HOMEWORK: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

By Peg Dawson, EdD, NCSP
Seacoast Mental Health Center, Portsmouth, NH

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

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 experts on the topic have drawn some common conclusions.

Background

Harris Cooper, a leading homework researcher, examined more than 100 studies on the effects of homework and concluded that there is little evidence that homework at the elementary school level has an impact on school achievement. Studies at the junior high school level have found some modest benefits of homework, but studies of homework at the high school level have found that it has clear benefits.

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

Reasonable Homework Expectations

It is generally agreed that the younger the child, the less time the child should be expected to devote to homework. A general rule of thumb is that children do 10 minutes of homework for each grade level. Therefore, first graders should be expected to do about 10 minutes of homework, second graders 20 minutes, third graders 30 minutes, and so on. If your child is spending more than 10 minutes per grade level on work at night, then you may want to talk with your child's teacher about adjusting the workload.

Strategies to Make Homework Go More Smoothly

There are two key strategies parents can draw on to reduce homework hassles. The first is to establish clear routines around homework, including when and where homework gets done and setting up daily schedules for homework. The second is to build in rewards or incentives to use with children for whom "good grades" is not a sufficient reward for doing homework.

Homework Routines

Tasks are easiest to accomplish when tied to specific routines. By establishing daily routines for homework completion, you will not only make homework go more smoothly, but you will also be fostering a sense of order your child can apply to later life, including college and work.

Step 1. Find a location in the house where homework will be done. The right location will depend on your child and the culture of your 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 things 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. Ask your child where the best place is to work. Both you and your child need to discuss pros and cons of different settings to arrive at a mutually agreed upon location.

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 there is a clear workspace large enough to set out all the materials necessary for completing assignments. Outfit the homework center with the kinds of supplies

your child is most likely to need, such as pencils, pens, colored markers, rulers, scissors, a dictionary and thesaurus, graph paper, construction paper, glue and cellophane tape, lined paper, a calculator, spell checker, and, depending on the age and needs of your 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), then your child can keep the 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 your child can keep track of long-term assignments. Allowing children some leeway in decorating the homework center can help them feel at home there, but you should be careful that it does not become too cluttered with distracting materials.

Step 3. Establish a homework time. Your child should get in the habit of doing homework at the same time every day. The time may vary depending on the individual child. Some children need a break right after school to get some exercise and have a snack. Others need to start homework 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, it may be best to get homework done either before dinner or as early in the evening as the child can tolerate. The later it gets, the more tired the child becomes and the more slowly the homework gets done.

Step 4. Establish a daily homework schedule. In general, at least into middle school, the homework session should begin with your sitting down with your child and drawing up a homework schedule. You should review all the assignments and make sure your child understands them and has all the necessary materials. Ask your child to estimate how long it will take to complete each assignment. Then ask when each assignment will get started. If your child needs help with any assignment, then this should be determined at the beginning so that the start times can take into account parent availability. A Daily Homework Planner is included at the end of this handout and contains a place for identifying when breaks may be taken and what rewards may be earned.

Incentive Systems

Many children who are not 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, motivating the child to do homework with care and in a timely manner. For children who are not motivated by grades, parents will need to look for other rewards to help them get through their nightly chores. Incentive systems fall into two categories: simple and elaborate.

Simple incentive systems. The simplest incentive system is reminding the child of a *fun activity to do when homework is done*. It may be a favorite television show, 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 ("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 is done.

Elaborate incentive systems. These involve more planning and more work on the part of parents but in some cases are necessary to address more significant homework problems. More complex incentives systems might include a structure for earning points that could be used to "purchase" privileges or rewards or a system that provides greater reward for accomplishing more difficult homework tasks. 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 realistic in setting goals and deciding on rewards and penalties when they are involved in the decision-making process.

Building in breaks. These are good for the child who cannot quite make it to the end without a small reward en route. When creating the daily homework schedule, it may be useful with these children to identify when they will take their breaks. Some children prefer to take breaks at specific time intervals (every 15 minutes), while others do better when the breaks occur after they finish an activity. If you use this approach, you should discuss with your child how long the breaks will last and what will be done during the breaks (get a snack, call a friend, play one level on a video game). The Daily Homework Planner includes sections where breaks and end-of-homework rewards can be identified.

Building in choice. This can be an effective strategy for parents to use with children who resist homework. Choice can be incorporated into both the order in which the child agrees to complete assignments and the schedule they will follow to get the work done. Building in choice not only helps motivate children but can also reduce power struggles between parents and children.

Developing Incentive Systems

Step 1. Describe the problem behaviors. 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 is 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. It is important to be as specific as possible when describing the problem behaviors. 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.*

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. 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, and 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. It may be a good idea if you are having difficulty designing a system that works to consult a specialist, such as a school psychologist or counselor, for assistance.

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. 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 does not earn that point. Parents should also 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; that is, avoiding penalties they are either unable or unwilling to impose (e.g., if both parents work and are not at home, they cannot monitor whether a child is beginning homework right after school, so an alternative contract may need to be written).

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. Your child over time may be willing to drop the use of an incentive system altogether. This is often a long-term goal, however, and you should be ready to write a new contract if your child slips back to bad habits once a system is dropped.

Involving Siblings

Parents often ask how they can develop one 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. Most siblings understand this process if it is explained to them carefully. If there are problems, however, parents have several choices: (a) Set up a similar system for other children with appropriate goals (*every* child has *something* they could be working to improve), (b) make a more informal arrangement by promising to do something special from time to time with the other children in the family so they do not feel left out, or (c) have the child earn rewards that benefit the whole family (e.g., eating out at a favorite restaurant).

Adaptations and Further Support

Suggestions provided in this handout will need to be adapted to the particular age of your child. Greater supervision and involvement on the part of parents is the norm with children during the elementary school years, while, by high school, most parents find they can pull back and let their children take more control over homework schedules. Middle school is often the turning point, and parents will need to make decisions about how involved to be in homework based on the developmental level of their children. If problems arise that seem intractable at any age, consult your child's teacher or a school psychologist.

Resources

Canter, L. (1993). *Homework without tears.* New York: HarperPerennial. ISBN: 0062731327.

Dawson, P. (2001). *Homework problems and solutions.* Unpublished manual. For information on obtaining a copy, contact Peg Dawson at her e-mail address

(Please be aware that e-mail addresses may change): *pegdawson@comcast.net*

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2003). *Executive skills in children and adolescents: A practical guide to assessment and interventions.* New York: Guilford. ISBN: 1572309288.

Romain, T., & Verdick, E. (1997). *How to do homework without throwing up.* Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing. ISBN: 1575420112.

Peg Dawson, EdD, NCSP, is a school psychologist with the Center for Learning Attention Disorders of the Seacoast Mental Health Center in Portsmouth, NH, and a past president of the National Association of School Psychologists.

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.

Daily Homework Planner

Date: _____

Subject/Assignment	Do I have all the materials?	Do I need help?	Who will help me?	How long will it take?	When will I start?
	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐			
	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐			
	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐			
	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐			
	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐			
	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐			

When will I take breaks?	What will be my reward for following my plan?

This form is reprinted with permission from Guilford Publishers, from Dawson, P. & Guare, R. (2003). *Executive skills in children and adolescents: A practical guide to assessment and interventions.*

Incentive Planning Sheet

Problem Behaviors

Goal

Possible Rewards

Daily Weekly Long-Term

Possible Penalties

Homework Contract

Student agrees to: _____

_____

To help student reach goal, parents will: _____

_____

Student will earn: _____

_____

If student fails to meet agreement student will: _____

_____

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.