

HOMEWORK- is it relevant, accessible and differentiated?

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Homework can be a nightmare for those with additional/special needs, especially those that have processing issues, (such as APD, Irlen Syndrome/ scotopic sensitivity and visual perceptual problems) and those with short term memory problems, writing and planning problems, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and attention deficits and any other “dyslexia-type” issues. These children can be totally exhausted by the time they get home from school; this is because it is so much harder for them to do the work that others manage easily and homework can be the straw that broke the camel's back. Bright/able/gifted children often suffer too, being set extra work or extended work after much of the same at school and those with dual exceptionalities (bright/able/gifted with learning difficulties) often fall into the same trap if their difficulties are not addressed. I'm sure these aren't the only children affected but these are ones in my area of experience.

After school these children are often sensorily overloaded, stressed, and homework for them needs to be differentiated or more support given or the child ends up being punished by missing out on essential free time.

Unnecessary amounts of homework cause avoidable anguish to many children, most particularly those with special educational needs. This misery often carries over into family life as it also puts added pressure on families to insist they complete their homework in order to help them achieve- often not realising that doing so is damaging to the child and also to the parent/child relationship. Tears, tantrums, sulking and defiance are a common reaction as well as avoidance and lies. Homework that takes an unaffected child half an hour might take them two hours, which, apart from the unnecessary effort it takes them at the end of a busy school day, also leaving less room for families to just spend time together. There is nothing worse than having to force a child who is already failing to do more of the same in the sanctuary of their own home.

They may be distressed and exhausted, so they need time to unwind and relax in a calm and quiet refuge from schoolwork in order to recharge their energy and also allow vital time for the brain to process what they have learned at school so they can be ready for the next day. They cannot do this if they are working till bedtime.

As much as some schools try to help with homework, why should children who have SEN and struggle to get through the day have to give up their lunchtimes, come early or stay late to do work that is unnecessary and inappropriate? Also inappropriate is the practice of keeping a child who struggles in lunchtime and break times to complete work, something of which too many schools are also guilty. If a child is unable to finish the work in the time allocated then it is too hard for parent becomes the oppressor, the “bad guy” and the trust the child has for them is gradually worn away. Children often feel that a parent should protect them from the misery they feel at school and that home is the only safe haven they have. Soon nowhere is safe. What is this needless extra work and pressure doing to our children and to family life? I expect many of you reading this will know this situation only too well.

When a child is so tired that they are just unable to do any more, forcing them to do homework that is too hard for them and which they do not understand will not benefit the child in any way. Often parents unwillingly push their child to do so for fear they will get into trouble at school, which many do, with the resulting punishments and loss of privileges etc, and the already exhausted child may lie awake half the night worrying if they have not been able to complete homework. Or, as seen especially in older pupils, some would rather accept the punishment and appear defiant just to save face to their peers and even to teachers and not have to admit they couldn't do the work. This also adds to their feelings of low self-esteem and compounds their failure.

Parents are often then called in to school and asked why little Johnny hasn't done his homework, so the poor child may well get punished at home too because parents feel that what the schools say is gospel and there

begins a downward spiral of disaffection. If you find that homework is benefiting your child then encourage them to do what they can as best they can in a quiet and calm environment that suits the way they learn. But if not, then this situation of imposing added distress on an already overloaded child has to stop. Ask the school to make your child's homework relevant, accessible and differentiated.

IEP/Statement Targets

IEP/Statement targets should not be routinely included in homework. They should be worked on at school with the appropriately trained member/s of staff that are usually named on their IEP/Statement. This is not a parent's responsibility. If there is no time at school to do this, then parents need to contact the SENCo by phone or email to ask why this is not being done at school. Sometimes tasks such as reading to someone may be included as an IEP target, but this is something that individual parents need to discuss with the school if they feel this is not something they would agree to doing at home. Many parents do this anyway but if parents have literacy difficulties themselves, this is not an area they can help with and added pressure is then put on them too.

Incidentally if you, as a parent, do not have a list of your child's IEP targets, please ask the school for one, as you are entitled to have one. Make sure that wherever possible they have named persons on them who will help your child achieve the targets set and also check that they state how they will do this. An IEP is not just a record of what is expected of a child but also how the school and outside agencies (where appropriate) will help them achieve them -if they could do it alone, they would not need an IEP! You also have the right to be present at any IEP/Statement reviews and your views (and those of your child if of an appropriate age to make such decisions) must- according to the Special Needs Code of Practice- be taken into account. You can take an advocate, family member or a friend with you if needed. If you are unable to attend at the time specified and wish to attend, they must re-arrange a date that suits you, so let them know in writing if you do wish to be there and the date is unsuitable- and keep a copy.

