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To learn more about working with schools and your child's rights, see *What We Know #4: Educational Rights for Children with ADHD in Public Schools.*

For more about behavior management, see *What We Know # 7S: Behavioral Treatment for Children and Teenagers with ADHD.*

ADHD and Homework Struggles

A chat with Ann Dolin, MEd



ANN DOLIN, MEd, IS A FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER with over twenty years of teaching and tutoring experience. A recognized expert in education and learning disability issues, she has delivered hundreds of presentations focusing on academic achievement and parenting issues. Dolin is the author of the award-winning book *Homework Made Simple—Tips, Tools and Solutions for Stress-Free Homework* (Advantage Books, 2010). She lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and two children.

I have a ten-year-old son with ADHD; he consistently procrastinates, although I remind him every day to do his homework that is due at the end of the week. Is there any way to get him more excited about homework so he can get it done earlier rather than later?

The best thing to do is to have a predictable schedule. About a thirty-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 ten minutes. This sense of urgency often 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.

I have no idea how to start helping my eighth grader with his homework. I think he has the desire, but he finds it extremely “boring.” How do you teach a kid to study?

It's tough with an eighth 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 him, “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 the time your child is in eighth grade, you want to be a supporter, not a doer.

Our fourteen-year-old son struggles with remembering what homework he has and time management for projects (he may spend an hour just searching for a couple of images per slide). What can we do?

Let's address the remembering homework part first. If your son has a locker, which he probably does at fourteen, 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 fourteen-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.

My sixth-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 three hours to do). Many teachers tell us to just stop after one hour, but wouldn't that put her behind the other kids academically?

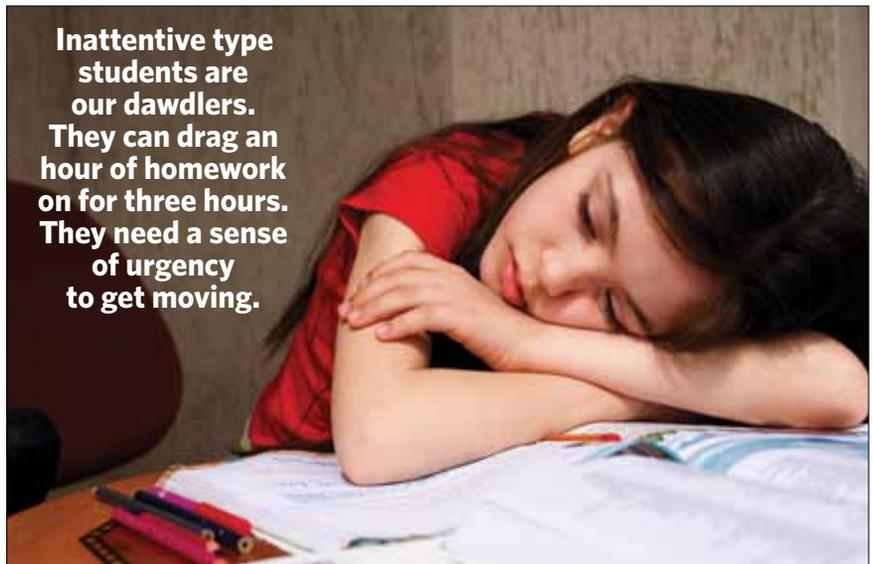
Yes, it would. The teachers' suggestion is a good one, but if you did that, your daughter would be very far behind. The best thing to do is to use a timer.

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.

Use a timer. Help your daughter to set it in short chunks, like seventeen 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 thirty minutes.

If you feel your daughter can work a little faster, put a cap on it. No kid should be doing three hours of homework in sixth 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.

Inattentive type students are our dawdlers. They can drag an hour of homework on for three hours. They need a sense of urgency to get moving.



How can I keep my fourth 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.

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 simulation and are often grabbing or touching something to get that input. My favorite is Tangle Jr.; you can buy it at tanglecreations.com.

