



## ***Troubleshooting Homework Problems: Ideas for Parents***

**Brief Introduction:** Homework completion is an ongoing issue for many students and their families. In fact, homework is often identified by parents as the single biggest issue affecting their home life with their child. For children who learn differently, this homework issue can be greatly magnified. In order to get back on track and make homework time more manageable, it is important to investigate the exact reasons why homework is so problematic for your child. Armed with this knowledge, then you, your child and school professionals can work together to design an improvement plan tailored to your child's own homework "roadblocks".

The following article attempts to troubleshoot some of the most commonly-encountered homework roadblocks. It is hoped that using this information to brainstorm solutions to your child's issues with homework time will improve both school success and your family harmony. If more help is needed, additional information, resources and reproducible materials for encouraging homework completion can be accessed by contacting NJCIE.

## ***Troubleshooting Homework Problems: Ideas for Parents***

Homework completion is an ongoing issue for many students and their families. In fact, homework is often identified by parents as the single biggest issue affecting their home life with their child. For children who learn differently, this homework issue can be greatly magnified. In order to get back on track and make homework time more manageable, it is important to investigate the exact reasons why homework is so problematic for your child. Armed with this knowledge, then you, your child and school professionals can work together to design an improvement plan tailored to your child's own homework "roadblocks". The following article attempts to troubleshoot some of the most commonly-encountered homework roadblocks. It is hoped that using this information to brainstorm solutions to your child's issues with homework time will improve both school success and your family harmony.

### **1. If your child does not write down homework assignments correctly or completely...**

- Teach the student to use a mnemonic device for writing down homework correctly or have them create their *own* mnemonic device for this. One example of a mnemonic for students to remember is "PAIN" which stands for: Page, Action you must take, Item Numbers.
- Students may also need to be taught to *correctly* use a planner or "agenda book" for recording assignments. Adults can also teach students to highlight quizzes and tests in their planner, so they are easier to see when reviewing planner at home.
- Help students prioritize assignments written in the planner (which to complete first, second, etc.).
- Some students may need to use a planner with *larger* spaces to record assignments. This might mean adapting an existing planner or purchasing one with larger spaces in which to record assignments.
- Some schools may have a "homework hotline" that students (and parents) can call with a pre-recorded message listing current class assignments. Some teachers also may set up a personal website/web page where homework is regularly listed so that students can access a listing of pending assignments and their due dates. If either of these is in place, it is important to encourage the student to access these supports.
- Parents of younger students can inquire whether their child's teacher implements a "homework buddy" system. If so, at the end of each class students can briefly check their buddy's organizer or planner to ensure that each has accurately and completely recorded any homework assignments.
- Inquire whether the school is using a "Check-In/Check-Out" (CICO) procedure in which your child could participate. In CICO, a staff member "checks-out" with certain students at the end of the day. As each student stops by, the "check-out" staff person reviews the student's recording of assignments to ensure that he or she has written them down completely.

### **2. If your child takes poor/incomplete notes on lecture content, making studying difficult...**

- Inquire if the teacher can provide sets of "guided notes" (notes which contain main headings and some key information but leave blanks where the student is to write in additional information).
- Ask if your child can audiotape lectures (or ask if the teacher records his/her lectures and allows students to sign out those audiotapes for review).
- Encourage your child to join study groups to prepare for quizzes and tests. In these groups, students can compare notes, increasing the likelihood that students with poor note-taking abilities will fill in gaps in their own notes while reviewing essential course content.
- See if the teacher has instituted a rubric for judging the quality of students' course notes. If so, obtain a copy to regularly review with your child.

### **3. If your child fails to take home materials required for assignments...**

- Ask whether the teacher is able to include a list of required work materials when writing assignments on the board as a reminder to students.

- See if it is possible for your child to keep one set of textbooks at home and one at school.
- Consult the teacher's webpage to see if he/she posts worksheets to be done as homework on the Internet where students can download and print if they have forgotten/misplaced theirs.
- Explicitly teach the student how to prepare at the end of each school day for that night's homework by reviewing each instructor's homework assignment and verifying that they have put the necessary work materials to do that assignment into their backpack.

