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Ask the Expert Chat Series

Jan. 18, 2012 – ADHD and Homework Struggles

Moderators – NRC Staff

Expert – Ann Dolin, MEd

Moderator 1: Thank you for joining us today. We will begin shortly. : Today's topic is "ADHD and Homework Struggles." You may begin submitting your questions.

Just to remind everybody, this is a moderated chat. All questions go to the moderator and we will do our best to post as many of your questions as possible.

It's likely that many of you may have similar questions dealing with the same issue. Even though your particular question may not be posted, please try to see how Ann Dolin's responses to other question may apply to your situation.

Thank you Ann Dolin for being here today. Are you ready to begin?

Ann Dolin: Yes, I'm ready!

Tammy: I have a 10 year old son with ADHD; he consistently procrastinates, although I remind him every day to do his homework due at the end of the week. Any way to get him more excited about homework so he can get it done earlier than later?

Ann Dolin: The best thing to do is to have a predictable schedule. About a 30 minute break after school is a good amount of time before getting started. When kids know what to expect day in and day out, they are less likely to procrastinate.

In addition, consider the "tolerable ten." Set the timer for ten minutes and encourage your son to work as hard as he can for just 10 minutes Often, this sense of urgency gets kids over the hump of beginning. After ten minutes, he can take a break or keep on working. Most often, kids can keep on going.

Maggie: I have no idea how to start helping my 8th grade son with his homework. I think he has the desire but he finds it extremely "boring." How do you teach a kid to "study?"

Ann Dolin: It's tough with an 8th grader because many, especially those with ADHD, need help, but they are resistant to a parent's overtures. Often "boring" means "I'm overwhelmed and underprepared."

If this is the case, then help your son to prioritize his work when he gets home. Ask "what will you do first?" Help him get started. Make sure he understands the directions and can do the work. Once you know that to be the case, let him go at it alone.

Be within earshot so you can help when needed, but by 8th grade, you want to be a supporter, not a doer.

Greensnow: Our 14 year old son struggles with remembering what homework he has and time management for projects (i.e. spending an hour just searching for a couple images per slide). What can we do?

Ann Dolin: Ah! I know the problem well! Let's address the remembering homework part first. If your son has a locker, which he probably does at 14, encourage him to place any book, paper, or notebook that needs to come home at the end of the day at the bottom of the locker. You can even buy him a little container. At the end of the day, he simply dumps what's in the box into his backpack. That will help with the forgetting problem.

Time management is another animal, especially when it comes to long-term projects. These are the enemies of kids with ADHD. Even though we might think that a 14 year old can plan ahead, it's unlikely to happen. Sit with your son and make a game plan. Take the big project and break it down into steps. Have him write these small tasks into his assignment notebook. Make a big deal of it when he's accomplished a task.

Mrsugar: Hi, my 6th grade daughter has ADHD problems with executive function. She is very smart, but very slow to complete homework (an hour of homework would take her 3 hours to do). Many teachers tell us to just stop after 1 hour, but wouldn't that put her behind the other kids in an academic sense?

Ann Dolin: Yes, it would. Your teacher's suggestion is a good one, but if you did that, your daughter would be very far behind. The best thing to do is to use a timer.

Some kids are "Super Bowl" kids. You know, the Super Bowl is on for four hours but the game is one hour. Some of our kids will sit and do homework for three hours and really get about a half hour of work done.

Two options: 1. Use a timer. Help your daughter to set it in short chunks, like 17 minutes to be novel. Tell her to work as hard as she can during that time. Slowly make the time longer, but never more than 30 minutes.

If you feel your daughter can work a little faster, put a cap on it. No kid should be doing three hours of HW in 6th grade. Consider a cap of two hours or even less. There is such a thing as natural consequences. She may have to go to school with it partially done.

Moderator 1: Want to receive well-rounded comprehensive knowledge about ADHD? [Parent to Parent](#) courses offered in local communities and online, provide educational information and support for individuals and families dealing with ADHD and learning to navigate the challenges of ADHD across the lifespan. Learn more about our [Parent to Parent classes!](#)

Page: how can I keep my 4th grader focused on homework after being at school all day? Currently we have to do homework right after school or I will never get him back to it.

Ann Dolin: Kids have a limited amount of willpower. Your child may need a break after school, but you may have to control what he does during that break. For example, many kids are quick to play Xbox, video games, or watch TV. It's often hard to get a child away from a screen. Consider giving a break, but limiting it to outside play or another activity that doesn't involve screen time.

Some students focus better when given a fidget toy. This allows kids that seek sensory stimulation and are often grabbing or touching something to get that input. My favorite is Tangle Jr. you can buy it at tanglecreations.com.

Caro: Do you feel video games can help stimulate or activate a child with the inattentive type ADHD to have more mental energy for homework?