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

It depends on whether 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, games may provide stimulation. Aerobic exercise is probably a better type of activation.

Can you talk about the differences in approaches to homework based on ADHD subtype?

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 homework with little attention to detail. Inattentive type students are our dawdlers. They can drag an hour of homework on for three hours. They need a sense of urgency to get moving.

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?

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 baseball.

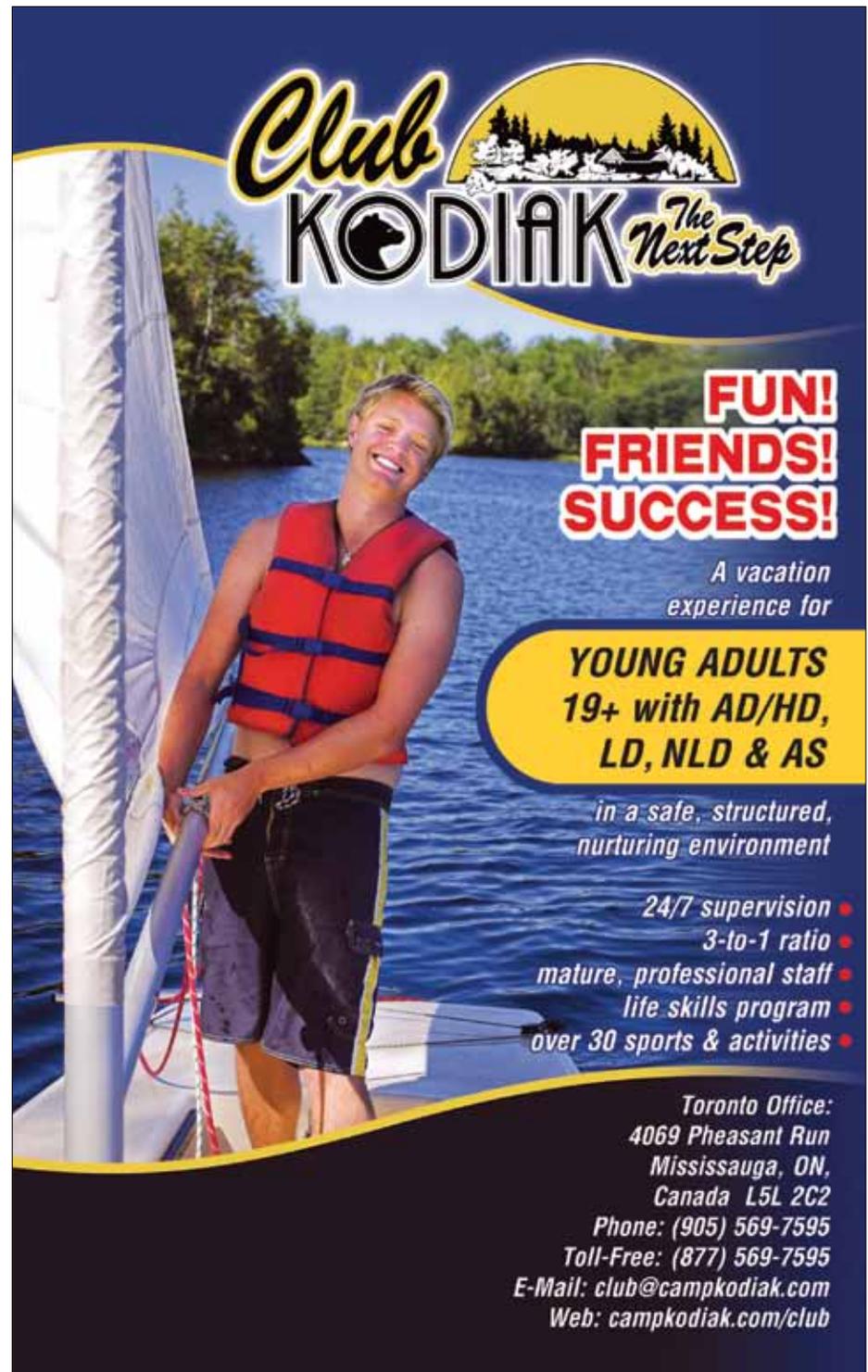
Break the candy in fourths or the stack into four piles. Ask your child, What are the four steps you need to do to get this project done? Write them down and say, When you finish each step, you will be rewarded with _____. To many kids, time is abstract. A tangible item makes it more concrete.

