

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home

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INTRODUCTION

On average, students spend approximately one hour of after-school time on homework each day. Time devoted to homework is important, and research shows it is related to academic achievement, especially in middle school and high school. Unfortunately, at one time or another, nearly all families have a child who experiences problems related to homework. Common problems include lost or misplaced assignments, procrastination, or inability to complete the work, resulting in increased stress and conflict in the home. This handout is designed to help parents address difficulties with homework completion.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

For students to be successful in school, they must be able to organize and complete homework and prepare for tests, skills that require many different behaviors (see Figure 1: Homework Completion Cycle). Students must accurately record detailed information about upcoming assignments and tests, bring home the necessary materials, plan how they will complete the work, work efficiently and study effectively, and return completed assignments to their teachers. Students often start to have difficulty with one or more of these activities about the time that they start middle school. This time also is when academic demands increase and students are expected to complete their homework and study more independently.

Students can experience difficulties with homework for many reasons, but most difficulties related to homework fall into one or more general categories: individual characteristics, family characteristics, and school factors.

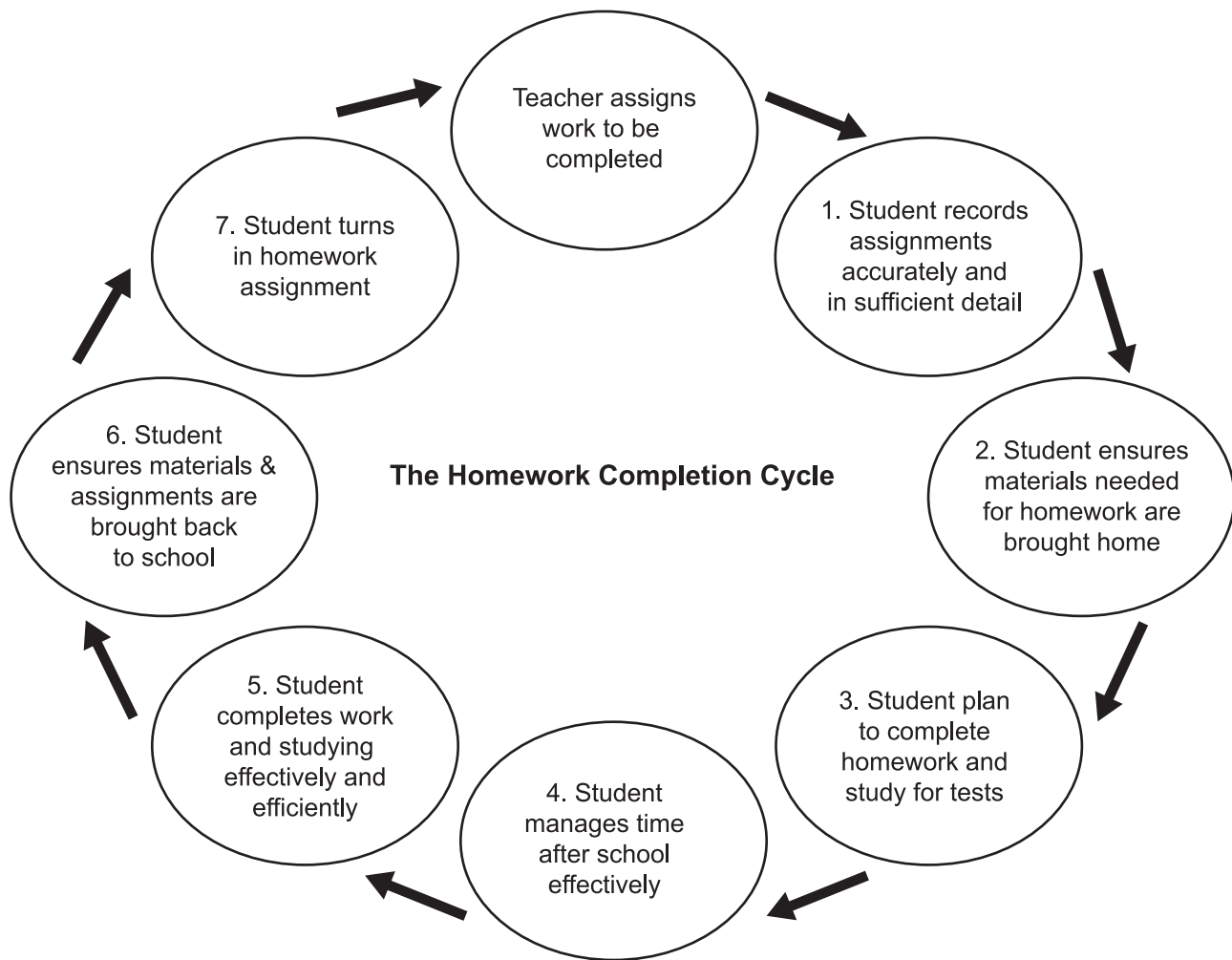
Individual Characteristics

Individual student characteristics can lead to problems with homework planning, completion, and studying. Perhaps not surprisingly, students who display lower motivation for school struggle with homework and may avoid or delay their homework-related tasks. When problems with homework persist, especially when students appear to have problems completing work in the classroom, parents should consider other reasons for their child's difficulties. Such reasons include the possibility that the student has learning, social, or emotional problems that interfere with work completion. For example, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder commonly experience problems with homework completion. Parents who are concerned that social or emotional problems are causing their child to struggle with homework completion should ask their child's teachers about getting an evaluation by a school psychologist.

Family Characteristics

Certain family characteristics can also make homework completion more difficult. For example, in families where stress and conflict are high, arguments may occur around homework. Likewise, families with very busy after-school schedules may have difficulty finding

Figure 1. The Homework Completion Cycle



consistent times, routines, places, and supports students need for completing homework.

School Factors

