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Homework Without Tears

12 ways to make homework less stressful for your child with attention deficit disorder (ADHD ADD) or dyslexia.

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After a long day at school, homework can be tough for children with attention deficit disorder (ADD ADHD) or learning disabilities such as dyslexia—and for their parents, too. Here are strategies for wrapping up assignments:

1. Start a homework group.

Invite one or two kids from your child's class to come over and do a little homework together. This can be an effective way to get a look at other children's studying strategies, and the chance to play for a while when homework is done is a strong incentive to do the work more efficiently.

2. Consider your child's daily rhythms.

Most children do much better if they do their homework relatively early in the day—maybe not immediately upon coming home from school but certainly before supper. (Everyone deserves a break, and our kids, in particular, may need a chance for some physical activity before they have to sit down again.) Some quirky kids are notoriously early risers, and that can be a terrific time to get homework done.

3. Have a plan of attack.

Sit down and strategize the day's homework with your child: How much has to be done? What looks easy? What looks hard?

4. Have a specific place to do the work.

How can you minimize distractions? How available do you, or some other supervising adult, need to be? You may want to set up a dedicated homework location. If your child's room is the place most full of possible distractions, the best spot might be some boring adult setting: a little desk in the living room or some space at the kitchen table.

5. Reward accomplishments.

We are big believers in small, tangible rewards for small, tangible accomplishments. Finish your worksheet, and you'll get a cookie. Finish all your homework, and we'll go to the playground for 15 minutes before dinner. With the assignments your child really hates, there's nothing wrong with offering a grape or a gold star for every single successfully completed sentence on the worksheet or math problem on the list.

6. Don't overschedule.

If you fill up every afternoon with sports, therapy sessions, and other activities, then homework will have to wait until later, and that may be hard. How about moving some of these activities to the weekend? How about getting your child accustomed to bringing his homework along if you know there's usually a wait in the physical therapist's office? Some schools send home a weekly packet of assignments due on Friday, or the following Monday. This allows for more flexibility in planning, and the final product is more likely to be relatively neat and well thought out.

7. Plan for supervision.

Think about homework supervision as you make your child-care arrangements. If you have a babysitter overseeing some of these after-school hours, give her clear instructions for helping with homework, and make sure she understands that, if possible, it needs to be done by dinnertime. If your child spends time in an after-

school program, is there some provision for homework? Many of these programs offer a supervised homework room, where kids can work in peace and get help if they need it.

8. Organize.

For many quirky kids, just keeping track of papers is a big task. When an assignment is given at school, your child should know exactly where to put the paper so she'll be sure to bring it home.

After homework is done, she should pack it in whatever special folder or backpack is going back to school the next day. The parent who picks up and drops off the child at school may need to double-check to see that assignments or completed homework has been packed. No matter how carefully you plan, every parent has, at some time or another, driven madly back across town one morning with the forgotten, left-at-home important assignment in hand. You just don't want to have to do it every day.

9. Check in with the teacher.

If the assignments are not always clearly indicated, or if your child has trouble figuring out exactly what is expected, you should either check in with the teacher on a regular basis or establish a connection with another parent who seems relatively clued-in, so that you can, in a pinch, call for advice and instructions. Some teachers are available by e-mail, and some even post homework assignments on a website.

10. Bend the rules.

By far our favorite homework activity for young children is reading—reading together, letting the child read to the parent, and, of course, letting the parent read to the child. If your child's worn out by the evening, take over more of the reading and let her enjoy the pleasant one-on-one contact. We'd like to express the hope that homework reading programs will recognize the pleasures and comforts of reading aloud and will allow children to select books that interest them. If you find yourself with a homework reading program that is taking all the fun out of it, you may need to make some discreet alterations at home—with or without notifying the school.

11. Use tools to plan.

Help older children plan their time—not just for any one evening's work but for the bigger, longer-term assignments. Some quirky children are unable to understand how to break these down into manageable steps, so a chart, a checklist, or a calendar, with separate due dates for each task, can be really helpful.

12. Remember the power of praise.

Try to make homework a period that is associated with a certain amount of praise, with some physical comfort, and even the occasional treat. It won't make your child love worksheets, but it may start to seem like a familiar, relatively pleasant interlude in the day—or at least, like a doable assignment.

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