



## HOMWORK HINTS FOR PARENTS

***No one ever died from doing homework, however...***

*by Nancy Hennessy*

How much time does your child spend doing homework? Tanis Bryan (1997), a researcher at Arizona State University, tells us that "homework accounts for one-fifth of the time that successful students are engaged in academic tasks." It is very possible that your student is spending even more time than indicated and, probably, is not reaping the expected rewards. The importance of homework is a well-supported educational practice. It is a century old tradition and has multiple purposes such as providing opportunity for practice and application of skills and concepts learned, the building of lifelong skills such as organization and time management, and even communication of student progress to parents. It is intended to be meaningful and contribute to overall achievement of the student. Each year, parents across the nation have the experience of "going back to school" as their children bring home assignments that range from completing a worksheet to studying for a test. Why then, does the mere mention of "homework" often signal the onset of behaviors that are associated with anxiety, frustration and even fear, especially for students with learning disabilities and their parents? Perhaps, because we know these students, in comparison to their peers, are more negative about homework, are less likely to complete assignments, are more resistant and perceive themselves as less competent. Interestingly enough, they also report that they receive less help and encouragement than needed (Bryan et al, 1995). The reasons for these behaviors and feelings are complex and reflective of a number of factors including, but not limited to, curriculum demand, teacher expectations, parent involvement and most importantly, the student's abilities and disabilities. Of equal significance are the findings of Bryan and Burstein (1997) "that both general and special education teachers consistently reported that homework problems seem to be exacerbated by deficient study skills and that many students, particularly students with learning disabilities, need instruction in study and organization skills." However, this instruction may, in fact, not be a part of the child's instructional program.

At the heart of solving the "homework dilemma" is a thorough knowledge of the student including what he needs to learn, how his learning disability affects learning, and whether or not he has the skills and strategies necessary to succeed in school. These are the critical issues that parents, educators and yes, even the child, must address together so that they can design effective learning environments at school and home.

The focus for this discussion is the parent and how you can work cooperatively with your child and his or her teachers to reduce many of the difficulties experienced by these students including procrastination, dependence, and feelings of inadequacy and inability to complete the task assigned. You are, after all, your child's most important advocate, guide and supporter throughout the school years. So, how can parents fulfill each of these roles for their children? Hopefully, the following "hints" will assist you in "wearing the many hats" required so that homework serves the purposes intended for your child.

### **Hint # 1: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!**

Remember that you and your child's teacher are members of the same team! William Bursuck and his colleagues (1999) have studied how practitioners and families can make homework a more successful experience and tell us that parent involvement is critical. Of note is the fact that teachers are often frustrated by many of the same things as parents, including problems with communication. On this issue, Bursuck points out that "unfortunately communication is, too often, either unclear, or not present." The message for both parent and teacher is to find ways to communicate, communicate, and communicate! This involves determining what needs to be known and how and when to keep each other informed. In a recent edition of *Research Connections in Special Education*, Leslie Sparks, of the Minnesota Parent Center at PACER (Parent Advocacy Center for Educational Rights) stated that "parents need to make sure that they have a clear

understanding of the entire scope and sequence of curriculum and of the homework requirements." As a parent, it is important that you know the school/district practices and policies for each grade. Lynette Herber, in a web-based article for Schwab Learning, says that many schools expect 30-45 minutes per night in early grades, one hour in late elementary and two hours in middle school. At the beginning of the school year make an appointment to talk with your child's teacher about how much homework he assigns, how long he expects assignments will take and what accommodations your child will receive based on his Individualized Education Program (IEP). Don't wait until "Back to School Night" which is usually a three-ring circus for the teacher. Sue Aberholden, who is also with PACER, suggests that "it is a good idea to include goals and objectives about homework in the IEP." Take time with your child's teacher to discuss strategies for maintaining communication throughout the school year. Some options include regularly scheduled meetings, telephone conversations, e-mail, and/or messages in the student's assignment pad or planners. You and your child's teacher need to work this out cooperatively while keeping in mind the needs of your child. The teacher has little knowledge of how the homework scenario plays out at home unless you inform him. He certainly will know whether or not assignments are completed and with what degree of accuracy but not necessarily the effort or time required. If your child does not understand the task, requires additional clarification, re-explanation of skills, or cannot complete assignments in a reasonable amount of time, let the teacher know. He needs this information to reteach skills and concepts, adapt expectations and provide necessary supports. Attention to appropriate adaptations is essential to your child's success. As a parent, you cannot be expected to know how to complete all of the varied learning tasks assigned to students, so do not hesitate to ask the teacher for suggestions and advocate for access to assistive technology that can help your child with homework. Lastly,

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you need to talk to your students about why it is important to do homework. Often children with learning disabilities feel that they have little control over their own learning and do not see a reason for doing homework or even why it is so difficult for them. You can guide your child in understanding the importance of homework so that he or she sees a purpose and can begin to "own" the task. You can also assure your child that you will work with him or her to identify the supports and strategies needed to be successful.

