

## **Identifying the Root Causes of Homework Non-Compliance Among Students with ADHD**

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Homework assignments have been a controversial teaching strategy ever since public education was first mandated in the United States in 1918. In fact, as early as 1925 a parent-based movement in Massachusetts suggested the abolishment of homework. By the 1980s, however, the tide had turned and most schools and families agreed that the mental exercise of practicing skills learned in school was a necessary function of the educational process. Duke University researchers reviewed more than 60 research studies on homework published from 1987 to 2003 and concluded that homework does, indeed, have a positive effect on student achievement.

At The Help Group schools we have studied the effectiveness of our teaching strategies on existing students and reviewed follow up data on graduates and others who have left the program. The ability of a student to independently complete their homework was one of the best predictors of success among graduates of Help Group schools. Homework provides students the opportunity to develop study skills and good work habits. In fact, compliance with homework assignments was a better predictor of a student's ability to be successful in a mainstreamed school setting than the student's level of academic competency, compliance with school rules or their ability to inhibit impulsive behaviors.

Three recent studies performed in the past ten years, however, suggest that students diagnosed with ADHD have significant difficulties completing homework assignments. Seventy-three percent of parents of students diagnosed with ADHD or other learning difficulties report significant challenges with homework compliance. These are usually thought to be related to a student's motivation, academic underachievement, parent-child conflicts or family-school relationship problems. Yet, specific intervention-related research in this area suggests there are two factors which affect homework compliance. Assessment of these factors may lead to more specific interventions to improve homework compliance.

### **Factors Predicting Homework Compliance**

In a parent guide titled, "Helping Your Child Get the Most Out of Homework," The National Education Association (NEA) states that most educators agree that homework assignments for children in grades K-2 should not exceed 10 to 20 minutes each day. Children in grades 3-6 can handle from 30 to 60 minutes a day, the guide states, while the amount of homework given in junior and senior high school classes will vary by subject. Many school districts' policies state that high school students should expect about 30 minutes of homework for each academic course they take, or more for honors or Advanced Placement courses. These recommendations are consistent with the conclusions reached by a combined analysis of dozens of studies.

Ken Anesko developed the Homework Problem Checklist as a method of assessing difficulties in compliance with homework assignments. Two factors have emerged from the use of this instrument in determining homework compliance. The first factor reflects difficulties associated with inattention or avoidance of homework. Students in this domain tend to struggle with paying attention, working independently and working efficiently. The second factor reflects difficulties associated with poor productivity or non-adherence with homework rules. Students in this domain tend to struggle with understanding the assignment, completing it according to the instructions and submitting homework. Factor I is usually associated with students diagnosed with ADHD-related symptoms and anxiety. Factor II is usually associated with students diagnosed with externalizing behaviors and poor overall compliance with adult authority. Note that neither domain is associated with poor academic fluency. In other words, students who struggle with homework compliance typically have poor work habits, as opposed to poor academic skills.

Determining which factor is responsible for the poor work habits that may ultimately lead to homework non-compliance is a necessary function in establishing interventions to change the behavior.

### **Homework Non-compliance Student Profiles: A Side-By-Side Comparison**

<b>Factor I Profile</b>	<b>Factor II Profile</b>
issues usually arise during the course of homework completion	issues are usually apparent from the beginning of the homework process
tend to have difficulties sticking to the task at hand	tend to have difficulties organizing the task
can start an assignment but may have difficulties continuing their effort throughout the course of the task	have difficulties starting the process or do not turn in their work when it is complete
understand the assignment but have difficulties completing it quickly and efficiently	may not have written down the assignment or may be too confused about the instructions to complete the assignment
need assistance to help them maintain their efforts throughout the assignment	need assistance starting the task and staying organized

### **Recommendations for Improving Homework Compliance**

Factor I students may benefit from family-based interventions. Given that these types of issues are usually more apparent in the home than at school, it stands to reason that that intervention should take place in the home. Specific interventions for this type of student tend to focus on improving attention to task, work efficiency and parent-child interactions during homework. One intervention that has proven to be successful for this type of student is the use of a kitchen timer during homework. Students who are inattentive tend to overestimate the amount of effort it will take to complete an assignment. In order to deal with this issue it is suggested that parents work with the child to estimate how much time it should take to complete each task. An assessment is made by the child and a timer is set to see if they are correct. Children invariably overestimate the time it will take to complete the assignment and are reinforced when they complete it prior to the time set on the timer. Finally, parents and students can work on trying to get more efficient in estimating how long each assignment should take.

Factor II students tend to require family-school interventions designed to improve parent-teacher communication and the accuracy of recording homework assignments. These types of students often benefit from increased structure during the homework process. Establishing a regular time to begin homework is useful. Planning and scheduling homework is also a useful intervention. This type of student needs a planner to identify which assignments are due immediately and which assignments require long-term planning. Students with these difficulties may also benefit from a stimulus-reduced study environment. Sandra Rief, author of "How to Reach and Teach Students with ADHD," suggests developing an organized study carrel. Using a simple piece of cardboard, the student builds in pockets for all of the materials needed to complete an assignment, places for homework instructions and a monthly calendar listing all the assignments for the month.

Many educational plans suggest the accommodation of reduced homework assignments, yet there is no evidence of the efficacy of this accommodation in educational literature. In fact, the opposite approach is often more efficacious. Students who develop good work habits are not only associated with improved academic achievement, but also improved overall compliance with authority. They also experience more satisfaction with their academic efforts. For example, students who struggle with completing their homework assignments on their own are more likely to report that the grades they received were worth their efforts. Reducing the assignments tends to get interpreted by students as a reflection of their abilities as opposed to their efforts.

### **Developing Independent Learners**

Homework can be an arduous task for families of students with special needs. However, the ability to independently practice lessons learned in school helps to develop work habits that will serve a student throughout their life. Parents and teachers are encouraged to assess the source of their child's difficulties with homework. More often than not, a child's non-compliance with homework is associated with poor study skills as opposed to difficulties with academic skills. Careful assessment of the factors that lead to non-compliance should drive the efforts to solve the problem. Abandoning homework is not an option if parents, teachers and school administrators want to develop independent learners.