

THE HOMEWORK OPPORTUNITY

Help your child complete assignments while encouraging independent learning skills

By Dona A. Durham

Have you ever battled with your child over a homework assignment? Wondered how in the world you were going to find the time for your child to complete homework with all the demands on your family's schedule? Or perhaps you simply don't know how to help your child complete an assignment?

As an educational therapist (a professional who combines educational and therapeutic approaches for evaluation, remediation and advocacy on behalf of children, adolescents and adults with learning differences) and a special-education consultant, I have worked with many families who have fought the homework battles and asked themselves the same questions.

One family had been editing and rewriting their son's written assignments for years. His school had no idea that writing was difficult for this boy and in fact thought he was a great writer! The family had to learn the difference between helping their child and doing his work for him.

Another mom took the opposite approach to homework by assuming that her son could manage increasing homework demands on his own now that he was in fifth grade. She was shocked to find out that he was failing several subjects in school because he was missing many homework assignments.

Both families turned homework into an opportunity to build independent learning skills by helping their children learn to manage their time, plan ahead, prioritize assignments and accurately estimate the amount of time to spend on each assignment, and work independently — all skills that play a large role in school and real-life successes. How did they do it? By using some of the following strategies:

Pre-homework set-up:

- **Create a schedule.** Make a timetable with your child to include some physical exercise, a brief transition to homework, a list of what to complete during this time, a place homework will go once it is finished, and a reinforcer for completing the schedule. More about all these steps below. For younger children and those with reading difficulties, you can use a picture or symbol in place of words.
- **Set up the homework space.** Make sure your child has all the materials needed for homework and a space to work.
- **Start with physical activity.** Perform physical exercise before starting homework as this helps with concentration and focus. Any activity that provides strong input to large muscle groups will suffice and may include activities

such as marching in place, sports or dance practice, running, playing vigorously outside or even digging in the dirt.

- **Transition to quiet work.** Use exercises such as gently circling the wrists in both directions, opening and closing both hands, and then sitting with both feet on the floor and taking several slow, deep breaths.
- **Check for understanding.** Before your child starts an assignment, check to make sure that he or she understands the directions and expectations.

Doing the homework:

- **Prioritize tasks and estimate time to complete them.** These are among the most useful organizational skills your child can develop. If homework involves more than one activity, discuss with your child which activity to do first, which to do next, etc. Encourage your child to get the most dreaded or difficult tasks done first, as most of us do best with the "Premack Principle." Employed by parents everywhere, this tactic is sometimes referred to as "Grandma's rule": "First you eat your vegetables, then you can have ice cream." Part of prioritizing is estimating how long it will take to do a task. Your child can estimate the time, you can time the task, and then you can talk together about how close or far away the time estimate was.
- **Use time limits.** Some families find it useful to set a timer for children who have a difficult time starting an activity and/or maintaining focus on an activity. For example, tell your child that you will check back in 10 minutes, set the timer for 10 minutes and check progress after the timer goes off. For children who spend "too long" on an assignment, setting a time limit may also be helpful.
- **Check in with your child periodically.** Ask if help is needed, answer questions or provide clarification. This lets your child know that you are involved with homework and helps keep him or her accountable and on task. Remember to ask specific questions — "Where in the story did you find the answer to question #4?"; "How did you know to add in this problem?" — rather than asking general questions like, "How are you doing?" or "How is it going," as many children will simply answer, "Fine."
- **Help with an assignment.** If your child asks you a question about homework, keep your answers short and to the point. Asking your child to explain what he or she is supposed to do on an assignment will help you learn what is understood and misunderstood about an assignment. Refrain from redoing



A good homework station includes all the materials a child will need, and enough space to do the work.

Photos by Dona A. Durham

your child's work and instead work with your child to discover any needed corrections. Guidance in finding errors and making corrections helps build confidence and independent learning skills.

- **If all else fails ...** If neither you nor your child know how to complete an assignment, write a note to the teacher at the bottom of the homework stating that you both tried to complete the assignment but did not have enough information. Most teachers would rather see an effort to complete an assignment rather than no attempt, or what appears to be no attempt.

Homework completed:

- **Put completed homework where it can be found.** I recommend using one folder for all completed homework. The folder is placed in the child's backpack after homework is completed. If your child already has a system that works — i.e., all homework gets turned in to the right place — don't mess with the system.
- **Bring on the reinforcers.** Remember the Premack Principle? We all work for reinforcers — paychecks, watching a favorite TV program or video — after completing a less preferred task. Teaching your child how to use this principle gives him or her a life-long independent work skill. It is best to stay away from “tangibles” like food and new toys or other objects as reinforcers. Instead think of activities your child prefers and that you endorse, like using the computer, reading a favorite book, drawing or



Cierra Jiron, a 10-year-old student at Carlos Gilbert Elementary School, tackles a homework assignment

watching a favorite video or TV program. With spring here in Santa Fe at last after a long, snowy winter, encourage your child to choose an outdoor activity as a reinforcer whenever possible. Allowing 15 to 30 minutes (depending on your child's age) after homework is completed to participate

in a favorite activity helps teach persistence and builds learning stamina.

Troubleshooting:

- **Contact your child's teacher.** If you and your child think he or she is being asked to do too much homework, if the homework seems too difficult for your child to complete without extensive support from you, if the assignments do not include clear directions, or if your child never appears to have

homework, contact your child's teacher. Reach the teacher by phone, email, text, note or whichever way you communicate with your child's school and calmly express your concerns. Don't let problems in school continue without intervening. You are your child's best advocate.

- **Check with your child's school to find out who sets homework policy.** Ideally the group determining the amount, type and level of parent involvement in homework should include parents, teachers and students. If there is no group setting homework policy, start one. The National PTA and many teachers recommend the use of this simple formula: Homework = grade level x 10 minutes. This translates to 10 minutes for first grade, with an additional 10 minutes for each ensuing grade level (20 minutes for second grade, 50 minutes for fifth grade, etc.).

As the weather gets warmer and the days get longer here in northern New Mexico, schools enter the last quarter of the academic year. At this time of the year, you and your children may feel the demands of homework intensify, but it is not too late to develop a family homework system using some of the suggestions offered here. Developing a system that works for your family can increase your child's independent learning skills and help finish the school year on a positive note.

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