

## **Homework Survival Guide**

### **Parent Handout by Peg Dawson, NCSP**

Peg Dawson, an experienced, on-the-job mother, and incidentally a past-president of the National Association of School Psychologists, has prepared the following handout for parents with tips on dealing with homework. This handout has been published by the National Association of School Psychologists as an eight page handout.

### **A Place to Work**

**Find the right place. In some families, having a central location, where all children in the family do their homework works best. This may be the dining room or kitchen table. In other families, each child has her own study place, usually at a desk in the bedroom. What works for you depends on your children. Some kids do best under the watchful eye of a parent, in which case the dining room or kitchen may work best. Others need a quiet of their bedrooms to avoid distractions. Some kids like to work with the radio on (and this helps them focus), while others do worse with this kind of background noise. Think about possible distractions that will need to be avoided (a nearby television, the telephone, etc.) when planning your child's workspace.**

You may want to conduct "experiments" with your child to determine what setting works best under what circumstances. Try several options for a week each and see how your child does (rate the quality of the homework completed, the time it took to finish, and the child's subjective reaction).

### **Gather necessary materials**

Youngsters can waste a lot of time tracking down things like pencils, paper, rulers, etc. when beginning their homework. To avoid this, stock your child's study area with these materials and any other he is likely to need, such as a dictionary, highlighters, pens, scissors, glue, tape, colored pencils, stapler and staples, etc.

It may also be helpful to set up file folders for each subject your child is taking in school to keep track of necessary papers, such as long-term assignment directions, tests and homework that have been passed back (to help in studying for the next test), etc. These folders should not be used for storing homework, since your child is likely to then leave it at home and forget to take it to school. Completed homework should be placed in the child's backpack, trapper keeper, or notebook as soon as it is finished to ensure it gets to school.

A plastic bin may be an ideal place to store study materials; if you have more than one child, you may want to have one bin for each child. The advantage to this is that these are portable - just in case you have a child whose preferred study style is to work in a different place each night!

You may also want to have a second container (such as a dishpan) which your child can "dump" their school things in as soon as they get home from school. This will help avoid last minute frantic searches for permission slips, library books, messages from the principal, notices of meetings, etc.

### **Organizing Homework/Setting Priorities**

A homework session should begin by reviewing what the day's assignments are. It is probably a good idea to draw up a list of assignments on a separate sheet of paper, so that you can then help your child prioritize and break down longer tasks into shorter ones. The steps to follow might be:

1. List out assignments.
2. Make sure the child brought home the necessary books, work sheets, etc.
3. Break longer tasks into sub tasks.
4. Check to see what other tasks the child has to do which should be included on the list - including long term assignments, and tests later in the week for which the child should begin studying. Add these to the homework list.
5. Have the child decide what order she will complete the work. A good rule of thumb is to have the child begin and end with assignments she considers "easy," sandwiching more difficult assignments in between.
6. Estimate how much time it will take to complete the work.
7. Make sure you have allowed enough time for the child to complete all his homework allowing for break time as necessary.

Sometimes it is difficult for kids to complete homework because of other obligations they may have - sports events, doctors' appointments, scout meetings, chores, family events, etc. You may find it helpful to put together a weekly calendar to keep track of these activities. Once a week (Sunday afternoon sounds good), sit down with your child and fill out (or review) the weekly calendar together. Then, as you plan your homework time each day, you can reference this calendar to allow time for the other activities your child is involved with.

### **Getting Started**

As mentioned above, it is usually best to have the child begin with a task that they consider "easy." Some children may want to start with the hardest task first to get it over with, and this is acceptable unless the child has a very difficult time getting started and will dawdle or avoid the difficult assignment even though it was his/her choice to start with it.

For many youngsters, just getting started on homework seems like an insurmountable obstacle. We have several suggestions for handling this problem:

1. Have the child specify exactly when she will begin her homework and then reward her for getting to work within five minutes of the time she has specified.
2. Sit with your child for the first five minutes to make sure he gets off to a good start.
3. Talk with your child about her assignments before beginning. This is particularly important for written language assignments or more open-ended tasks. Children often need to be "primed" or activated for their best efforts to come out. This is particularly true for youngsters who may have difficulties with verbal fluency or word retrieval.
4. Orient your child to his assignment; walk him through the first one or two problems or items to make sure he understands what he is supposed to do.
5. Build in a short break relatively quickly, if getting started is a problem.

### **Getting Through It**

Make sure adequate breaks are built in. Many children have a great deal of difficulty

working for long stretches of time on homework without a break. Better to plan for a two hour homework session with frequent breaks built in than to try to cram homework into a one-hour, non-stop session. You can use a kitchen timer to keep breaks to a reasonable length (e.g., 5-10 minutes). Breaks might be used to get a snack, play a few minutes of a Nintendo game, or to shoot baskets or do some other form of exercise. Breaks should be scheduled when tasks get accomplished rather than after a set period of time, otherwise your child can daydream the time away and still get his break. One child we know arranges homework sessions between TV shows he likes to watch. Thus, his schedule on any given day might look like this:

4:30 math  
5:00 TV show  
5:30 language arts  
6:00 dinner  
6:30 social studies  
7:00 TV show  
8:00 science  
8:30 TV show  
9:00 bed time

If he hasn't finished whatever task he was working on when his television program comes on, he either misses the program or tapes it watch at a later time.

Other suggestions for getting through homework:

1. Make a game out of work completion: have the child estimate how long it will take to complete an assignment, have her "place bets," set a kitchen timer where the child can't see how much time it was set for and challenge her to "beat the clock," or use a stopwatch to see how quickly she can do an assignment, one math problem, etc.
2. If a task takes longer than your child can sustain (even if it's broken down into smaller steps) or if he "gets stuck," have him switch to another assignment rather than stop working altogether.
3. Use a "beep tape" to help him stay focused. This is an audio tape which sounds an electronic tone at random intervals. When the child hears the tone, she is to ask herself, "Was I paying attention?" She can be given a form to fill out to accompany the tape. This has been quite effective with children who daydream or who get pulled off task easily. often without even realizing it. The tone brings them back to task. Alternatively, some parents make "nag tapes" where they tape messages at random intervals, again to prompt the child back to task.

## **Long Term Assignments**

These are often the hardest homework assignments for youngsters to keep track of and to complete.

### **1. Know what assignments are due when.**

In addition to having a weekly assignment book where daily homework is recorded, it is also advisable to have a monthly calendar on which long term assignments can be written as soon as they are assigned. With younger or more disorganized students parents may want to periodically send in this calendar and ask the classroom teacher to verify that it is up-to-date. Older students should be able to keep these themselves, transferring items as necessary from their weekly assignment book.