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Study Skills

A Handout for Parents

by Virginia Smith Harvey, Ph.D.
University of Massachusetts-Boston

Overview

Many capable children at all grade levels experience frustration and failure in school, not because they lack ability, but because they do not have adequate *study skills*. Good study habits are important for success in school, to foster feelings of competence, to develop positive attitudes, and to help children realize they can control how well they do in school and in life. Good study habits lay the groundwork for successful work habits as an adult.

For children to learn good study skills, teachers and parents must work together. It is most important to help children build good habits, to develop a system that works for an individual child, and to use the system effectively and consistently. Preferred learning styles vary from child to child. Children need to discover how they learn and then work out a study system that fits best. Parents of elementary aged children usually help their children more than parents of adolescents. However, adolescents also need parental support and encouragement throughout high school.

Four Basic Principles to Enhance Study Skills

1. Make homework completion a positive experience: associate it with love and affection, freedom, fun and control.
2. Make homework completion a high priority.
3. Use homework completion to teach organization skills and improve learning skills. Remember that the primary purpose of homework is to improve learning and foster work habits.
4. Provide and enforce logical and meaningful consequences.

Make Homework Completion a Positive Experience

Associate it with love and affection, freedom, fun, and control. Possible ways to do this are to:

- Provide support and praise for homework completion.
- Be available to provide non-critical assistance.
- Give children choice in when, where, and how they complete homework assignments.
- Encourage your children to complete homework well enough that they have a sense of control over their own learning and levels of competence.
- Maintain a positive and helpful attitude: avoid criticism and anger.
- Help children understand what types of homework they enjoy and encourage them to choose assignments accordingly. Some prefer written reports, others prefer hands-on projects.
- Use homework preferences in developing a homework schedule. Some children prefer to get disliked homework done first, while others prefer to do their easier work first.
- When a child dislikes subject, find ways to make it less frustrating. For example, set a goal of doing five math problems and then taking a stretch.
- Encourage your children to participate in study groups with friends. Research shows that children who form study groups achieve at a much higher level than children who always study alone.
- Encourage your child to have fun such as eating a snack, calling friends, starting an activity, or watching a favorite show when homework is finished.
- Never use homework as a punishment.
- Be a good listener, and encourage your child to ask questions about things that are hard to understand.
- Set aside time for your children to share with you the skills and information they are acquiring.
- Help children study for tests by quizzing them on the material in a friendly manner.
- Have your children imagine themselves as excellent students. Then brainstorm what needs to be done to make that a reality.

Make Homework Completion a High Priority

- Make clear that you expect your children to complete homework well.
- Establish a study routine: children should be in the habit of studying at the same time and in the same place each day. Children and parents should decide, together, upon the study routine by taking into account scheduled activities, family commitments, and favorite TV shows. Also, consider the child's ability to concentrate at different

times of the day. Many elementary school children are too tired after dinner, and show this by having trouble concentrating, being easily frustrated, and being slow to complete tasks. Ideally, the family agrees upon a study hour, the television and stereo are off, phone calls are not taken, and the entire family studies, reads, or completes paperwork.

- Establish a place to study with good lighting and a table or desk. Some children prefer to study in their own room. Others do better if they are studying at the kitchen table or other location near parental help. Some children are able to study with a little background noise such as music. Few can study effectively in front of the TV and most need uninterrupted quiet. Other children may prefer to work at the library, and will need transportation.

- Have supplies on hand including binders, notebooks, paper, pencils, pens, assignment books, erasers, dictionaries, a calculator, ruler, hole punch, tape, glue, reference books and/or programs.

- Demonstrate, and enforce, that homework completion is a higher priority than other activities. A child should not watch TV and talk with friends before completing homework, unless time later in the day has been set aside upon for homework completion.

- Reduce activities if a child has so many commitments that there is insufficient time for homework.

- Have help available for every subject. This might be a parent, neighbor, friend, teacher hot line, an on-line homework service, or a tutor. The helper needs to be someone who is knowledgeable about the subject and who can help the child without becoming frustrated or angry.

- Establish a family expectation that studying for exams is expected and takes priority over other activities.

Use Homework Completion to Teach Organization Skills and Improve Learning

Keep in mind that the primary purpose of homework is to improve learning and foster work habits. Possible ways to do this are to:

- Encourage your child to use an assignment book, write all assignments into the book daily, and check them off when completed. Your child should also break down long term assignments, such as projects, into smaller parts and write each part into the assignment book. Many children also find it helpful to put other commitments into the assignment book as well, including music lessons, sports, and jobs.

- Encourage your children to estimate how long it will take to complete each assignment and plan their schedule accordingly.

- Help your children set goals regarding how well they want to do on an assignment and how much effort it will take to do that well. This will help them learn to divide study time effectively.