If your child struggles with homework, let the school know as soon as possible. It is unfair to your child and to you for this situation to continue. If homework is an issue for your child then it must be addressed by the school. Many schools include doing homework as part of their school rules, adopting it as compulsory like uniform and often as a way of ensuring they complete the curriculum. Your child's education should be provided at school as much as possible although they will need to develop study skills and ultimately independent learning. For some children with processing issues, these need to be taught. In my view and that of many, the time would be better used resting and recovering from their day and learning and practising study skills in a calm and relaxed environment with no pressure and minimal worksheets to complete. The DfES guideline makes no reference to SEN at all; it does say in section 2 that homework "need not and should not" interfere with social activities or outside interests, which for many children with SEN it does, as they have little time left to do anything else.

Any recommended remedial programs and CD-roms etc. should also be undertaken at school when the child is fresh and alert, not at home at the end of the day when the child is already tired and the gains that might be made will be negligible; training programs are exhausting and add more pressure to the child and family in ensuring this remediation is done. This does not help any child. If your child is undergoing remediation of this kind, make sure it is included in their IEP/Statement that it is to be completed at school at a time when it will benefit them most.

What teachers can do to help

For children with special/additional needs, homework for homework's sake should be avoided at all costs and if it is deemed essential then it should be kept to a level appropriate to the child. Homework for children with SEN must be relevant, accessible and differentiated. If you are a teacher, please think very carefully about what you set as homework. Decide whether the homework is really necessary or if you are setting it because

homework is traditionally required at your school. If the latter is true, question the policy and help schools to make it applicable for children with SEN.

Homework should not be in place of what has not been taught at school due to time restraints Determine whether the homework is relevant to what is being studied at that time - do not set work on topics they do not already know as new topics set as homework will invariably not be understood without prior teaching. Don't set IEP/statement targets or remedial tasks/programs as homework. This should be done at school so that it can be delivered by appropriately trained personnel. Don't just set the whole class the same homework without thought as to how it will affect those with special/additional needs. Ask yourself whether the homework will benefit each child according to their needs or if it will make things harder for them/complicate understanding. Make the tasks multi-sensory, if possible, to reinforce what has been done at school.

Send clear notes home so that parents can repeat them to help if the child needs explanation on how to proceed. (It could be that work is set on a topic that has not been understood by the child at school. If the child does not understand, the parents should not then force them to do that piece of homework, as for them it will be meaningless). Encourage parents to tell you if the child has struggled - the child may not want to admit it to a teacher or in front of peers and will often take punishment to save face rather than say they have not understood. Give each child a home/school diary for parents to log areas of difficulty and parents' comments.

If a child continually struggles with written homework, please consider whether to reduce it or replace with of other types of reinforcement and overlearning or study skills. Or in place of class homework send home information for pre-teaching new vocabulary and concepts. This for many may work better as "pre- taught" reinforcement instead of "after-teaching" homework. Children with APD particularly need time to absorb new concepts and if this is done before they are introduced in class it will help enormously. Provide handouts whenever possible and allow the child to keep them and refer to this information in class when the topic is covered, instead of expecting them to take unnecessary dictation, which should always be avoided as it serves no real purpose when pre-printed handouts can easily be given to all that need them. This should not be accompanied with worksheets or tasks. Homework time for some children might well be better spent in developing study skills, another thing that pupils with special/additional needs find very difficult.

Always make homework SMART like an IEP target...Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time bound (allowing that it may take these children at least twice as long to complete tasks as other children, so instead of making them work for a longer time, set less and expect less and you will increase the quality of work produced). Always strive to avoid putting a child with special/additional needs in a position of failure. Allow the use of a word processor and/or diagrams/flowcharts for those that find planning/writing work difficult. Provide pre-printed tables and planning diagrams for them to fill in wherever possible. Provide pre-printed cloze procedures in place of comprehensions where applicable and do not set unnecessary copying of vast amounts of text. Spelling words, if they must be given, should be no more than 5 and should be linked by a particular spelling rule/theme, not just random disassociated words.

Please don't give bright/able/gifted children more work than other children or extended work as homework; this is not fair and they need to relax and have a life outside school too or they may burn out and become disaffected. Alternative/differentiated work is just as essential for them too if they need to be educationally stimulated. But don't just assume that they do – in all cases, look to the child.

If implemented according to the child's needs and abilities, homework can aid in the development of independent learning and study skills. BUT if a child is genuinely distressed by the homework that is set, please reconsider whether it BENEFITS the child. That should be the defining factor. Please think again about what you set and make sure it is applicable and beneficial to all children in your care.

Special/additional needs affect children everywhere, not just at school, and they need time to relax and socialise too, or they will come to school un-refreshed the next day, which compounds their difficulties. A child who goes to school happy and relaxed, having rested well the night before and understood the homework they were set, will feel a sense of achievement and process information a lot better than one who is exhausted and stressed, yet again having experienced failure. In many cases homework set with care for the individual can help them to achieve this, so please rethink your school policy. And just remember...less or no homework also means less marking and less time reinforcing again in class what might have been understood better at home if it had been applicable to the child.

FOOTNOTE

In the UK now homework is no longer a legal requirement, but schools will have this in the school rules of=r the contract you sign when you admit a child to school. Please read this carefully. Help is available from the Citizens' Advice Bureau. This page is on homework.

http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/england/education_e/education_school_education_ew/problems_at_school.htm#h_homework