School factors can also play a role in creating homework problems. For example, teachers might not communicate consistently with parents about homework and tests, making it difficult for a parent to help a student. Furthermore, difficulties arise when teachers assign developmentally inappropriate amounts or types of homework or when assignments are unclear or too difficult for the student.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many students have no difficulties completing the steps of the homework completion cycle. For those students, the goal is to encourage the use of efficient and effective homework practices to prevent problems from developing and to ensure that students work

up to their fullest potential. The first section presents strategies that may prevent homework problems by helping students establish healthy habits for completing work. The second section provides a framework and set of recommendations parents can use to improve homework problems. The third section provides examples of how parents can apply these recommendations to address specific problems with completing homework.

Preventing Homework Problems by Establishing Healthy Homework Habits

It can be challenging and frustrating for parents to not know what homework has been assigned or how much time their child is supposed to be spending on homework. Parents who are concerned about their child may need to contact teachers to discuss homework. Parents also should have regular conversations with their child about homework before problems emerge. This first set of recommendations

will help parents learn how they can prevent homework problems.

1. **Ask your child's teachers how much time they expect homework to take each night.** This helps to establish realistic expectations and goals and to determine if there is a problem (e.g., homework is taking longer than expected).
2. **Find out how the school communicates information about homework and tests (and whether this varies across teachers).** Students will have difficulty with homework and studying if they are not sure of what was assigned. Schools and teachers vary in how and when information about homework is communicated, and if students are expected to independently record assignments in a planner.
3. **Have family discussions about the process of completing homework, planning for tests, and managing time.** Communicating with the student is also important. Regularly ask your child about the strategies he or she uses. Share strategies you use for managing materials and time at work or at school (e.g., task lists, alarms, apps, and calendars). Comparing and discussing strategies helps convey that these are important skills that can be improved.
4. **Establish clear expectations, guidelines, and routines.** It is important to be clear about expectations and rules at home for completing homework. Providing structure and a day-to-day routine for completing work helps students approach homework consistently (i.e., place, time, and manner) and more efficiently. Guidelines should include the following:
 - **Where homework is completed.** Ideally homework would be completed in a place in the home with minimal distractions and where a parent can monitor and answer questions. The dining room table, without television and other distractions, often works well for this purpose.
 - **When homework will be completed.** Try to have a consistent after-school routine. Decide if you want to give your child time to relax or play with friends first, and for how long. Then decide what time homework needs to be started each day.
 - **What happens if the student says there is no homework.** Establish the expectation that your child will spend a minimum amount