#### **4. If your child does not have a regular routine (fixed time, location, etc.) for studying and completing homework...**

- Help the student identify both a place at home where he/she can do homework without distractions and a set time for doing homework. Parents can help children pick a specific time and place for homework that is as free as possible of clutter, pets, and television.
- Children also need to know that there is a time to eat a snack, a time to do homework and also free time, but free time starts *after* homework is done. For this reason, children may need to see when homework time falls on an after school schedule. Parents can help their children create an after school schedule in order to accomplish this.
- Once the schedule has been developed, then parents can use it to redirect their children (i.e., by saying "Right now is homework time. The sooner you get it done, the sooner you can have free time."). Through this children learn that if the "homework part" is not finished, then the child cannot move on to the next part of the schedule.
- Schedule "homework time" for the child's most difficult class(es) to occur every school day at a certain time. If the child says they have no homework in that subject(s), they can spend that time reading ahead in textbooks, making up missed work, doing extra credit, studying something related to the troublesome subject(s). If they say "I left my books at school," parents can have them read a book related to this subject. After consistent implementation of this practice, parents may find that the child starts to bring home assignments from this subject.
- Include choices within the homework routine. Embedding choices during any problematic routine will decrease the likelihood of the child engaging in challenging behaviors. If a child can have opportunities to make even *small* choices of activities or tasks that he is expected to do (i.e., choosing which he wants to do first, second, etc.), it may provide the child with a sense of control and as a result can help prevent some challenging behavior. Choices create situations in which children are forced to think and problem solve, which in turn provides opportunities for children to make mistakes and learn from consequences. Offering choices proactively (not reactively) can also help parents avoid getting into power struggles with their children.
- Generating choices for homework time can be as simple as having the child pick which subject to tackle first, when to take a brief break, what to do for a brief break (i.e., get up and stretch, do some jumping jacks, take a lap around the house, etc.), or what to have for an after school snack. Choices do not have to be elaborate or complicated, but they should be plentiful. Offering more small choices as part of a routine is better than offering one or two larger choices.
- When using choices, remember to offer choices that you can live with—don't provide one you like and one you don't, because the child will often pick the one you don't like.
- Help the child take the first step to getting started by telling him "As soon as you get home, take a step—no matter how small—toward doing the assignment." A small step might be setting up your book on the table turned to the right page and putting a heading on your paper. Doing this can help the child cross the "threshold" to getting started on the assignment.
- Inform the child that he is allowed to take *brief* breaks during homework completion (as often as every ten to twenty minutes, if needed).

#### **5. If your child's homework completion environment is still not working for him/her...**

- If the homework place selected is not [proving to be conducive for completing homework, brainstorm with your child to find another location within the house or the community (e.g., local branch of the public library, community center) that is more suitable for homework.

- Involve your child in discussing the pros and cons of different settings for homework to arrive at a mutually agreed upon location. The right location for homework time will depend on your child and your family. Some children do best at a desk in their bedroom because it is a quiet location, away from the hubbub of family noise. Other children become too distracted by things in their bedroom and do better at a place removed from those distractions, like the dining room table. Some children need to work by themselves, while others need to have parents nearby to help keep them on task and to answer questions as needed.
- Help the child remove unnecessary “time-wasters” from the homework setting (e.g., internet, texting, television, music, cell phones).
- Sometimes it may still be too noisy for some children. Many children complain that they still have trouble concentrating at home. Their siblings may be running around, TVs and music systems are on, someone may be talking loudly on the phone, the dog is barking, the baby is crying, etc. If this proves to be the case, then further problem solving needs to occur.
- As a family, try to designating a block of time as “quiet time”. During this time, normal living continues, but more quietly than usual. Your child (and school-aged siblings) can use the time to do homework; parents might read, balance the checkbook, and write e-mails. Others who have time to watch television can do so with the sound turned low or using headphones. This may not always work out as planned, but making an attempt at implementing this can help your child see that you are hearing his concerns and trying to address them together, as a family.

#### **6. If your child lacks an efficient strategy for completing homework assignments...**

- Parents can serve as the child’s “homework coach” by meeting with the child each night to look over assignments, setting up a plan for completing the homework, monitoring the child’s actual time spent doing homework, and reviewing finished work to verify its completeness and quality.
- Train your child in the specific steps needed to build a “work plan” for homework. Show him/her how to preview their after-school assignments, order those assignments so that they do the most difficult first (when their energy level is highest), break larger assignments into smaller sub-tasks, and estimate how much time each assignment is likely to require. After implementation, have your child reflect on how their use of these plans may have improved his/her homework completion.
- As part of this plan, students can be taught to create their own task checklist or “to do list” to structure homework tasks. This can enable the student to see how much work is required within a given amount of time in order to clarify “when the work will end”.
- Students may also enjoy being able to cross items off such a checklist as they are completed.
- Adults can also refer to the checklist when providing feedback to the student regarding his progress on the tasks and use the list to redirect the student back to work.
- Parents can incorporate short “cognitive breaks” between homework assignments (e.g., spending 10 minutes engaging in a movement activity) to refresh and reenergize.
- Help children improve their understanding of the passage of time by using a clock and/or timers to monitor homework efficiency.
- Some children also may benefit from having their own self-monitoring chart for them to use to reflect on how they are doing with their homework routine. The student can rate himself regarding his ability to meet the homework expectation on a scale from 1-3, using a “yes/no” or other method. At the end of the week, they can review their progress and celebrate successes.

