

PFA Tips

Homework Tips

For parents of kids with autism, ADHD, or other executive functioning deficits, homework time can be an all-out battle. Oftentimes students have “held it together” all day – the last thing they want to do at home is more schoolwork! Try one or more of the following tips to make homework time less of a battle and more of a routine.

Start with a break

If your student needs a break from the day before diving into homework, set a specific break with a defined time. Many students with executive functioning weaknesses have difficulty initiating tasks, and while they may need a break between school and homework, too much of a break will lead to reduced momentum and significant difficulty returning to a school mindset. Allow your student 20 minutes to have a snack and read a magazine, and do not be afraid to set a timer. Try not to use TV as a break – it can be much harder for your student to switch their brain from passive TV watching back into school mode.

Establish a homework routine

Set a consistent time and place in the home, with relatively few distractions. Start each homework session by listing the tasks that need to be completed and assessing which are the easiest and which are the most difficult. Attack these tasks in a consistent manner. For some students with initiation problems, it can be best to start with an easy task to gain some momentum. For other students who get easily distracted or whose mental energy wanes fast as the evening passes, it is best to start with the hardest task, while they are more awake. For these students, sometimes starting with an easy task has the unintended consequence of the student spending too long on an activity that they could complete more quickly if under more time pressure.

Chunk blocks of time for assignments

After listing homework tasks and before beginning work, have your student estimate how long each task will take to complete. Add all the time up and discuss a block of time that can accommodate each task, plus breaks (more on that below). Actually schedule “Homework” on the student’s calendar, ideally one that they can visually see the time block. Finally, and most importantly, have the student time herself as she completes each task and write it next to her original estimate. Over time, look at which tasks she consistently overestimates and which ones she consistently underestimates. We all have a tendency to underestimate the time we will need to complete a task, but sometimes students with executive functioning weaknesses will overestimate the time a task will take, thinking it will be much more difficult than it actually is. For students who consistently do this, see the next tip!

Address initiation difficulties

For students who have initiation difficulties and those who consistently overestimate the time and effort a task will require, long-term, large projects are a particular challenge. Set a timer for 15 minutes and tell your student he needs to start the task and work diligently for the entire 15 minutes, and then you will stop him. Many times these students are surprised at how much they accomplish, and removing the pressure to complete the whole task allows the student the freedom to start.



Similarly, it can help to focus a student’s attention on just the first steps in front of her. Invite your child to list the first three things she needs to do on a project. Rather than thinking of the entire assignment, which may only overwhelm, ask her to concentrate on just those first three steps. Then, once she has completed the first three steps, brainstorm the next three and pick a time for when the student will complete them. In this way, she begins tackling a larger assignment in smaller, more manageable pieces.

Request an Assistive Technology assessment

For students who struggle with organizational skills, particularly remembering materials and planning their time, request that your school district conduct an Assistive Technology assessment. In particular, the following assistive tech components may be useful to your child:

- Scanned documents: If your child constantly loses homework papers, it might benefit him to receive and complete assignments electronically
- Electronic calendar: Many schools now use Chromebooks, which come with

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the capability to use Google's calendar program. An electronic calendar can be very valuable to a student who loses track of paper planners, but he needs to be explicitly taught how to use this tool. For example, if a student puts an assignment on its due date, but does not set reminders or block off time to work on it in advance, marking the event itself will not do the student much good.

- Sync your student's computer calendar with their phone, which he is much more likely to keep on him.

Create an order for tasks

Establish a consistent homework "order of operations" based on how your child works best. One technique that can help with both planning and easing homework anxiety is to list all tasks that the student needs to complete, then to put them in order of easiest to hardest. Identify the rhythm that works best for your child. Everyone is different, but most students will need to do the hardest assignment sometime toward the beginning of their homework time, before they get over-tired. A student may tackle tasks from hardest to easiest, going backward through the list. Others might need to start with one easy assignment, then alternate with hard and easy assignments until they finish in the middle of the list.

Take breaks

Plan natural breaks in your child's homework time. Typically, a break should give the student a chance to step away without being so long that she can't return to task. Where possible, use natural activities that are different but not far more desirable than homework and can help contribute to the family, such as getting the mail or setting the table.

Reward over punishment

Identify a "reward" for your child to receive after completing homework. This can both validate for your child that you understand how homework can be and gives him an incentive and something to work toward. Try to avoid circumstances that would cause the child to "lose" the reward, even when fights get bitter. (E.g. do not say, "If you do not finish that assignment by 7:00 p.m., no TV tonight!") When a child loses his chance of earning a reward, he has little incentive to keep working.

Investigate homework accommodations through your child's IEP

Talk to your child's teacher and IEP team. Though homework will almost certainly be a part of your child's life at some point, the focus should be on quality over quantity. The homework students do get should be meaningful practice, not busy work. All

students in your child's class might benefit from a constructive dialogue between parents and teachers about what amount of homework is good for your population. Even if decreasing the amount of homework teachers assign is not an option, it might be appropriate for your child's IEP team to consider reducing homework as an accommodation. If the previous tips do not help decrease tears, fights, and work refusal, you may want to discuss an individual change with your child's school team.

Additional Resources

Education tips and articles

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/education/>

PFA's Autism By Age

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/autism-by-age/>

Within each age, see the category Education

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