

Spotlight: Preparing for the Annual Back to School Tradition

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Trauma Momma, Homework Drama!

*Easing the strain of homework on children and parents in adoptive families.
Suggestions from an adoptive parent, former educator and clinical psychologist.*

By Natalie Montfort, Ph.D.

As a former special educator, I recognize the importance of homework. Homework may teach some children responsibility, planning, organizing and independence. However, in my experience, those children who benefit the most from homework are those children who already have solid foundations in these skills.

As the parent of a traumatized child adopted at the age of 9, I have also lived the drama of homework. Homework may lead some children (and parents!) to tears, tantrums, aggression and withdrawal. In my experience, the children who create the most drama around homework are those children who lack the academic, organizational, attentional and/or executive foundations necessary to manage the demands of homework.

Adopted children often require special educational considerations due to their early environments (sometimes filled with chaos, abuse, neglect or other trauma) and/or medical diagnoses (such as FASD, ADHD and/or learning disabilities). These children may also work to build strong attachments to their adoptive parents because they have generally not had the luxury of being together since conception.

Furthermore, medical diagnoses and/or exposure to trauma may result in a child who needs more practice with the academic skills of school, which leaves less time for attachment building. What is an adoptive family to do? Should we abandon the homework that often feels like too much to ask of our child? Or, should we put their homework and grades before our relationship and sanity?

In my current profession as a psychologist, I have coached countless families through this struggle. As a mother, I have experienced it first-hand in my own home. These strategies for homework success have been collected from my home, the homes of others, and with the help of caring teachers who truly understand that it takes a village to raise a child. Suggestions to make homework manageable in the adoptive home:

1. Consider homework readiness.

There is a reason that nursery school does not give homework. Developmentally, homework is not appropriate for all children. Parents know this. Teachers know this. Society knows this. Most academic curricula introduce homework (i.e. schoolwork sent home to reinforce academic concepts) in early elementary school, or kindergarten at the earliest. Homework is not

given to nursery school students because they lack the executive functioning skills needed to complete the task. Executive functions are those cognitive skills needed to plan, organize, problem-solve, monitor progress and regulate behavior and emotions. These skills begin to appear around age 2 and continue to develop through adolescence and into young adulthood. For children with developmental trauma, their executive functioning may be immature, as are other areas of their development. Research suggests that executive functioning is also impacted by ADHD, FASD, autism spectrum disorder, depression, anxiety and other clinical disorders. Medical conditions such as chemotherapy or diabetes are also known to impact executive functioning. In sum, children who were adopted and/or who have experienced trauma are likely to have some difficulty with executive functioning. For some children, their executive functioning and/or developmental levels may be such that homework is an exercise in futility.

“Pre-homework” such as show-and-tell or weekend reports may start in prekindergarten. These assignments are designed to teach early executive functioning skills. Because these assignments are generally fun, creative and do not require strong academic skills to complete, many families find these assignments doable bonding experiences. After all, searching the house for something that begins with the letter M or talking about your weekend highlight as a parent writes it down are far more enjoyable and conducive to attachment building than practicing long division. Do not get me wrong, I believe long division is important. But, there is a time and a place for everything — and in adoptive families, particularly those with children who have experienced trauma, the relationship must come first.

Without the relationship, there will be no learning. There will be no homework. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (and others) tell us that for learning and higher-order processes to occur, our basic needs must be met. After the basic needs of physical safety that keep our bodies alive, such as food, water and shelter, our emotional sense of safety and security must be met. For children who have experienced trauma, this need may be difficult to meet.

PTSD is the body and mind’s reaction to trauma that leads to a heightened level of alertness for danger, a foreshortened sense of future, avoidance of triggers that cause the individual to feel unsafe or scared, anger, irritability, numbness, detachment, sleep disturbances and more. For children who have experienced trauma and been adopted, their attachment may also be disrupted on top of their trauma symptoms. Children exhibiting symptoms of trauma and attachment disruption are not generally feeling safe and secure. Their bodies and minds may be in “fight, flight or freeze” mode, and they are not in an optimal state for learning. As a result, learning will be difficult. Learning may take a long time. Homework may not be a realistic option at this point in the child’s life. If doing homework is filled with drama, it will not likely reinforce learning, but it may have the unintended consequences of damaging self-esteem, hindering attachment and even retraumatize the child — from potential chaos, yelling and/or feelings of failure and rejection.