of time completing homework or studying every day, regardless of what is assigned. Knowing that at least an hour is always to be devoted to homework helps prevent your child from rushing through the work or studying too little.

Responding to Problems With Homework Completion

As shown in Figure 1, organization, planning, and study skills are all important parts of the homework completion process. If problems are occurring, consider using the homework completion cycle to figure out which behaviors need the greatest attention. It can be challenging to focus on improving multiple behaviors at once, so focus on the behavior(s) that contribute most to your child's low grades or other academic difficulties. Regardless of what aspect of homework your child has the most problems with, the following five recommendations are general strategies you can use for improving behaviors involved in homework completion: (a) specifically describe the problem behavior, (b) set clear goals, (c) monitor progress, (d) positively reinforce good habits, and (e) use rewards to motivate your child, if needed.

5. **Specifically describe the homework behavior your child needs to improve.** This step is important because all remaining recommendations rely on the student clearly understanding what is expected. Students are often told that they need to be more organized, to study more effectively, and to manage time more efficiently. Unfortunately, many times the meanings of these terms are not clear, and students' definitions may differ from parents' or teachers'. This lack of agreement can lead to unclear goals and expectations for improving behavior and to students' and parents' frustration.
6. **Set a clear and realistic goal.** Once you have specifically defined a behavior to improve, consider setting a clear and achievable goal for your child to work toward. For example, you can quickly determine whether or not there are any loose papers or trash in the bookbag. Similarly, you can evaluate whether your child made 20 flashcards and memorized at least half of them, whereas you might not be able to determine if your child studied well. The important part of this step is to set a goal that helps your child succeed. When students do not experience success, they will not be motivated to pursue future goals.

7. **Monitor progress consistently and frequently.** Once a clear goal has been set and the student has been asked to try to achieve it, the next step is to track progress. Ideally, this is done on a daily basis because doing so provides the student with more opportunities to be successful and to bounce back from failure.
8. **Keep the focus on the positive!** It is important for monitoring and tracking to be a positive process. When evaluating your child's progress, focus on what has gone well and not on what has gone poorly. By commenting on what homework goals your child is not meeting, you will discourage effort. For example, the following statement acknowledges the positive but focuses on what didn't go well: "Good job recording that assignment; I told you it was easy. Now why not just do it for the other three classes?" In this case, it would be wise to stop after "Good job recording that assignment" so that the student feels positive about the system and motivated to continue making progress.
9. **Use rewards to help motivate your child, when needed.** Sometimes clearly defining a behavior, setting realistic goals, and focusing on positive interactions are enough to motivate students to work toward their goal. Unfortunately, some students have experienced a series of failures with homework and studying and will have low motivation to try to improve. Using rewards can help increase motivation. Rewards do not have to cost money or be material rewards. Often, the most effective rewards are privileges. For example, a child could earn playing video games for 30 minutes after school for recording homework assignments in the planner. Privilege-based rewards are also ideal because they can be delivered on a daily basis.

Applying the Strategies to Address Specific Homework Problems

10. **Address problems with materials organization.** Some students have significant difficulty organizing their homework materials. They may fail to complete their homework because they misplace assignments or fail to bring materials home from school, and they may fail to return their work (steps 2 and 6 in Figure 1). To help your child understand what it means to be organized, you might suggest a specific organizational system to adhere to, such as keeping all school papers

in one large binder. Consider asking your child to maintain a homework folder in the binder, where homework assignments to take home are placed on the left side and completed homework is placed on the right side. Handouts and class-related notes that are not homework can be filed in separate class folders in the middle of the binder. Suggest that your child post visual reminders (e.g., a sign or note) to help remember where school materials go in the binder.