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

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 homework, 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 fifteen minutes to her bedtime if she begins her homework on time. Think about what's valuable to your child. So often, acknowledging good behavior makes change better than punishing it, especially for kids with ADHD.



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

There are five times kids can do homework—right after school, after a short break, before dinner, after dinner, or before bed. Options four and five 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 thirty minutes for elementary, but the older kids get, the more they want to “chill” after school. Getting started before dinner is ideal.

Can you suggest strategies to focus on during homework time, given that ADHD medicine has worn off by then?

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 homework as early as possible is ideal.

Help your child break down homework 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, and underline key words in directions with the child’s favorite colors.

How do I keep my sixteen-year-old daughter on track with homework in high school? I do not get to see her homework. I just see the missed homework online when I'm viewing her grades. When I ask her about it, she always says she doesn't have any.

This is a very tough situation. High schoolers want so desperately to be independent, but they often lack the skills to be 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.

How do you determine how much of the homework difficulty is ADHD-related versus—I hate to say it—laziness?

The general rule of thumb is that homework should be ten minutes per grade level. That means, for example, a fifth grader should have about fifty minutes of homework. But studies show that teachers underestimate how long it takes a student to do homework by fifty percent! So that fifty 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 homework 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 homework log for one to two weeks. Write down the date and how long it took your child to complete the homework. 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.

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

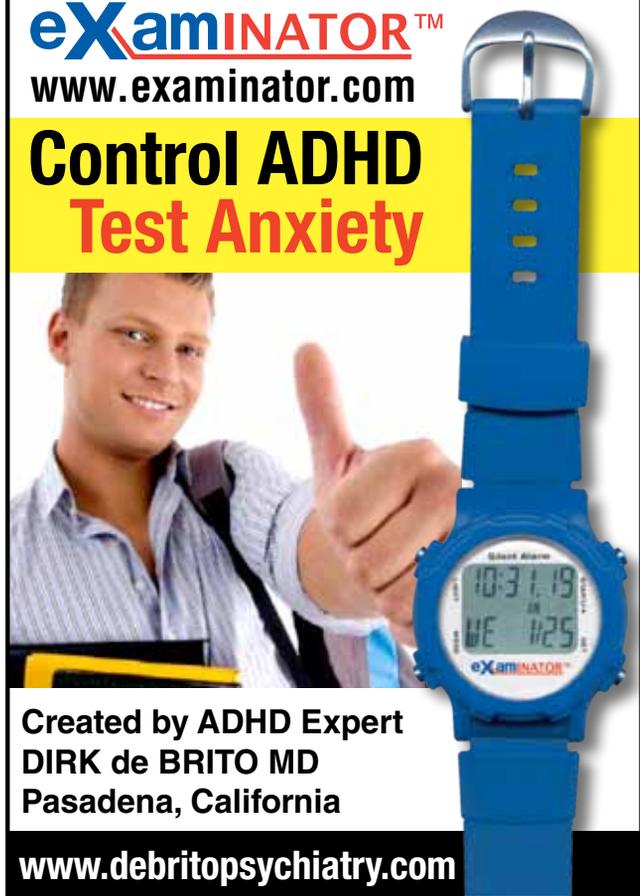
You could ask for a Friday progress report. This means that the teachers are required to give you an update on all missing/incomplete work each Friday. Some teachers will do it willingly, but others will not. You may have to write “parent-initiated Friday report,” which means that you will have to email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