### Hint #2: Organize, Organize, Organize!

Organization is a key ingredient to school success but a skill that is often lacking in students with learning disabilities. We all know the kids that forget to write down the assignment, can't find what they need in their desks or lockers, don't bring home the materials they need, run out of time to complete projects, or have a dog that regularly eats their homework. Kenneth Shore (1998) tells us, "the problems of the disorganized student are often most apparent in his homework habits." Many of you know this child far better than others involved in his education and in fact, live with the daily frustrations of the behaviors just described. So, what's a parent to do? This is an opportunity for you to guide your students in organizing three essential components for successful studying namely; *time, space and materials*. At the same time, don't forget to work with your child's teacher who is often addressing the same issues. You can actually support one another in this effort by reinforcing related routines and procedures.

#### Time

The good news is there are "just about enough hours" in the day for your student to do everything they want, including homework. However, it is never easy to schedule all that is involved in the day of a student whether he or she is five or fifteen years of age. After all, we know that students with learning disabilities often need more time than others to complete academic tasks. However, remember you will be advocating for appropriate adaptations including assistive technology. Involve your children in

making these hard decisions about how they will schedule their time. They need opportunity for non-academic tasks as well since many of these kids excel in athletics, music, art, etc. A colleague, Lois Rothschild, and I outlined one possible approach for creating a time plan that addresses all areas of the child's life in *Kids Who Learn Differently: Strategies for Successful Studying* (1998).

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- First, buy a three-hole spiral student day planner that includes time slots for scheduling daily assignments, long-term projects, and personal activities (there are 168 hours in a week!).
- Second, fill in necessary activities, such as sleeping (approximately 56 hours a week); eating (approximately 10 hours a week); and playing-time with friends, practicing a musical instrument, participating in team sports or seeing a movie. (This can vary from approximately 10 to 20 hours.)
- Third, don't forget to block in the hours you are in school (approximately 35 hours a week).

When you and your child finish this, there will actually be almost 50 hours left that can be scheduled for homework. This will become the basis for a time plan for homework. Another approach would be to look at a day at a glance (6 X 4 block grid), then talk about and chart hours needed for eating, sleeping, school, activities, and homework. Remember to

choose homework times based on what you know about your child's best time to work, need for breaks and family schedules. A word about breaks - think about chunking assignments into manageable steps with refreshment, stretch, and even "praise" breaks built in. Even if your child does not have homework on a particular day, use this time for a related activity. For example, students with dyslexia often do not read for pleasure because of their reading disability so read to them or have them listen to a book on tape for enjoyment. Many students need additional practice and repetition of skills and concepts so find creative ways to review through games, software and making connections to everyday activities. A final suggestion is to keep a master calendar that reflects the family's activities so that you can organize your time to support your children at critical moments.

#### Space

Keeping a neat study/learning space does not come naturally to the disorganized student. His desk, locker, backpack, and even his room at home are often disaster zones. He will need both his teacher's and your help to organize his home and school work space. Let's start with the backpack which often is a mini-version of the student's desk. Leave desk organization and clean-out to the teacher who also often guides the student with packing the backpack at school (particularly younger students). Backpacks come home, and if organization of space and materials is a goal, then you need to begin by establishing some good backpack habits. Here are some thoughts:

#### Backpack Basics

- Check it for assignments and materials everyday
- Organize and put all completed assignments and materials in the backpack for the next day
- Place it by the "back door" each night
- Do weekly backpack clean-outs
- Reward your child for effort and performance!

Initially, you need to guide students, and then eventually just support with gentle reminders. Additionally, you will

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need to designate the space where your student will work each day after school being certain that it is relatively free of distractions. At the same time, it is important that you and your child talk about where they will be most comfortable. Younger children may need a space close to you while adolescents need to be more independent. Create a tool box that contains essential supplies, (pens, pencils, highlighters, rulers, calculators, dictionary, post-its, paper, etc.). Ask for extra copies of textbooks. When possible, have technology (e.g. electronic spell check, computer, audio books, screen readers, instructional software) available that can assist student learning and completion of tasks.

