

Connecting for high potential



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR
Gifted Children

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NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

Topics for this month: “Homework: Making It Worthwhile”

A Teacher’s View

I’ve just finished a great lesson. The students responded to advanced questions by offering substantial answers. They get it! We’re all smiling. Then, in the final moments of the period, I stand at the board and write the dreaded abbreviated “HW,” to which a harmonious groan comes from behind me. Why? Maybe because I’m a middle school teacher and these kids have already had years of bad experiences. Who wants more work? For teachers, the reality is that the hardest part of any planned lesson can be crafting a follow up homework assignment.

Recent media has portrayed the “idea” of homework as needless busy work, assigned because it has always been this way. There are even isolated movements to ban homework altogether. But let’s not forget that homework can be useful. Homework can be a crucial element in cementing knowledge. So, knowing this, I have three questions. What can I do to get parent support for homework assignments? Where can I get some ideas to help kids with homework? And, how can I learn more about good homework practices?

A Parent’s View

Parent 1: My 9-year old daughter leaves the house at 7:30 am and isn’t home until 4:30 pm. Homework can add as much as 3 hours more to her day. She has daily piano practice, plus other weekly activities like soccer and volunteering at the children’s library. We all feel rushed, tired, pushed, and pulled. Where’s time for family? I’m becoming resentful of the amount of wasted time IN school while my daughter waits and waits for something new to learn, and then the wasted time OUT of school when she’s expected to spend valuable time doing simple, repetitive, ridiculous worksheets. How can this be changed?

Parent 2: I’m reeling from the news that my son is failing in two subject areas not because he can’t do the work (he always gets top scores on tests) but because he doesn’t turn in his homework. When I confronted him, he said it wasn’t “worth the bother.” Turns out he’s actually doing the work but keeps it in his backpack. The teacher only records that it’s turned in. No comment on quality. No suggestion for improvement. My son has gone “on strike.” I rather agree, but don’t want him to fail. What do I do?

There’s often a disconnect between what the teacher, student, and parent believe to be relevant and challenging homework. By assigning homework, good teachers seek to strengthen and enhance curriculum content, evaluate students’ level of understanding, offer opportunities for independent exploration of topics of interest, and yes, at times, allow for the completion of unfinished class work. Homework also helps develop crucial independent learning skills such as organization, time management, and studying. Through the completion of meaningful homework, students have a chance to consolidate their knowledge, use skills learned in the classroom, and extend their proficiency. At home, involved parents have the chance to explore what their child is learning, observe how their child approaches learning tasks, encourage, and help their child to take delight in making connections beyond the classroom. For a healthy transition between learning at school and the commitment to extend that learning at home, teachers and parents both need to recognize their differing perspectives when confronting homework. Here are some suggestions to begin sensible discussions about responsible homework practices. You’ll find even more information in the Duke Gifted Newsletter article “Making the Homework Connection,” <http://www.nagc.org/chp.aspx>.

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Please copy this for other parents and teachers in your community
who may find this useful.

Note: The full articles cited in this issue of *Connecting for High Potential* (CHP) can be accessed on the CHP Resource Page www.nagc.org/chp.aspx

1. Homework? Be clear on the purpose. Is it part of a long-term learning plan?

AT SCHOOL

- There's a big difference between purposeful practice and mindless repetition. The goal should be to give work that is relevant to the curriculum being taught. Students need to feel that what they are doing is an extension of a great class. If it's only busy work, don't assign it. (After all, grading and commenting on homework can take as much time as it does for the students to complete!)
- Make the purpose explicit. When there's a strong connection between the students and assignments, some homework problems might be solved.
- Useful homework policies are fluid and allow for adjustments based on student needs.

AT HOME

- Does your school have a written homework policy? If not, volunteer to help craft one. If your school does have one, have you talked about the policy with your child to make sure everyone is in agreement?
- If you're encountering resistance from your child, find out why. Is it the sheer volume of work? Is it the level of difficulty? Is it a matter of clearly defined expectations? It's often helpful to keep a homework log for a week to illustrate actual time spent, level of challenge, etc. This log can serve as a basis for constructive conversation with the teacher.

2. Setting the Stage for Homework

AT SCHOOL

- Stopping class five to seven minutes early to allow ample time to write down assignments and clarify expectations is helpful for all students.
- Share strategies with parents for creating an optimal work environment at home.
- Construct your homework assignments with a creative edge. Check out the article "Helping Your Students With Homework: A Guide for Teachers" at <http://www.nagc.org/chp.aspx>
- Over the course of a grading period many students "miss" an assignment or two. Scaffold students into becoming comfortable with homework completion. Try instituting a "Homework Club" at school that provides analysis of organizational and time management skills. For more ideas, look at December's Teacher's Corner, <http://www.nagc.org/teacherscorner.aspx>

AT HOME

- Take a minute to review the basics: Does your child have a quiet, well-lighted place to study? Is homework time a regular part of the day. Get in the practice of setting time aside for academic review or reading every school night whether there is specific homework or not.
- Homework is an opportunity for a child to safely stay in the struggle, and to eventually experience success. Although you need to help create optimal learning conditions and model organizational strategies, it's ultimately your child's responsibility to complete homework in the best way possible. For more ideas about developing skills such as planning ahead, or making appropriate choices, read the article *Teach Your Child to Think and Make Parenting Fun Again* from *Parenting for High Potential* and reprinted in *The NAGC Mile Marker Series* at: <http://www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx>

Strategies used to make change both at home and school will depend on why homework is a problem in the first place. Consider some additional reasons, such as individual student approaches to homework.

- We'll start with a **homework underachiever**. He/she may only complete minimal work. Look for ideas to try in the study guides and time management techniques in one of NAGC's parent pages at <http://www.nagc.org/organizationskills.aspx>
- A second type of student **never feels satisfied or "done"** and, as a result, struggles with finishing. There are many resources for working with these students in the book, *What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough* (Free Spirit Press).
- Other students may be currently content with meeting the minimal requirements. They're **reluctant to stretch**. Sometimes a simple meeting can provide necessary attention and subsequent motivation to aim higher. Giving them examples of varying levels of work can help their understanding of what is expected and possible to achieve.

"The are no gains without pains."

--Benjamin Franklin