

Homework Tool Kit

Homework skills are necessary for students to master. They teach self-sufficiency, responsibility, and how to follow directions. Despite these benefits, parents find themselves dealing with their children's apathy and disinterest in homework. When that child also has autism, parents can find additional challenges including attention deficits, tantrums or difficulties with organization. This tool kit will offer tips for working through those days when homework is more difficult to complete due to lack of cooperation or interest. There are also additional resources and suggestions to caregivers.

Milestones provides consultation services to all family members, professionals, and self-advocates. Services include connecting participants to resources and providing general information and assistance. We also offer a free Autism Helpdesk. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at (216) 464-7600.

Tips for Homework Success

When is the best time to tackle homework?

Some kids may need time to regroup, relax or play after school, and some may want to get it done right away. Decide together what time to start homework and make sure to stick to that time every day, as best you can. Experimentation will help you determine what time of day works best for your child. You may need to think outside the box: is your child an early riser? Maybe try doing homework in the morning before school. Are they willing to stay after school? Perhaps their school has a "homework club" where they can get help from teachers and complete everything at school.

Organization is the key to making sure everything gets done. Sit down each day with your son/daughter and review their homework for that night. Estimate how long each assignment will take and what is involved. Together you can make a schedule and decide when and where they do their work, as long as the location promotes good study skills. (see Teaching Good Study Skills below).

If there is going to be a disruption in the typical homework routine, have a conversation with your child with plenty of notice beforehand (i.e. "Since we are going to your school concert tonight, you will need to finish your homework before we go. We can not go if your homework is not finished.")

Use special interests to motivate

Some students with autism obsess over favorite interests, such as animals or a character from a favorite movie. If you can tie in the assignment to their focus, it will make it much more motivating for them! Suggest they can spend time with that interest once they complete a specific amount of homework (i.e. a child can play with dinosaur toys for 5 minutes after finishing 5 problems). The exception to this would be video game or computer time, since short increments are likely to create arguments- save those as rewards until after the homework is finished.

A black and white contract

Be very specific when communicating about homework and your expectations. You might write down your expectations as a contract for your child to sign, and review it before starting homework each day. There should be consequences if the contract is not followed. As your child's homework load increases, you may need to modify the contract accordingly.

Color their world

Color coding subjects can really help. Have each subject represented by a different color, and match folder, notebook and book cover to designated colors. Work with your son's/daughter's school team to help enforce your color coding system. You can also color code subjects in an organizer to help keep track of assignments. Some schools like to use a set system for their classes, so you may need to modify your plan to mesh with your school.

“Homework is Stupid!”

Explaining why your son/daughter needs to do homework might be a daily conversation. It:

- encourages students to take initiative and responsibility for completing a task.
- reinforces skills, concepts and information learned in class.
- teaches students to work independently, develop self-discipline and time-management skills.
- prepares students for upcoming class topics.
- helps to connect school learning to the world outside.

Teaching Good Study Skills

Set ground rules such as what time the homework needs to be done, when there can be time for relaxing and for how long, or whether he/she can listen to music while doing homework. Include these ground rules in your expectations contract (see above).

Environment

Let your son/daughter make the choice of where they prefer to work, as long as it is conducive to learning. A quiet area, free from distractions with appropriate supplies nearby is the best option. Letting a student use their bedroom where they are unsupervised may not be the best choice – many children need you around where they work as it will keep them from being distracted. However, a desk or table is not absolutely necessary; if they ask to lay on the floor, sit on a couch or even stand at a counter it can work well, as long as they will be able to focus on the task at hand.

Use a timer

Adding a timer can help the process. You can use it to help visualize a window of time for working, or to dictate when to take a break. Depending on the amount of work and the student's tolerance for sitting and focusing, you may find that your son/daughter needs to take multiple breaks during a homework session. Refer to our online Visual Supports Tool Kit for other ideas for visual cues to help with homework.

<https://www.milestones.org/resources/tool-kits/visual-supports-tool-kit>

Time each break – have your son/daughter check in when he starts the break and then let him know when time is up (older children can time themselves). Offer encouraging feedback: “when your homework is finished, the rest of the night belongs to you.”