Children in this state need reduced or no homework. They also need to feel proud of the work they are able to do and not be shamed for their inability to complete all homework or make As and Bs. Likewise, parents need to feel confident that their putting the relationship and attachment first is acceptable and likely the fastest route to their child being able to meet academic expectations in the future. A supportive school has the power to help a family build attachment and build a learner. However, not all children will go on to have their emotional sense of safety and security met. These children are likely to struggle academically and homework may not be in their best interest for quite some time (if ever).

It is important for parents to educate their children about trauma so they do not feel bad, stupid or guilty. Their brains are so busy trying to keep them safe that there just is not as much room for learning. Remind them that soon, their bodies and brains will feel safer and be more ready for learning. In my experience, this psychoeducation does not enable children to be lazy (as some fear), but instead, helps them make sense of their experience and look forward to learning as something they can do.

If their school is on board, it can be productive to reassure children that the school is aware and being flexible while they work on feeling safe and connected. If the school is not on board and/or a negative experience, it can be helpful to reassure the child that the school is working on a plan to best teach them or that the parents are working on finding the right school. These reassurances can help children to externalize their difficulties rather than internalize them, which runs the risk of damaging their self-esteem.

As many adoptive parents know, a child’s sense of safety and security may ebb and flow just like anything else. This means that as children become capable of homework, their capabilities may vary from week to week or day to day. Parents need not worry that what a child could accomplish last month differs from what they can accomplish today. Sometimes our children experience triggers, reminders, anniversaries and/or biological, psychological or neurological events that challenge their sense of safety and security and/or impede their executive functioning. During these times, our children may be less capable. A supportive school will understand notes like, “Johnny was unable to complete his homework last night. We’ll try again another time. Thank you for your understanding and support as we work through the challenge. We will be sure to provide documentation from his treating professional, just let us know what is needed for record keeping. We understand homework is important and we hope this is a temporary setback.”

The key is communication with the child’s teacher and school. Inconsistent homework without explanation reflects differently and does not generally rally a school in support of a child. At the same time, oversharing can reflect differently, too, so enlist the support of treating professionals early on to provide educators clarity and to support the validity of the challenges your family is facing. Only you can judge what is and isn’t appropriate to share. When schools are well-informed and have a clear understanding a team of professionals are supporting a family, it paves the way for collaboration and reassures schools of the safety and well-being of a home environment.

As time goes on, and effective working relationships with school teams are built, it can become more comfortable and appropriate to share more detail about challenges and behavior at home. The goal is always an effective, safe team of support for the child and family. Parents who work well with educators will always be more successful in achieving that goal. The more informed, knowledgeable and concise the parent-advocate is, the more effective.

Some assignments themselves are triggers or upsetting. Our son has come home with more than one assignment that was not sensitive to attachment or trauma. We have avoided assignments (at our son's discretion), such as family trees, timelines or lifelines, projects requiring baby photos, writing assignments for emotional memories (happiest memory, a scary time), and certain books, including "A Child Called It." Generally, an alternative assignment can be provided. However, no trigger is too small — even a simple math word problem or reading passage can be a trigger that impedes the ability to complete the assignment accurately or at all. Again, communication with the teacher and school about these encounters is key.

Whether children are ready for homework routinely or rarely, the suggestions below provide opportunities for strengthening relationships and squashing drama.

2. Change the mood and attitude of everyone involved.

Join with your child to promote attachment and model the skills you want him or her to develop. Though it can be stressful and exhausting to help children manage their homework, it is critical to the relationship that parents join with children in the process. This does not mean taking responsibility for their homework or doing it for them (as tempting as that sometimes may be!). Joining with your child in the homework process may be as simple as sitting near them while they work and working on something of your own during this time. Set a good example — keep the TV off and your phone in your pocket. Sometimes, children with attention difficulties benefit from this strategy because your presence is a reminder to stay on

task. When distractions occur, redirect them back without judgement or reprimand. Children who have a need to be involved in everything going on around them often benefit from this strategy because they do not feel isolated or left out of other activities. This strategy sounds like, "May I sit near you while you do your homework? I also have something to work on. Let me know if you need any help. I will be glad to look it over for you when you finish."

Joining with some children may be a more extensive process. For children with difficulty regulating their emotions or dealing with frustration, they may need an adult to share in these disappointments and share in the process of problem-solving and recovering. For disorganized, easily frustrated children, this might sound like, "Bummer. The worksheet was left at school. Sometimes that happens. It is a little problem that I think we can solve together. Let's think about what we can do about it."