Ann Dolin: It depends if the child must "get to the next level!" Have you heard that from your child before... "Wait mom, I'll start when I "get to the next level." For some children, games are addictive, and they are unable to detach. For others, they may provide stimulation. Aerobic exercise is probably a better type of activation.

PracticalHelpforParents: Can you talk about the differences in approaches to HW based on ADHD subtype? (Inattentive vs. hyperactive vs. combined)

Ann Dolin: Sure! Hyperactive and combined type children need fidget toys, breaks between assignments and in many cases exercise before starting homework. Often, these are our kids that rush through HW with little attention to detail. Inattentive type students are our dawdlers. They can drag an hour of HW on for three hours. They need a sense of urgency to get moving.

Moderator 1: For more information about parenting and family life, check out Nadine Taylor-Barnes's monthly CHADD blog. In addition to Ms. Taylor-Barnes' writing monthly on parenting, Gina Pera discusses how ADHD affects adult relationships, and Nancy Ratey discusses coaching. Stay updated on our new blogs by visiting www.chadd.org weekly!

MaryLaCanada: What suggestions do you have when your child has a project to be completed over a time period, for example, two weeks, but refuses to start until the night before the project is due, even after many reminders to start during the two-week period?

Ann Dolin: Sometimes, a parent's reminders go unheard. Instead of a verbal reminder, you may be better off sitting down with your child and creating a plan. For younger kids, I recommend getting a big tootsie roll or even a stack of baseball cards if you have a child who loves b-ball.

Break the candy in fourths or the stack into four piles. Ask your child - what are the four steps you need to do to get this project done? Write them down. Say, "when you finish each step, you will be rewarded with___." To many kids, time is abstract. A tangible item makes it more concrete.

Zoomer: My daughter has lots of trouble beginning - homework, writing assignment, almost anything. Is there something we can do to help her "get started"?

Ann Dolin: I mentioned this before, but it's really important, so I'll mention it again. Be sure you have a predictable schedule. When kids know when they are to start HW, procrastination is lessened. If you've tried a timer, consider rewarding your daughter for an on-time start.

For example, if she likes to stay up late, add 15 minutes to her bedtime if she begins her HW on time. Think about what's valuable to your child. So often, acknowledging good behavior makes change better than punishing it, especially for ADHD kids.

Page: how do you get them back on track after the break? And how long should the break be?

Ann Dolin: There are five times kids can do HW - right after school, after a short break, before dinner, after dinner, or before bed. Options 4 and 5 do not work for kids with ADHD. Starting too late in the day creates stress and rewards procrastination.

The break time depends on the age of your child. About 30 minutes for elementary, but the older kids get, the more they want to "chill" after school. Getting started before dinner is ideal.

JimB: Can you suggest strategies to focus on during HW given that medicine has worn off by then?

Ann Dolin: You may want to consult your physician about a short-acting medication for after school or a longer-acting daytime medication. I assume you've taken this route already! So... for your child, starting HW as early as possible is ideal.

Help your child break down HW into manageable parts. If he has an involved worksheet to do, it may feel overwhelming. Fold it in half. Have him do the top half, take a super quick break, and then the bottom half.

Color is novel and novelty improves attention. Use a neon colored reading guide, colored highlighting tape when highlighting while reading, underline key words in directions with favorite colors.

Moderator 1: To learn more about Managing Medication please see our [What We Know Sheet #3](#), for children and adolescents.

Connie: How do I keep my 16 year old daughter on track in High School? I do not get to see her homework. I just see the missed homework online viewing her grades. When I ask her about it, she always says she doesn't have any.

Ann Dolin: This is a very tough situation. High schoolers want so desperately to be independent, but they often lack the skills to do so. I would tie privileges to effort. That means, take the emphasis off grades (they're too long-term, too far out) and instead, put an emphasis on study time.

If your daughter drives, tie her driving privileges to the amount of time she spends studying each day. This study time can be homework completion, preparing for a test, really anything academic. If she doesn't drive, tie the privilege of going out with friends to effort.

mmccoy1566: My 17 year old is on an IEP yet still has no motivation and only fair grades. What can I do to help him improve his grades?

Ann Dolin: Does your son have college aspirations or hope to go on to community college? If so, get him thinking in that direction. Help him to peruse websites (about.com has a good section on GPA needed for certain colleges) to see what it takes for higher ed. When you're in the area of a university, drive through campus. These little things help kids start focusing beyond the here and now.

For high school kids that don't want to hear it from mom and dad, consider getting a tutor so that you're able to remove yourself from the role of "homework police." A good tutor is a neutral, third party person who doesn't have an emotional history with your child. This step can make a huge difference in effort and grades.

Case in point - I have two sons, 13 and 9, and I have tutors for both of them. Could I do it myself? Yes, I do this for a living and wrote a book on it (Homework Made Simple), but the fact is, I am their mother and they naturally respond to an outside person better than me.