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

Use the “trust but verify” method, just like the IRS does. That means you trust that your child is doing the homework, but you verify periodically by checking your school’s online portal or communicating with teachers. Set expectations before you

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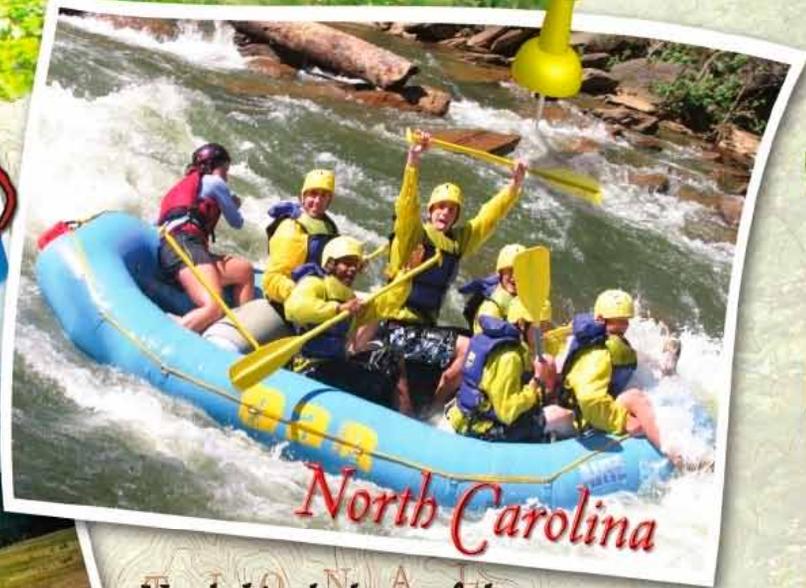
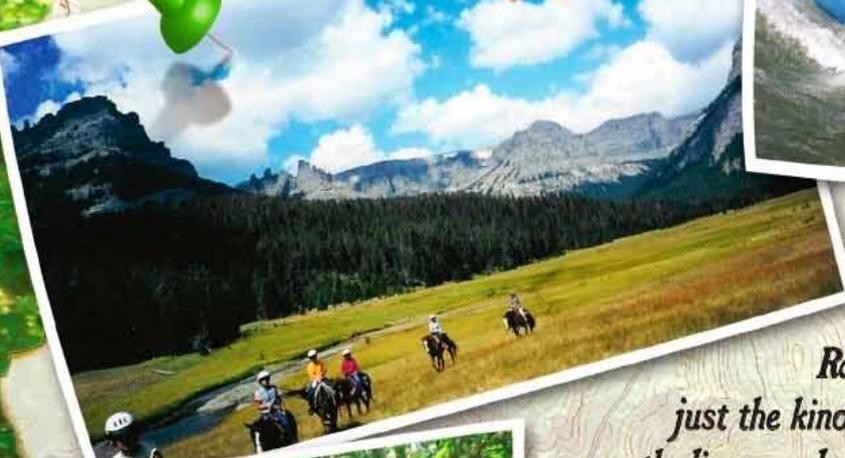


