated with homework. The job of a coach is to help students stay on top of assignments, make good decisions about how they will spend their time, and break down long term assignments into smaller pieces. Ideally, finding someone in the school to act as coach is recommended; it should be someone with whom the youngster has a good working relationship—preferably an individual selected by the youngster himself/herself. The job of a coach is to encourage and support the students as well as help them problem solve when recurring problems arise. At times, the coach also has to be a “nag,” which is why a good working relationship between coach and student is essential to the success of this intervention. A manual describing the coaching process is available from Multi-Health Systems (*Dawson & Guare, Coaching the ADHD Student*).

When considering how to intervene with homework problems at the high school level, parents need to consider the nature and quality of the relationship they have with their child, but also the youngster’s long term goals. For students who plan to go on to college, the goal of both parents and students should be to have the student be able to function with full independence before they graduate. Students who require significant support from either parents or teachers by the time they’re seniors are often unprepared for the college environment where there are no adults supervising how they spend their time or the quality of the work they produce. If parents find that they are still playing a significant role in supervising homework into their youngster’s junior year in high school, they may want to consult either school personnel or other professionals regarding how they can help their youngster gain greater independence. Counseling may be appropriate as well as tutoring or coaching.

### **Final Comments**

As a survivor of the “homework wars” myself, I know that this can be the most challenging aspect of a child’s schooling for parents. I hope the suggestions in this manual are useful and offer some relief to parents who may be struggling with specific homework problems with their own children. If readers of this manual have suggestions for how it may be improved, please contact me (email address: [pegdawson@comcast.net](mailto:pegdawson@comcast.net))

### **References**

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