Know when to ask for help

Sometimes the hardest thing to teach a child is not to rely on the parent to solve the problem for them. Teach them to try their best, and to answer the questions they understand before asking for help. If their teacher allows using their book or notes to help them, remind your son/daughter to go back and reference them.

Try Pre-Teaching

Pre-teaching means reading a textbook together with your child and breaking concepts down before it is taught in class – it can make a big difference in their comprehension of materials. This falls under homework because although it is not assigned, it may be an essential homework activity. You can also take turns reading paragraphs aloud for assignments and novels throughout middle school. It can give you an opportunity to explain things that are implied or interpersonal interactions that may not be understood. It was also a great way for you to know what your child was working on.

Managing longer projects

If a lengthy project is assigned, sit down and discuss the project. Estimate the time needed to complete it and put together a timeline. Make a list of the tasks and the approximate time needed to complete them, and create a calendar that can be posted in a common area of your home. Use visual tools as much as possible to help plan and schedule due dates for homework and assignments. This process will help teach about organizing time wisely, and not leaving something to the last minute. Check off each step as it's completed and plan a special treat for when the project is turned in.

Ask your son/daughter's teacher for examples of past projects that received high grades – these can be concrete examples of the finished project and of the level of work the teacher is expecting.

The Caregiver's Role

Stay calm and resolute

If a parent gets upset with their son/daughter during homework time, it is better to step away and take a break. If necessary, have another adult step in. If you have a child who has difficulty in getting started, spend the first five minutes with them. Make sure they understand their assignment. If you argue with your son/daughter over doing homework, you have already lost! Giving in to the pressure of negative behavior may lead to negative habits as well as defiant behavior in the future.

Stay positive

A positive approach can help your son/daughter maintain their good mood when completing their tasks. It can also help with their self-esteem and give them the confidence to do their best work.

Be available for help

You may not need to sit with your child, but stay close so they don't have to search for you if they need help.

Be a role model

While your son/daughter is doing homework, you can help your child see that the skills they're practicing are related to things you do as an adult (such as writing a grocery list, paying bills, reading the newspaper).

Provide positive reinforcement

Completing homework has rewards, refusing to do homework has negative consequences. Choose two or three behavioral goals for your son/daughter and write them on a chart (i.e. if yelling or screaming is the worst part of homework time, you could include: "Speak in a calm voice" or "finish all homework with a positive attitude".) Phrase goals positively. At the end of each homework session, discuss progress and reward for a positive experience. There are many positive reinforcement reward ideas, from allowing extra computer time, to a favorite family outing, to a coveted toy. You can also create a reward chart, as described in our Visual Supports Tool Kit. Many ideas can also be found online.

Advocate for them

Make sure to develop a relationship with your child's teachers, principals and supporting staff every year. Attend curriculum nights, parent/teacher conferences, and other school functions, and drop by for a casual "hi" as often as you can. Email is also a great way to check in with teachers periodically. Share with teachers how long your child works on homework for their class and what level of help you provide. Get their input and suggestions.

Teach them to advocate!

Does your child pack their backpack each morning? Are they prepared for their classes and bring the correct materials? Does he/she remember to bring home materials for homework assignments, and do they remember to turn the assignments in to the teacher when completed?

It is common for children with ASD to do the assignment but not turn it in. Sometimes the teacher didn't ask for it to be turned in, but assumed students know the place to put it or the routine for turning it in. You may need to have a special pocket for completed assignments, coach your child to turn it in and then check to make sure it was turned in. Sometimes reminders are needed at first.

Teaching how to prepare for their school day is an important step in self-advocacy. Likewise, they need to learn how to advocate for themselves in class – asking questions when something isn't clear, or getting more information from a classmate.

Use the IEP meetings and be creative

You may find a need to advocate for your child's homework load to be modified due to frustration, communication skills or length of time it takes your son/daughter to complete assignments. During your annual IEP meeting, discuss these options with your team.