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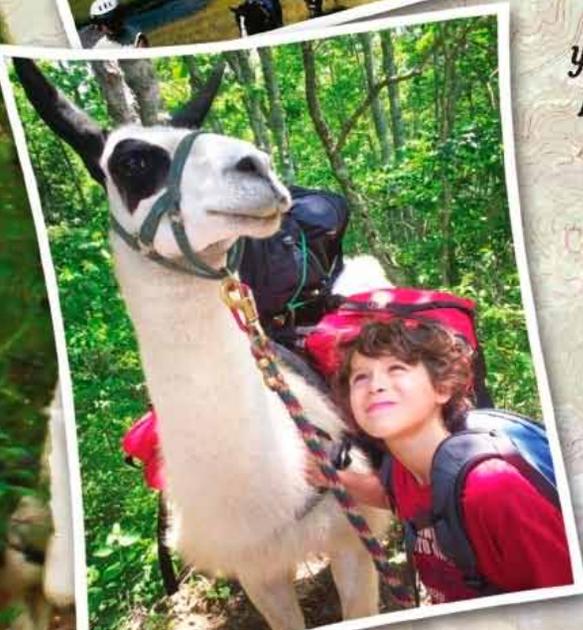
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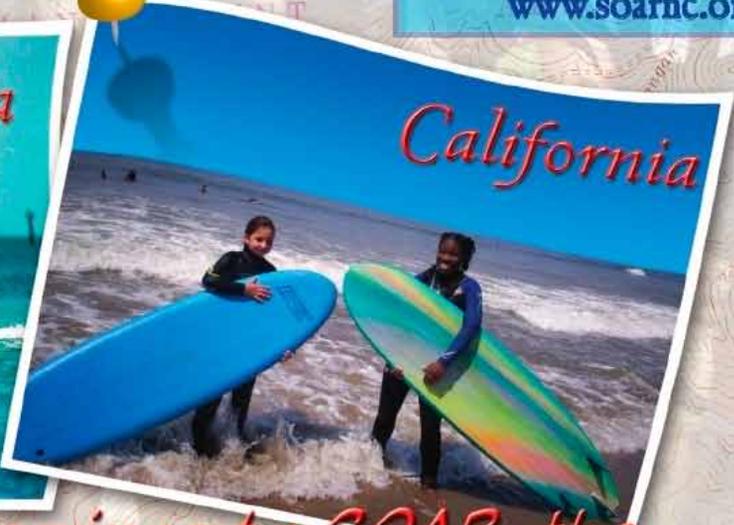
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Hyperactive and combined type children need fidget toys, breaks between assignments, and, in many cases, exercise before starting homework. Often, these are our kids that rush through homework with little attention to detail.

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.

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 high school.

You are correct about that research in the elementary grades. There is no evidence that homework 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 homework. I personally believe the ten-minute-per-grade-level guideline is fair. It's enough for reinforcement but does not wreck families.

I have a ten-year-old son who has the inattentive type of ADHD. He gets very anxious and overwhelmed with his homework. It is heartbreaking. 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?

It's really important to get this under control now, and you are right to be concerned and to be ad-

ressing 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 to 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.

After a long school day many students with ADHD need "downtime" to recharge before they start homework. Any suggestions on how to manage this so they don't get distracted and avoid homework altogether?

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 four o'clock. That meal helps them to muster the energy to get going!

For students with significant executive dysfunction, kids who really struggle with the task of getting hard copies to the right place on time, what is your opinion about email submission of homework?

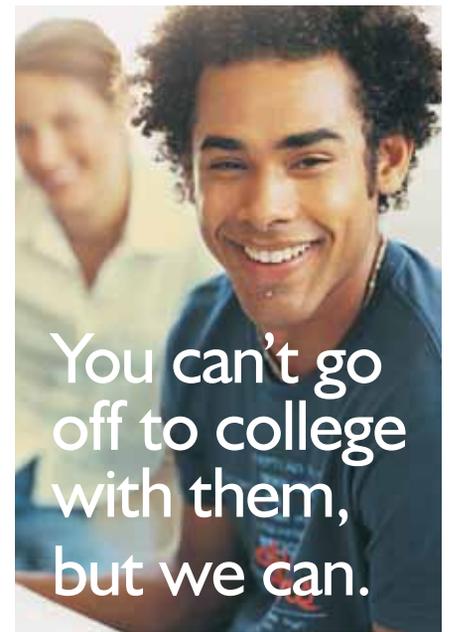
I love it! Many schools have drop-box systems now where kids can simply drop their homework into the teacher's inbox. It works beautifully. Colleges do this, too, and it will be the wave of the future. If your child's school doesn't have this technology, consider setting up the arrangement with the teacher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

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?

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. They 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* (Magination, 2010). There's a parent edition and a student version, too. 



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