

HANDLE Homework HASSLES

Attention asked six experts: If you could advise parents of children with ADHD about the subject of homework, what would you consider the three most helpful pieces of information?

Interventions that build lifelong habits

by Maureen A. McQuiggan, EdD

Tips and tricks for surviving the homework wars fill volumes. Strategies intended to “help” with homework often leave both parent and child feeling like they are just adding to the workload. The real key to success with homework rests in identifying strategies that work for all homework all the time. Here are three basic interventions that get the job done and build valuable lifelong habits:

- › **Process is more important than product.** In recent years, educators have perfected the art of outlining explicitly the product they expect from students. Rubrics and assignment contracts spell out clearly what teachers expect to see handed in. The missing link often rests with the process. Help your child get from “I haven’t even thought about the assignment” to handing in a quality product by creating process cards. Together with your child, outline clear and simple steps to completing the task. Cards for tasks such as learning new vocabulary and outlining reading materials can be used repeatedly to build both confidence and good work habits. Start each step with a motivational check box that can be ticked off for a sense of accomplishment.
- › **All reading assignments must be active.** Asking a child with ADHD to simply read a chapter for homework is like asking him or her to watch grass grow—many will comply, but in the end the grass and child remain unchanged. If reading assignments are not active, the brain is not engaged, attention wanders, and learning does not take place. Active reading strategies can involve asking students to locate key ideas in the reading, color coding answers to the end-of-chapter questions, or creating questions based on the reading.
- › **Build basic skills.** Basic skills are the gifts that keep on giving. Devoting a chunk of time in the summer to targeted basic skills practice such as increasing reading fluency, improving written language skills, or committing math facts to memory will help build your child’s automaticity. Students who read more fluently, compute with speed and accuracy, and write with ease will realize the benefits across all academic tasks.

Maureen A. McQuiggan, EdD, is the Literacy Coordinator for the Radnor Township School District in Radnor, Pennsylvania, and an adjunct professor in special education at Immaculata University. She is a member of the professional advisory board for Chester County/Main Line CHADD and the parent of two children affected by ADHD.



Communicate about struggles

by Courtney Calio

Students with ADHD feel overwhelmed with the idea of homework. Work outside of the school day requires time management, focus, and self-regulation—all skills that do not come easily for those fighting ADHD. Not to mention that the required task could be difficult, in a content area of little interest, or seen by the child as pointless. These possible culprits are at the core of the all-too-familiar scene: fighting and crying over homework with your child at the kitchen table, plugging through one spelling word or math fact at a time.

The reality is that all children of this generation are required to sustain a daily routine that requires intense academic rigor. Eligible content and high-stakes standardized testing leave little room in the school day to release extra energy or engage in self-selected learning activities. Unfortunately, there is little reprieve from this routine for many children at dismissal time. The transition from school to home, usually with well-deserved extracurricular activities jammed in between, creates a difficult dilemma. How do you explain to your child who has ADHD that he or she must be focused all day at school to do his or her best work, but then must also refocus at home to do more schoolwork?

As an elementary educator, I have come to realize that only so much can be expected at home from all children, that the smallest modifications can reap huge rewards, and that without communication (from teacher, parent and child) the battle is never won. My advice to parents of children with ADHD:

- › **You must communicate with your child’s teacher about homework.** Determine the exact purpose of the homework. Is the teacher open to differentiating the assignment to meet the strengths of your student? Your child’s teacher will not understand any struggles going on at home unless you communicate them and work together to develop possible alternatives.
- › **Consider your child’s learning style.** Is your child a great artist, musician, or athlete? Does your child love technology? Seek out ways to complete a reading log or memorize spelling words and math facts that involve your child’s natural strengths, known as multiple intelligences in the world of education. Find activities that are enjoyable but meaningful and produce the same results.
- › **Stay positive and involve your child in open dialogue.** Involve your child in discussions with the teacher and demonstrate how to communicate and voice struggles. Your child knows he or she has ADHD



and it will always present challenges in life. There will be many times when modifications can't be made and when one just has to get the job done. Explain this, each and every time. Show your child that you are advocating for him or her, that you understand, and that learning how to cope and overcome will make him or her stronger.