### Materials

A teacher I know regularly checks notebook organization by doing the "shake test." She turns the students' three ring binder upside down and shakes. Student notebooks, particularly in middle and high school grades, are often a total mess; there is no rhyme or reason as to how they are organized. Yet, even as adults we use systems to organize home and work life. Structured notebooks are essential especially for students, whose approach to learning is often unsystematic. They serve multiple purposes including recording of learning, reference for review, resource for test taking and repository of supplemental materials and assignments. Many teachers have specific notebook systems, particularly in the upper grades. As parents, it is important that you know what system is being used, so you can review and reinforce organizational expectations. However, if the system is too open-ended for your child, then you should consider working with your child's teacher on structuring his notebook. In *Kids Who Learn Differently: Strategies for Successful Studying*, a process for constructing a Power Notebook is outlined that may be helpful:

- Begin by buying a three-ring binder, paper, dividers, a three-hole punch, and two pocket folders.
- Place your student planner in the binder and set up and label a section for each subject.
- You will need three additional dividers for each subject area — one for class

notes, one for returned assignments and a third for corrected quizzes and tests. Do not forget to date all assignments and homework just in case a paper falls out and has to be replaced.

- Place one pocket folder in the front of your notebook for Homework To Be Completed and one pocket folder in the back of your binder for Homework To Be Handed In.

In addition to thinking about notebooks, your student needs to be taught a system for recording and completing assignments from early grades through high school. Teachers of younger students often provide assignment sheets or require that their students use assignment pads. In the middle and high school grades, students are more likely to use planners that include assignment calendars (these are often a component of the notebook). Parents of younger students should use the assignment sheet/pad as a means of communication (recording comments, signing off on assignments). As the child becomes older, parents may become less involved in the actual review of assignments but should continue to discuss homework requirements and provide necessary materials and support needed (even if it is just a "high five" for sticking with it — remember you are your child's best cheerleader!).

### Hint #3: Strategize, Strategize, and Strategize!

Students with learning disabilities often experience difficulties with learning,

not because of a lack of effort, but because of a lack of knowing how to accomplish their goals. Homework tasks reflect what students are learning and are expected to do across the grades in school. As a result, homework can involve varied activities such as completing a phonics activity or reading a novel, taking notes on an article or researching a topic, completing math problems or analyzing data, writing a paragraph or an opinion paper, studying for a quiz or a mid-term. Each of these assignments requires knowledge of skill and concept as well as efficient and effective strategies (how-to's) to accomplish the task. The bottom line is many students with learning disabilities often have no clue as to how to approach the actual assignment. Have you ever asked your child how he or she plans on doing the task at hand? When asked, responses most often reflect a "hit or miss" (just do it - try this or that - don't know) approach. The reality is that their approach to learning is often inefficient and rarely strategic. Even if they have been taught study skills and strategies, they often do think about using what they have learned. In fact, these students have been called "actively inefficient learners." So, what can teachers and parents do to guide their students to become strategic learners? We need to teach and encourage students to create a game plan for learning tasks and work with them to monitor effectiveness. One way of accomplishing this is to model the type of question that successful learners routinely ask and answer for themselves (usually without even knowing it) when they have a task to complete. Ask your child's teacher whether or not this type of activity occurs in the classroom; many teachers use a

Figure 1

#### Self-Direction



What do I need to do.  
(What will I need, how will I get it, what time will I need?)

#### Self-Monitoring/ Self-Correction



How am I doing?  
(Do I need other information/ resources, different approach support, how can I get it?)

#### Self-Evaluation



How did I do?  
(Did my approach work, did I finish on time, Oral else could I have done?)

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strategy called "think aloud" to show their students what efficient thinking sounds like. At home, parents can also model and then encourage their students to use questions that help them plan for and monitor learning. Remember to adapt based on the age of the student and use questions before, during and after the completion of tasks. They might sound something like this (See Figure 1 on previous page)

Ultimately, your child will need to do this independently since the goal is creating a learner who is capable of directing and monitoring and evaluating his or her own learning approach. Are you wondering how you or your student will know what the appropriate responses to these questions are (particularly, the how-to's)? Well, some of this will come naturally to you since successful learners are often intuitive about what strategies work and when to use them. However, as noted earlier, your student will need to learn specific study skills and strategies. Talk to your child's teacher(s) about what he is learning in school and how these critical skills are taught. Study skills instruction is often a part of the child's educational program both in general and special education. This instruction usually addresses essential skills (e.g. organization, test taking, memory, note-taking strategies and time management) that relate to current curriculum demand. It is important to know that students with learning disabilities need direct instruction, practice and opportunity for application before they are able to use strategies routinely. Advocate for appropriate study skills instruction, specific to your child's needs and curriculum demand, during the initial development or ongoing review of the IEP.

Parent participation and involvement is essential during your student's journey through school. To be most effective, you need a knowledge base that empowers and allows you to advocate for effective learning practices at both school and in the home. Learning about issues specific to communication, organization and study strategies should assist you in making informed decisions on how to guide and support your student. While you may not be able to make homework your child's favorite activity, you have the power to make it as positive and productive as possible so that your child can achieve his or her potential.

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