You can request homework modifications in many creative ways. Here are some ideas:

- A teacher can reduce the number of problems or specify the amount of time your son/daughter spends on assignments.
- If writing is a challenge, your child could dictate their writing assignment while you transcribe. Or, maybe they can be permitted to write shorter assignments, or be given extended time to complete them.
- Does your son/daughter struggle with organization? You can request that their IEP includes having a second set of textbooks to keep at home, or help remembering to complete a daily planner.
- Extended time for test taking or completing major projects could diffuse extra stress.

Technology can help homework

Students can rely on homework apps for keeping track of multiple subjects, or schools might have websites that list all assignments to help families keep track. Once a child enters middle school and high school, there are multiple classes with multiple homework assignments, both long- and short-term. If your son/daughter is tech-savvy, using an app might be the best way to help them stay organized.

Should I Hire a Tutor or Mentor for My Child?

Homework mentor

Does your child have a mentor, someone who your son/daughter looks up to (an older, “cooler” kid), or possibly an older child of one of your friends? Consider asking this person to be a “homework helper” one or two days a week (you might offer to pay them). Consider meeting at the library or your home where they can do homework together.

Hiring a Tutor

Kids tend to respond better to an authority figure who does not have an emotional attachment to them. Bringing in someone that does not have that emotional tie can help change behaviors and focus, as well as increase their willingness to try harder. Ask around at your child’s school –some teachers like to tutor to earn extra money. A local college job board can be another good way to find a tutor. You don’t need to have a tutor in your home, you can arrange to meet them at the library or a coffee shop.

My Child Often Struggles with Homework

Should I be concerned?

Not necessarily – try to identify what is preventing your son/daughter from doing the homework or getting upset when it is time to complete it. Sit down with him/her to make sure he knows what is expected. If he/she cannot explain the assignment, it is possible that a) they do not understand it; b) they are overwhelmed by the amount; or c) they are bored with the homework assigned.

Work with teachers and the school

Develop a good relationship with your son’s/daughter’s teacher(s) and make sure you have access to daily homework assignments and grades – they are often posted online. Take your concerns to a teacher, counselor, or other professional (i.e. a school psychologist) to get input and suggestions on how to move forward. Have a good line of communication with your school team, whether by email, phone, or in-person meeting to review problems or struggles you feel your child is having.

Additional Resources

View our Afterschool Activities & Independent Leisure Skills Tool Kit for additional homework tips, as well as tips on independent leisure skills and other after-school activities.

<https://www.milestones.org/resources/tool-kits/afterschool-activities-independent-leisure-skills-tool-kit>

Ask Rose Student Resources: <https://askrose.org/studentresources/>

Autism Spectrum Therapies Back to School: Homework Tips:

<https://autismtherapies.com/back-to-school-homework-tips/>

Autism Support Network: Autism, Homework & Beyond:

<http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/autism-homework-beyond>

Math and Reading Help: http://mathandreadinghelp.org/article_directory/Tutoring.html

My Asperger's Child: Back to School "Quick Tip Sheet":

<http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2015/08/back-to-school-quick-tip-sheet-for.html>

My Asperger's Child: Refusing to Do Homework:

<http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2011/02/refusing-to-do-homework-25-tips-for.html>

My Asperger's Child: Asperger's Children and Homework Problems:

<http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2011/03/aspergers-children-and-homework.html>

Bright Hub Education: Children on the Autism Spectrum – Learning to Prioritize:

https://www.brighthubeducation.com/special-ed-neurological-disorders/66974-assigning-modifying-homework-when-teaching-children-with-autism/?cid=parsely_rec

Helping your Grade Schooler with Homework:

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/help-gradeschooler-homework.html>

Helping Your Teen with Homework: <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/help-teen-homework.html>

Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Practical Solutions for School Success by Diane Adreon and Brenda Smith Myles, Autism Asperger Publishing Company, 2001

Helping Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Express their Thoughts and Knowledge in Writing: Tips and Exercises for Developing Writing Skills by Elise Geither and Lisa Meeks. Jessica Kingsley Limited, 2014

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