Once the organizational system is established, you can set goals and monitor your child's use of the system, either daily or weekly. It often helps for parents to have their children clean out their binders and bookbags each day after school, and check their organization once a week, perhaps on the weekend, to prepare for the school week. If you are concerned that your child is not motivated to meet the goal, consider adding a reward system.

12. **Address problems with procrastination.** If your child often waits until the last minute to begin or to complete homework, teach strategies for planning in advance what work needs to be done (step 3 of Figure 1). Strategies include breaking down and recording the steps for each homework or study task in a planner or calendar. For example, have your child record an upcoming test or quiz in the planner the day the teacher assigns it and write in specific terms what pages will be covered on the test. Your child also can estimate the time needed to study for an upcoming test and write the date to begin studying, along with noting how many hours to study and what method of studying to use (such as making 20 flashcards and then reviewing them for 30 minutes).

Ask to see the planner and review it together daily or weekly to note changes in your child's abilities. Remember to use a positive approach, commenting on what your child did right. Adding a reward or points system can encourage your child to use more complex planning behaviors. For example, a child could earn one point for recording that she has a test on Friday but might earn three points if she records exactly what the test will cover.

15. **Address problems with study skills.** Students sometimes do not study effectively enough to demonstrate their ability or knowledge on tests. For many students, reading the textbook for a certain period of time qualifies as studying.

Although such “learning through osmosis” exposes students to the material, it does not ensure that the student will gain usable information from the process. Therefore, one key to improving your child’s studying is to ensure that there is a completed product that can be evaluated at home. Two of the methods of studying that have been shown to be effective include the use of flashcards and outlining. In the first technique, in which parents have the child make flashcards, you should set a goal for studying. For example, you might say, “I need you to create 20 flashcards from your Social Studies chapter and know at least 10 of them when I quiz you. Then you can go outside and play.” This instruction is much clearer and less likely to lead to disagreement than telling a child she can play after studying. Also, instructions should describe clearly how to write on the flashcards, such as to write a short description, about 15 words, giving the key points from the chapter. Students who write entire definitions or paragraphs on their flashcards are not actively learning because they are not thinking of how to summarize their reading.

The second way to help your child study is by having your child create a structured outline of the chapter. Your child might record the main idea and three supporting details from each section of a textbook chapter. Creating an outline makes studying an active process, and as with flashcards, students can answer quiz questions or explain what they learned.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2017). *The work-smart academic planner, revised edition: Write it down, get it done*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This is a school planner designed for students in grades 6–12 that provides structure and guidance for keeping track of assignments and tests.

The planner includes activities and exercises for students to build self-monitoring, organization, and study skills.

Langberg, J. M. (2014). *Improving students’ homework, organization, and planning skills (HOPS): A parent’s guide*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. <https://www.nasponline.org/books-and-products/products/books/titles/hops-for-parents>

[nasponline.org/books-and-products/products/books/titles/hops-for-parents](https://www.nasponline.org/books-and-products/products/books/titles/hops-for-parents)

This manual contains interventions that parents can use to implement evidence-based organization, time-management, and planning skills interventions. The manual includes checklists that specifically define organization and planning skills that can be used to track students’ progress.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, Educational Partnerships and Family Involvement Unit. (2005). *Checklist for helping your child with homework* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: Author. <https://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/homework/>

U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *Homework tips for parents*. Washington, DC: Author. <https://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/involve/homework/homeworktips.pdf>.

These resources provide guidance for parents related to encouraging good homework habits and communicating with schools about homework-related concerns.

Related Helping Handouts

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for School

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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