



When Homework

by Richard Lougy, LMFT, and David Rosenthal, MD

The topic of homework comes up frequently when parents talk about problems in school.

The child with ADHD is asked to be attentive, not impulsive, and focused on his or her homework. Getting the child to pay attention in the classroom can be a challenge. Asking the child to attend to homework can be especially difficult.

Struggles over homework can become more intense as the child advances in grades, when more written work is the norm. Book reports, long-term projects, and daily assignments are often part of the school experience. In the upper grades, homework necessitates not only efficient use of time, but also understanding and comprehension of the assignment. Remembering to bring home books and materials needed to complete the work is an ongoing struggle for children and adolescents with ADHD.

Children affected by ADHD are not good managers of time, and they don't always attend or understand directions or concepts given in the classroom. They will come home without a good understanding of what is asked of them, or they will have only part or none of the material required to finish the assignment. Parents often find themselves running to the school after the teacher has left and begging the custodian or office staff to let the child into his classroom to get books and materials.

Parental Responsibility

What is a parent's responsibility when it comes to homework? Sandra Rief, MA, shares these guidelines in *How to Reach and Teach Children with ADD/ADHD: Practical Techniques, Strategies, and Interventions* (second edition, Jossey-Bass, 2005).

1. Provide a quiet place for your child to work, away from the TV or other distractions.
2. Have appropriate materials, supplies, and lighting for homework.
3. Provide a place and system for checking the assignment calendar or homework sheet with the child. This list of things to check would also include school notices, permission slips, and other school communications.
4. Help the child prioritize activities and things to do in the evening.
5. Try to enforce a consistent routine as possible (dinner, homework, and bedtime).
6. Make sure books, completed homework, and binders are in the child's backpack for the next day.
7. Help the child write lists, schedules, and reminder notes.
8. Reward good organizational skills at home.

Note that doing the homework is the child's responsibility. The parent's responsibility is to check to see that the child is working in an environment that will minimize problem behaviors and increase productivity.

Is a Family Struggle

Tips for Homework Peace

- **Homework can be difficult for a child with ADHD and put a great amount of stress on the whole family.** Because of difficulties with focused and sustained attention, as well as high distractibility, an assignment that would generally take a half-hour may end up taking more than an hour.
- **Provide an environment in the home that can minimize ADHD behaviors.** Set up a learning space with few distractions. Put your child in a quiet area and break up the homework period into small blocks of time. Quiet area doesn't always mean isolated area. Often children do best when they can be monitored more closely, such as working at the kitchen table.
- **Remember, homework is your child's responsibility, not yours.** You can provide guidance, but don't do the work for your child. If the material is too difficult, ask for a conference with the teacher.
- **Don't jeopardize your relationship with your child over homework.** If necessary, and if you can afford it, hire a tutor to work with the child after school.

Don't jeopardize your relationship with your child

Your relationship with your child is the most important thing, and it must take priority over his or her completing homework. Some argue that homework is important in reinforcing learning and helping a child to become a more independent learner. Especially for children with ADHD, however, this model does not seem to work as effectively. "The absence of evidence supporting the value of homework before high school is generally acknowledged by experts in the field," writes Alfie Kohn in *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (DaCapo, 2006). Since homework can reinforce learning in secondary grades but has not been found to improve learning in primary grades, Kohn asks, "Why do we continue to administer this modern cod liver oil or even demand a larger dose?"

Parents often accept without questioning that homework is innately necessary and should be done by their child, no matter what negative consequences that may arise in completing this goal. For many parents, the dilemma is trying to balance what they know from nightly battles—that large amounts of homework are not only not helpful to their child but can bring great stress to the family—with the realization that some educators view this position as enabling and not in the child's best interest.

For children with ADHD, homework often requires more time to do properly and to finish, triggering unwarranted stress upon the child, as well as elevating negative parent/child interactions. Homework accommodations are not only needed but often required for children with ADHD. Through open discussions with teachers or through formal accommodations under a 504 plan or

IEP, parents can find respite from nightly battles and provide their child needed support.

Homework is not easy for children affected by ADHD. The child needs to know that his parent understands his difficulties by providing the support and guidance to help him be more successful. The first step is for the parent to ask the school for needed accommodations so that evenings are not consumed by tears and angry exchanges.

Since attitudes about homework may not be changing any day soon, here are some suggestions to help parents walk safely through the minefield of homework discontent.