Courtney Calio, MEd, teaches fifth grade in the Kennett Consolidated School District in Pennsylvania.



Hire homework helpers

by Sheila Grant

As a parent, I have experienced the stress and tension of trying to get my kids to complete their homework. When you break it down, the steps required to complete homework can be especially challenging for a student with ADHD:

- › Figure out the assignment. (Big problem, because it is not always written down.)
- › Do you have the right materials to complete assignment? (Is the book at home?)
- › Do you have an understanding of what is required? (Your child may have the assignment, but does not really know what is required.)
- › Complete the assignment. (This is the hard part.)
- › Hand in the assignment. (How many times does your child finally complete homework, only to leave it on kitchen table?)

After many stressful nights, tears, and fights, hiring a homework helper was the best thing I ever did for my family when my kids were in elementary and middle school. I hired many wonderful college students and graduate students over the years. Some were studying to be special

education teachers. Once or twice a week, the homework helper sat in the kitchen with my child and supervised homework. The job included going through the backpack to find all of the errant papers, checking assignment books, working on organization, and making sure the assignments were complete and put away in the backpack. I was able to prepare dinner quietly; there were no fights, and my children felt a sense of accomplishment and confidence in their ability to do the work.

Homework helpers do not cost nearly as much as a tutor; figure on paying between \$8 and \$15 per hour. Here are my tips:

- › **If you have a university near you, try posting an ad.** There are always students who need jobs and are perfect for elementary age through high school. Mature high school students would work well for elementary-age children.
- › **Be prepared to change over homework helpers if they do not work out.** Look for one that is very organized, very kind, and comfortable setting limits with your child. For example, if you asked my son if he had any homework, he would frequently say no because he simply forgot. The effective homework helper did not stop there, but went through the backpack and the assignment book and almost always found something that needed to be done, even if it was simply organizing school materials or reviewing material.
- › **Ask for an extra set of books to be kept at home.** This accommodation should be a part of the child's IEP or 504 Plan to ensure you get that extra set of books.

Sheila Grant is the coordinator of the Chester County/Main Line CHADD parent support group and the parent of a school-age child affected by ADHD.



Establish the homework ritual

by Jim Karustis, PhD

Many years ago I discovered that homework problems can truly rip families apart, and that is no exaggeration. Common complaints include: “My kid will argue for six hours about doing homework that would take her fifteen minutes!” “He says he does his homework at school, then I get hit with surprises at teacher conference time.” And, in a different vein: “My child really does try, but homework seems to take up all of her time every night.” In a way homework can be a silent problem, because many students do their homework struggling at home—and as long as they finally complete the work and submit it, the teacher may not realize that there is a problem. In fact, many well-meaning parents gradually find themselves taking over the lion’s share of homework responsibilities, out of fear that their children will be penalized for incomplete work.

If your child is experiencing significant homework problems, review the basics of what we call the *homework ritual*. Get clear on the rules yourself, then review them with your child and post them prominently in your home.

As much as possible, homework should begin at the same time each day. There should be a designated, distraction-minimized location. Don’t believe it when your child says he can pay attention better when the television is on—turn it off. (However, some children *do* fare better, mainly for rote tasks, when there is some subdued music in the background.) The homework location should be virtually a sacred spot, set aside *only* for homework, so that your child can keep materials there and not confuse the location with other activities.

If these elements of the homework ritual have been problematic, then I suggest that you implement an incentive system that targets the troublesome homework-related behaviors—for example, fifteen minutes earned for her favorite video game for beginning homework with one reminder.

The next issue is to keep separate and distinct your roles as homework manager and homework tutor. Managerial duties include the structure of homework time and making sure you know what your child has to do for homework. Once you are confident your child understands the directions, then leave the homework station. Inform your child that you will check back later, but that you expect that he will have completed *X* number of problems. The assistance with the actual instructional material can come later.

All students should use their homework assignment books. Many or most schools are establishing online assignment sites. These may at some point greatly reduce the importance of pen-and-paper assign-

ment books, but the systems remain works in progress—with variable reliability—for many students. If compliance with consistently using the assignment book has been a problem for your child, you may wish to ask the teachers to sign the book on a daily basis, including ‘no homework’ written in and signed as indicated. If your child is one of those who says she has completed her homework at school, then make it clear that privileges at home are contingent upon her bringing the work home for you to compare against what is in the assignment book.