#### **7. If your child has difficulty organizing long terms assignments and projects...**

- For long term assignments, teach long ranging planning at home by having the student keep a monthly calendar to track when tests occur and assignments are due so he can task analysis and then plan head to complete tasks.
- Technology may also be helpful when fostering organizational skills, including the following tools and ideas. Electronic scheduling tools (like Outlook) may be more efficient than paper calendars,

since one schedule is usually integrated in many views (i.e., with one click you can see a daily plan, as well as weekly and monthly).

- iGoogle is a Web 2.0 tool where students can add tools such as to-do lists, calendars, calculators, etc. to a homepage to assist with personal organization. Step by step directions for how to set up a google calendar can be found at: <http://theedublogger.com/2012/11/06/the-educators-guide-to-google-calendar/>
- Visual long-term mapping charts, such as a Gantt Chart, ([www.ganttchart.com](http://www.ganttchart.com)), can be helpful when planning and monitoring *multiple* activities for various classes. It can be used to produce bar type graphs that allow a student to visually track multiple projects across time, determine when they are due and how much time is available to work on each.

### **8. If your child does not consistently bring necessary work materials to class...**

- Help the student implement a general system for organizing work and storing materials. Students should have an organizer with a section for every subject. Each section should include a calendar to record assignments, and space to store work in progress. The organizer should also be stocked with pens, pencils, and writing paper.
- Coordinating the colors of textbook covers, notebooks, class schedules, and divider tabs (in a 3-ring binder) to match in color for each individual subject can help students easily identify what materials are needed to complete specific assignments. For example, if all of the student's math materials are color coded to be blue, then when the student has math homework, he knows that he will need to pack up blue material(s).
- See if it is possible to pair the child with a "buddy" whom he/she can share with, or borrow from, if items are forgotten (book, pencil, etc). Also, pairs can check with each other at the end of class to ensure that each has written down all assignments correctly and has the necessary study materials needed for homework.
- Consider creating a checklist for packing up correctly with the student and have him keep it inside a planner/folder, so that he can access it when needed to remind himself of the necessary steps.
- Have the student use a simple self-monitoring system. At the end of class each day, the student answers one question: "Did I have all necessary materials in class to do the work expected of me?" An incentive may be earned if he/she is able to answer YES to the self-monitoring question a certain number of times per week. You may need to start with an easy-to-achieve goal (i.e., 2 YES ratings pre week), then as the child shows improvement, raise to bar to 3, then 4, and eventually 5 YES ratings per week. Also, spot-check his/her rating periodically to make sure that the student is being honest.
- Inquire whether the school is using a "Check-In/Check-Out" (CICO) procedure in which your child could participate. In CICO, a staff member "checks in" with certain students at the start of each day/before they go to class. This person can quickly check students' schedules for the day and make sure that they have all necessary work materials. If a student is missing an important item, the check-in person can help that student to secure the missing item before class.

### **9. If your child completes homework but fails to turn it in at school...**

- Try to check each morning to be sure that your child has all completed homework assignments in his or her backpack before leaving for school.
- Inquire whether the teacher sends "overdue homework" notices home regularly to parents.
- Parents of young children may wish to set up a homework chart for the child. This chart can be used to award the student a point for each day that he/she turns in homework. The collected points may be exchanged for rewards or privileges at home (such as staying up one minute past the child's set bed time for every point earned, etc.).
- Inquire whether the school is using a "Check-In/Check-Out" (CICO) procedure in which your child could participate. In CICO, a staff member serves as a "check-in" person for selected students. At the beginning of the day, students go to this staff member to discuss whether the student has

completed the previous night's homework assignment(s). If not, the student and check-in person develop a plan for how to handle this situation.

**10. If your child finds the homework consistently to be too difficult and/or confusing...**

- When children chronically complain that assignments or directions are confusing, they are likely to become frustrated and/or anxious, eventually avoiding such assignments. Exasperated parents may respond to these children by asking, "Weren't you listening?" or "Just read the directions!" If this is truly a *chronic issue* that keeps coming up for your child, then further investigation may be warranted. Quite possibly, the child was listening or reading, but he may not have been able to process the information.
- You may need to seek the help of teachers or a learning specialist to help your child learn strategies s/he can use to overcome or compensate for these difficulties. For example, s/he may need to learn to put the words into pictures or graphic organizers for herself. Children who become confused due to problems with language processing, do better when they can see things visually.