Aic: How do you determine how much of the HW difficulty is ADHD related vs., I hate to say it, laziness? It's challenging to know what to expect much of the time.

Ann Dolin: The general rule of thumb is that homework should be 10 minutes per grade level. That means, for example, a 5th grader should have about 50 minutes of homework. BUT, and here's the big but, studies show that teachers underestimate how long it takes a student to do HW by 50%!! So that 50 minutes she thought she was assigning is really an hour and fifteen minutes. Let's add ADHD onto that and now you're talking close to two hours.

The only way to know is to pop in from time to time and observe your child. If she's off task the majority of the time, you've got a focus issue and not necessarily a HW issue. If she's on task the majority of the time, there is probably too much homework and the teacher may not realize how much she is assigning.

Consider keeping a HW log for 1-2 weeks. Write down the date and how long it took your child to complete the HW. Write down comments. For example, is it mostly math she's struggling with or is it

across the board? You will probably see a pattern. Bring it to the teacher and ask for suggestions on how she can help.

Chapsteve: What is your opinion about getting 504 accommodations or just working informally with the school?

Ann Dolin: Good question! It depends on the needs of your child and if the problem has been chronic. With some children, they are able to manage their ADHD quite well and seem to be on the upswing. They seem to be getting better each year. If this is the case, informal is probably just fine.

However, I'm a strong believer in 504s. The reason is that you can have one teacher who is simply fabulous and naturally does all these great things. Accommodations are no problem! As parents, we fall into that lull that it will be the same next year, but it often isn't.

If you foresee that your child will need accommodations going forward, get a 504. It's always best to have it in writing. You don't want to have to reinvent the wheel every year and cross your fingers that the teacher will make these accommodations out of the kindness of her heart.

Moderator 1: To learn more about working with the school, and your child's rights, please see our [What We Know Sheet #4: Educational Rights for Children with ADHD in Public Schools.](#)

Torry: How do I explain executive function problems to teachers?

Ann Dolin: Another great question. I just wrote an article about that which I posted on my website, www.ectutoring.com. It's in the section called "articles." The main thing you want to get across is that your child's struggles aren't a matter of not trying hard enough. These are innate problems with organization, time management, and focus.

Pick one area that you want the teacher to focus on. If it's organization, ask that she work with your son to help tidy his desk each week. Of course, it will be different for each child, but EF seems overwhelming to teachers and many just don't get it. Choose one or two things and start there.

Jillb: What are some interventions we can add to an IEP or 504 to help our child decrease the amount of missing or incomplete homework assignments?

Ann Dolin: You could ask for a Friday progress report. This means that the teachers are required to give you an update on all missing/incomplete work each Friday. Some teachers will do it willingly, but others will not. You may have to write "parent initiated Friday report," which means that you will have to email the teacher each Thursday as a reminder.

bombardier-gal: Can you give some advice, for us parents of high schoolers, on how to have our teens organized without taking over or getting frustrated with their progress?

Ann Dolin: Because a teen's executive functioning skills aren't fully developed, organization is often tough for them. Pick one thing you want to improve. Let's say mornings are chaotic because your teen

can't find papers, her binder, etc., and she's running around like crazy looking for things. Create a "launching pad."

This is a bin or box that goes by the door from which the child exits each morning. Have a family policy - all binders, books, sports equipment, etc. goes into the launching pad by 9 pm each night. That way, when your child is getting ready in the morning, everything is in one place. She launches into a new day in an organized way!

Agatha: What about the lying, hiding homework, throwing papers away, etc. that seems to come with ADHD?

Ann Dolin: Oh yes, that can certainly happen. Use the "trust but verify" method, just like the IRS does. That means you trust that your child is doing the HW, but you verify periodically by checking your school's online portal or communicating with teachers. Set expectations before you start doing this. Set rewards and consequences.

Really, you only want to know that homework is complete, that's it. When a child does this, you cannot get too picky or battles will escalate. Instead, aim for the child to simply do the homework. You can tackle quality later on.

Kapklein: What about the research showing that kids don't necessarily benefit from homework? Intuitively that makes sense to me. Besides, they've been working all day, and if they don't have it by now, is what they do at home really going to help? Sometimes I think I should just let my child go without doing the homework, and worry about it later when he is in HS.

Ann Dolin: You are correct about that research in the elementary grades. There is no evidence that HW improves academic performance in the early elementary grades, but there are studies that it helps with responsibility. The older the child gets, especially beginning in middle school, the more benefit he gains from HW. I personally believe the 10 minute per grade level guideline is fair. It's enough for reinforcement but does not wreck families. I consulted with a parent earlier today from a local private school. She told me the teachers told the parents to expect 5-7hours of HW over the weekends!!