- Help your children learn to plan for finishing assignments on time. They should start working on major assignments or reviewing for major tests well ahead.
- Help your children expand their concentration time. At first they may be able to concentrate for only 10 minutes. Parents can help their children build up this length of time gradually, so that homework takes less time. Even high school students should take a 10 to 15 minute break after studying for 45 or 50 minutes. Otherwise, they lose the ability to concentrate.
- Encourage your child to circle the verbs in directions.
- Encourage your child to review class notes and add details, make corrections, and highlight the most important information.
- Encourage your children to improve reading skills by having them pre-read non-fiction reading assignments (reviewing the headings, picture captions, reviewing tables, charts, and graphs). Children can pre-read fiction by reading the front cover, back cover, and introduction, and skimming the first quarter to determine setting, character, and plot.
- Encourage your child to determine the meaning of unknown words by using the context or by looking them up in a dictionary and writing them down.
- Help your child learn effective reading techniques such as SQ3R, where the reader:

Surveys: Looks over the material before beginning to read to obtain a general orientation.

Questions: Writes down questions about the material before beginning to read.

Reads through the material in the normal way.

Recites and Writes: Writes down or gives the answers to another person.

Reviews: Goes over the material several times before being tested.

- Encourage your child to outline or "map" reading material for better understanding. To "map," a child places the main topic in the middle of a blank sheet of paper. Then a branch is drawn for each subheading, and supporting details are placed on smaller branches going out from the subheadings. This creates a visual aid that increases organization and comprehension.
- Make sure your children are able to understand their textbooks. Children should be able to read 9 out of 10 words accurately and answer correctly a least 3 out of 4 questions.
- Help your child predict outcomes, distinguish fact from opinion, discern emotional appeals, recognize bias, discern inference as they read.
- Encourage your children to organize thoughts before beginning a written assignment, and write at least two drafts.

- Have your child proofread and check for success or failure in answering the purpose of the assignment, legibility, neatness, spelling, complete sentences, and punctuation errors.
- Help your child to see tests as an opportunity to "show off" what they have learned, rather than something to be feared.
- Help your children predict test questions as they study for tests.
- Encourage your child to space learning over several sessions instead of cramming the night before. Five hours of study spread over a week is better than studying five hours the night before the test: cramming for tests increases anxiety and causes lower grades.
- Avoid acting as a tutor for your child. If a child needs a tutor in a particular subject, call the local high school and ask for a student tutor through the Honor Society.

Provide and Enforce Logical and Meaningful Consequences

- Each week, have your children assess their own homework completion by reviewing returned papers, tests and quizzes, and current grades. With your children, note their progress, improvements, areas of need, and jointly plan how to solve any problems.
- Display well-done work in a prominent place, such as on the refrigerator door.
- With their help, graph your children's grades. Include the grades for each class, the average grade for all classes, and an agreed upon target line. The target line should be the grades that you and your children agree are reasonable and obtainable (if your child is now receiving D's, a reasonable goal is grades of C: to first set the goal at A's will lead to frustration). Discuss the graph with your children, help your children identify any patterns of poor performance, and jointly develop solution plans.
- Teach your children to bring all necessary materials home. If your children get in the habit of "forgetting" homework materials, have them spend time on reading or working on other academic activities during the agreed upon study time. Your children could also walk back to school to pick up forgotten materials, or be charged "gas money" out of their allowance for being driven back to school. Or, with the help of a school psychologist or counselor, set up a system that rewards them for bringing everything home.
- Sometimes children "lose" completed homework in their books or backpack. Placing all completed homework in one folder in the backpack can solve this problem.
- If a child does not complete homework, reduce the freedom the child has until grades improve and the teacher indicates that the problem is solved. Methods of reducing freedom might be (a) giving your child less control about where and when homework is completed, (b) parents checking the quality of completed homework every evening, (c) parents and teachers maintaining ongoing communication in the assignment book, or (d) the child not being able to participate in a planned activity such as a field trip.

- Reward your child for good grades and for improving grades. Your child's preferences should be considered in deciding upon the reward, but the rewards need not be expensive. Going out together for an ice cream cone, or telephoning a grandparent to tell them of the child's success, are examples of inexpensive but effective rewards.
- Provide support and genuine praise for homework completion and good study habits.

Resources

Canter, L. (1993). *Homework without tears*. New York: HarperCollins.

Mack, A. (1997). *A+ Parents: Help your child learn and succeed in school*. McBooks.

How to help your child achieve in school (1988). Pueblo, CO: Consumer Information Center (Dept 109M).

Rosemond, J. (1990). *Ending the homework hassle: Understanding, preventing and solving school performance problems*. Andrews & McMeel.

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