You may not be able to be his teacher

Parents may make poor teachers of their own children, especially if they are dealing with the overwhelming stressors of parenting a child with ADHD. As one homeschooling parent shared, "My son was going to have a near-death experience at my hands if I continued teaching him." If you find that it is difficult to patiently teach your child, then provide support for him—but don't do his teacher's job.

Another parent expressed that she sometimes feels pressured or obligated to make sure her child finishes his math or writing assignment so his teacher won't be upset with her child or think she is an irresponsible parent. A parent can get into the role of being the teacher at home. This can sometimes lead to serious conflicts, with the child feeling angry and betrayed.

A seventh-grader told us that his father is not his teacher, "and he shouldn't act like he is!" This child wasn't just upset with his father because he made him do the homework, but because "all Dad does is ask about my homework." The relationship had become one-dimensional. They were no longer playing catch, going to the card shop for find new baseball cards, or riding bikes. The majority of their conversations centered on homework.

One father told us, "I make sure Don gets his homework done, no matter what happens." Unfortunately, this obligation had created serious conflicts. Like many parents who become the teacher at home, he spent much of their evening policing his child and begging, pleading, or threatening him over homework.

Communicate with the teacher regularly

Regular communication with the teacher is an important parental responsibility. Let your child's teacher know if your child is overloaded with homework. Sometimes the assignments are too long or complicated, and as your child advances in grade levels, the material can be too advanced for the parent to help. This is very important, because children with ADHD, even though they want to be successful, can become overanxious. Because they often struggle with anxiety coupled with unrecognized executive function dysfunction, it's important that the parent share with

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the teacher about the child's specific struggles related to finishing homework tasks. Because of struggles with EF cognitive processes, such as organization, time management, and working memory, daily homework assignments can be very difficult to manage and complete successfully.

Many children with ADHD show avoidance behaviors, such as lying about homework assignments or leaving books at school. It's important the parent attend to such behaviors because they can be early signs that the material is too difficult or the quantity of homework is too large.

Children may claim they don't have homework. Let your child know that you will talk with his teacher if this pattern seems out of the ordinary. Sometimes the child will honestly think no homework is required, and this may be true. At other times, however, he may be confused or simply doesn't want to be bothered with homework.

If your child is taking medication, it's important that you communicate closely with the doctor to make sure the medication is addressing the core ADHD symptoms. Often the doctor can provide suggestions so that evening dosages support the doing of homework.

Assignments may be too hard or long

Sometimes teachers give homework without considering the special needs presented by some children. These teachers need some guidance in understanding the unique difficulties children with ADHD face with homework. Academic accommodations are made daily in classrooms, and a parent is not out of line requesting a meeting to discuss homework concerns. Most of the time, the teacher will listen and make accommodations.

As the child moves up in grades, however, this kind of understanding sadly is less common. Often we rec-

ommend that the parent ask for a formal meeting to assess the appropriateness of a 504 plan. Parents can request that their child be brought up for an educational review by a student study team or its equivalent in the local school district.

First, however, it is best to take your concerns directly to teachers if they do not understand your child's special learning challenges that stem from his or her ADHD diagnosis. Then, if you feel you are still not being heard, speak with the school principal or the principal's supervisor at the district office.

It's important for parents to understand that their child can't use ADHD as a crutch for not doing schoolwork. ADHD is not a get-out-of-jail-free card—homework accommodations do not mean no homework at all. Most of the time, minor accommodations can bring about positive changes in the child's attitude toward school and homework.

When it comes to homework, a parent's role should be one of a loving coach, a person who gives guidance and provides structure, not the person who plays on the field. The parent doesn't do the child's homework, the child does it. The parent needs to provide support at home and be the child's advocate to ensure that accommodations, if needed, are made at the school site. **A**

Richard Lougy, LMFT, is a school psychologist, and **David Rosenthal, MD**, is a child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist. They have spoken nationally on ADHD and have been guest speakers on various radio programs. They coauthored three books on ADHD: *ADHD: A Survival Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Hope Press, 2002); *Teaching Young Children with ADHD: Successful Strategies and Practical Interventions for PreK-3* (Corwin Press, 2007); and *The Counselor's Guide to ADHD: What to Know and Do to Help Your Students* (Corwin Press, 2009). Their website is thesekidsaredrivingmecrazy.com.