If you have these elements in place and still experience significant problems, it may be time to request a meeting of the school’s Instructional Support Team (private schools have equivalent teams with varying names). The IST can assist with basic interventions regarding homework and related issues, and can also begin the process of exploring the possibility of whether your child is receiving instruction consistent with her current level of functioning. For students with ADHD, requesting reduced homework demands is a common and reasonable intervention.

Homework can be put in its place for what it is meant to be, which is a reinforcement of classroom instruction. If it is dominating home life, then try the modifications outlined above, and also consider seeking assistance from the IST and from a qualified psychologist with expertise in school issues.

A psychiatrist in private practice, James Lorenzo Karustis, PhD, is a member of the professional advisory board for Chester County/Main Line CHADD. He coauthored Homework Success for Children with ADHD: A Family-School Intervention Program (Guilford Press, 2001).

Get support with homework

by Thomas J. Power, PhD

Debate continues about the value of homework and whether homework should be assigned to students, particularly in the elementary grades. Although many arguments have been made in favor of homework, three are especially important. First, family involvement in education clearly has been shown to have a positive effect on children’s performance in school. Homework provides an opportunity for families to be involved in their children’s education and to help their children to do well in school. Second, the quality of the family-school relationship is critical for school success. Homework is a natural means of family-school collaboration and provides ongoing opportunities for parents and teachers to connect with each other. Third, when students transition into high school and college, they generally need good work habits to be able to work effectively on their own. Homework provides an opportunity for students to develop independent study skills.

The most important question is not whether to assign homework but how to support families with homework. The following are a few points to consider:

- **It is critical for homework assignments to be adjusted so that students experience high rates of success.** Parents have an important role in negotiating with teachers the right amount and type of homework.
- **Homework can be a battleground that has negative effects on student motivation to learn and the quality of the parent-child relationship.** Many parents need training to design a homework routine and use positive reinforcement strategies that will be effective. School guidance counselors and your child’s doctor may be able to offer referrals to a professional who can offer this service.



› **Homework assignments can be overwhelming to children and their parents.** It is usually a good idea to break up homework into manageable chunks or units and to set goals for completion and accuracy for each unit. Subsequently, children can earn positive reinforcement for being able to achieve established goals.

Thomas J. Power, PhD, is professor of pediatrics and education at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Center for Management of ADHD at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. He is a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board. He is one of the coauthors of *Homework Success for Children with ADHD: A Family-School Intervention Program* (Guilford Press, 2001)



Redefine perfect

by Meghan S. Leahy, MS

Homework can be very stressful for both adults and students. The best approach is to find a system that works for everyone and make it a habit. Discovering the system that works best can be tricky. It takes experimentation, creativity, and patience. Also, the system needs to be flexible, re-examined, and tweaked over time. For students with ADHD, the key is *flexible structure*. Adults have to remember that it is their job to implement this structure for students in a positive manner. It is the student's job to engage in the homework process and complete the work. This is an important relationship. Adults need to find a balance and model productive behaviors

while allowing responsibility for quality homework completion to remain with the student. Students are empowered by adults who can honestly and enthusiastically help them discover success in small, continuous steps. Here are a few helpful tips:

- › **Make a plan.** Know what is required; awareness is key. Each night, have the student make a list of all the work that needs to be done, for that night and for the week. Discuss a plan of attack for completion. How will the work be broken down?
- › **Use your words and laugh a lot.** Research has proven that positive reinforcement is the most successful way to motivate students with ADHD. Avoid negative language and always ask open-ended questions—remember to *wait* for a reply. Realistically, not too many students enjoy homework. Don't judge. Address the fact that it is a reality that must be accepted and talk it through. Some students need to vent. Let them discuss how hard life can be—as long as they are talking while they work.
- › **Redefine “perfect.”** There is no such thing as perfect, so help your students to set reasonable goals that will make them (and you) “perfectly” happy. At the end of each marking period, reward progress, examine setbacks and set new goals.

Meghan S. Leahy, MS, is the director of Leahy Learning and a clinical associate at the Penn Adult ADHD Treatment and Research Program at the University of Pennsylvania. 