Markeylou: I have a 10 year old son who has the inattentive type of ADHD. He gets very anxious and overwhelmed with his homework. It is heart-breaking. He is doing fine in school. He could be doing better but he misses a lot of instruction. How can I help him to reduce his stress?

Ann Dolin: It's really important to get this under control now and you are right to be concerned and to be addressing it now. So often, anxiety leads to perfectionism. Even if it doesn't, a good therapist can help your son with stress-reducing strategies and can give you the language to help calm him.

Inattentive kids often miss a lot of teacher directions. This is very anxiety-producing. Ask your son to be placed in close proximity of the teacher and to sit next to a peer who is usually on-task. When he sees his classmate doing something, it's his clue that he should probably be doing the same thing.

Pam_L: After a long school day many students with ADHD need "down time" to re-charge before they start homework. Any suggestions on how to manage this so they don't get distracted and avoid homework altogether?

Ann Dolin: Recharging is really important. Some kids can recharge by playing Angry Birds. It's really not addictive like other video games. Others cannot get engaged in screen time because they can't stop. Figure out what works for your child. Always encourage outside play or exercise. I know some families that feed their kids dinner at 4pm. That meal helps them to muster the energy to get going!

Tammie: For students with significant executive dysfunction. What is your opinion about email submission of homework for kids who really struggle with the task of getting hard copies to the right place on time? Thank you.

Ann Dolin: I love it! Many schools have "drop box" systems now where kids can simply drop their homework into the teacher's inbox. It works beautifully. Colleges do this, too, and it will be the wave of the future. If your child's school doesn't have this technology, consider setting up the arrangement with the teacher so that work can be emailed OR handed in in person. This way, your child has the option.

Agatha: Sometimes trying to manage my kid's schoolwork is just overwhelming, and I'm an organized person. How do you know if they're ready for college when you've been managing them for years?

Ann Dolin: I'm working with parents now who are in this situation. They have propped up their son for years. He's now a junior and mom is still sitting with him to organize his binder, checking the school's online portal, and emailing teachers. I'm working with her to take a few steps back, but at first she was very reticent. Why? Because she's incredibly fearful that if she does back off, he will not do anything. The answer is to back off slowly, not cold turkey. The plain fact is that kids with ADHD do need more parental support, but they also need independence. One idea is to have a family meeting each Sunday night. Talk about the week ahead, especially any long-term assignments that are coming up.

Help your child to prioritize and break these big tasks down. This type of help is okay. I can highly recommend a book by Pat Quinn called Ready for Take-Off. There's a parent edition and a student version, too.

Moderator 1: For more about behavior management please see our [What We Know # 7S: Behavioral Treatment for Children and Teenagers with ADHD](#).

DCN: My ADHD child doesn't really care about rewards and consequences--especially when it comes to completing homework assignments. Any thoughts on how to motivate someone who is not motivated?

Ann Dolin: You know, some kids just will not go to the dog and pony show. Your child may be motivated in other areas, but not when it comes to school. If you find that this isn't the case and he seems withdrawn across the board, I'd urge you to seek out a good therapist who specializes in ADHD.

Sometimes, kids are in a power struggle with their parents and will do anything to win. Unfortunately, there are no winners. If you think this may be the case, try to back off as much as you can by bringing in a third party, such as a tutor or mentor, who can help your child find success.

Moderator 1: Missed part of the chat? Past chat transcripts are available to CHADD members as a benefit. [Learn more about joining CHADD.](#)

This will be our final question. If we were unable to get to your question please contact one of our Health Information Specialists on ADHD by calling 1-800-233-4050 between 9 AM- 5PM EST or by clicking on the "[Ask a Question](#)" link on the top of [our website](#).

Lpcintern: What would you tell a parent whose student is performing on a passing level and is happy at that level, but the parent insists that the child is smart and can do much better?

Ann Dolin: This is a tough one for parents and it often occurs when the parents are go-getters but the child doesn't necessarily follow that mold. Here, you want to put the emphasis on process, not product. That means, don't worry as much about grades as you do about effort.

With effort, grades and success will come, but if a parent puts too much pressure on their type-B or type-C child, it often backfires into a power struggle. A better idea is to have the expectation that your child will study or work on HW for a certain amount of time per day (use the ten min. per grade level guideline). I hope that helps!!

Moderator 1: The National Resource Center on AD/HD hosts "Ask the Expert" chats every month! Our next chat on Relationships: Survival Tips for the non-ADHD Spouse/Partner with Terry Dickson is scheduled for Feb. 22 from 3:30-5 p.m.

We would like to thank everyone who participated in today's chat. Thank you Ann for your insights and advice, which will certainly help our participants with homework struggles.

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The views expressed in this chat are those of the guest expert and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), the National Resource Center on ADHD, or the CDC.

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