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What Good Is Homework?

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By Barbara Smith

For some families, homework is just another activity that fits into their daily routine without too much trouble. For others, the mere mention of the word homework sends strong feelings of dread through every member of the family — the child who is struggling, the parents who are trying to oversee the process



and the siblings who have to witness the associated conflicts. If this is your house, it is time to stop, take stock and figure out what is going on.

Discover the Purpose

Having a clear idea of the purpose of homework is a good first step. What good is homework anyway? Usually the main purpose of homework is to give children independent practice with a skill that they have been taught at school in order to reinforce learning. This sounds easy enough, but for the family with a student receiving special education it often isn't. It is important to consider the

special needs of the child as they relate to homework as closely as you look at their needs during the school day.

Communicate with Teachers

The assumption that homework is practice of a skill already learned may not apply to the student with special needs. Even though a skill may have been introduced during the school day, the student may not be ready to practice independently. Close communication between school and home can help support the student in this situation. For example, a parent who understands how a science concept is being demonstrated in school will have an easier job helping reinforce that concept at home. Acting as partners, the teachers, parents and students can make sure that the student has the information and supports at home to be successful with their homework.

Understand Requirements

Students' frustration with homework often leads to anger or procrastination. Partnership and close communication between home and school can support the student by providing a clear understanding of the requirements for the student's success. A study guide for the social studies test given to the child whose social studies curriculum is being modified makes the job of studying easier. The study guide clarifies for both the parent (who has no other way of knowing) and the child (who may have forgotten) the parts of the general

curriculum content that they are expected to have mastered.

Create the Proper Setting

The home environment needs to be set up to physically support the student's work in a manner similar and as well thought out as the one found in the school. If the students use assistive technology at school to complete work similar to the work assigned for homework, they should have access to the same equipment at home. For example, parents need to know that using a calculator to solve certain types of math problems at school is permissible so that they will know to allow its use at home. Similarly, if the student uses a keyboard like an Alphasmart to complete writing assignments at school, they should not be expected to write in long hand at home. Sometimes parents can provide the needed tools at home themselves (like having beans available for solving math problems) and other times (like providing access to word processing equipment) the access to these tools needs to be specified in the IEP accommodations section.

Break Work into Small Steps

Students avoid homework when the task is too big and they don't know where to start. Some students have trouble organizing all tasks, even seemingly simple ones. They may benefit by breaking tasks into smaller steps and setting up programs to tackle long term projects. This requires more frequent com-

munication and checks on progress, but when parents know the details of the plan and teachers monitor the stepwise progress, students have a better chance of success.

The Fatigue Factor

For some children with special needs, fatigue is a possibility. After a long day at school, they are often too tired to put in more effort at the end of the day. In this case, the IEP team needs to consider the child's stamina when planning the homework load. This could include tailoring homework differently for the student with special needs to reduce the amount of homework, include only tasks that have a big payoff educationally and reducing homework on days that the student has other after-school obligations.



Make It Challenging

Homework that is too easy can cause difficult behavior when it is time to settle down and get it done. No one likes being bored, and a student who is not being challenged will resent the time they spend on work that requires little brainpower. Students do not behave the same at home as they do at school. Sometimes the quiet, secure environment of the home makes it easier for a child to think and perform than at school. If this is happening at your home, it would be a good topic of discussion with your child's teacher or IEP team.

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Talk with the IEP Team

If homework is a battle at your house, it is not helping your child to learn. Don't keep it to yourself. As a concerned member of your child's educational team, let your child's teacher and/or IEP team know what is happening during homework time. Together, you can brainstorm solutions to turn homework time from a hassle to a meaningful part of the day.



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