Celebrate little victories. For children who struggle with homework and executive functioning, their days are often full of negative feedback like not living up to expectations, being redirected, being corrected and other perceived disappointments and failures. For all children, it is important to praise at a higher rate than correct or redirect. Generally, three positive remarks or praises are needed to counter every one correction or redirection. However, this group of children arguably needs more than that to make up for the increase in negative feedback they receive as a result of their difficulties with homework and executive functioning. For a child who remembered two out of three homework assignments, this might sound like, "Way to go! You remembered two out of three homework assignments. I see you working hard to become more mature and responsible." Other little victories may look like hanging work with a C on the refrigerator for a child who previously made failing grades in that class.

Praise effort over outcome. Research suggests that praising children for their effort increases their future effort, while praising them for the final product, such as a grade or outcome, decreases their future effort. This strategy can be particularly difficult to implement in our

current school system that places significant value on a few outcomes such as standardized testing scores and semester grades.

Inform the school. Let the school and teachers know that your child struggles with homework. Explain or describe the extent of the difficulty. Understand that "he gets angry about homework" differs from "she throws books, slams doors and punches the wall when angry about homework." Not everyone's definition of "angry," "frustrated" or other key words are the same. Explain to the school that you support their work and attempt homework, but are dealing with challenges that may preclude the successful completion of homework every night. Allow the school to apply the natural consequences to the extent that are appropriate for the individual child.

3. Change the environment.

Optimize the environment for your child's areas of weakness. For children with attention difficulties and distractibility, reduce the number of distractions in the work environment, such as noise, visual stimuli and other activities going on. For children who feel as if homework goes on and on, use lists, schedules or visual representations to help them know that homework has an end. Some children with difficulty focusing or getting started may benefit from a friendly "race" or "beat the clock" challenge. Some children can race against a parent performing a task like unloading the dishwasher, or a sibling with a different homework assignment, but others can only race themselves or race the clock. Some families have found this strategy effective for more than just homework completion. Be sure to reward your child for their speed, effort and accuracy as needed.

For children who rush through their work and complete it inaccurately, a different approach is warranted. These children often need help prioritizing neatness, accuracy and speed. I have encouraged many families to help their children rate the importance of neatness, accuracy and speed before beginning each assignment. Then, after they finish the assignment, rate how you think they actually performed in each of these areas. To teach the concepts, practice with game-like activities.

First, draw a house as neatly as you can. Then, draw one as fast as you can. Last, draw one as accurately as you can. On different assignments, these elements differ in their importance. For example, a timed test of math facts differs from a book report or a homework practice worksheet.

Consider taking the “home” out of homework. This strategy can be particularly helpful for families when children have loud, long or intense tantrums or outbursts related to homework. These emotional and behavioral events often have long-lasting consequences on relationships and mood within the household. However, they may or may not improve the likelihood of successful homework completion. When major emotional and behavior outbursts are the case, ending these outbursts in the home that are related to homework is a priority. Personally, after picking up my son from school, I brought him to my office until my workday ended. This was his built-in study hall or homework time. With no TV, cell phone or computer, there was not much else to do. Only a few times did we have to stay particularly

late and eat dinner at my office as he tried to call my bluff about not going home until he finished. Years later, this is simply part of our routine. I have worked with other families who stop by a park or outdoor picnic area to do homework before going home from school. For children who need less temptation to play, a place like a public library or school library may be preferred. In addition to being motivated to complete their work to get to more fun things at home, I find children less likely to have major outbursts in these public places.

Consider paying for homework to stay out of the house. In the above scenarios, some children benefit from a tangible reward. For example, some children may be able to earn an ice cream on Fridays if they worked on homework at the picnic area Monday to Thursday without fuss. Other children may need more immediate reward like Pokémon cards or extra allowance for their “job” as a student. While this “bribery” may seem like too much for children who do not struggle with homework, in families with major homework drama, these items are a small cost to pay — and worth every penny —

if they end outbursts and improve mood and relationships.

Most schools have after school tutoring programs for free or for a fee. Children can often attend and do their homework with the help of adults who will supervise and assist as needed. However, in my experience, group tutoring settings are not particularly effective for children with homework drama. These children often need a one-on-one tutor just to help them through homework. Because the tutor is not a parent, they often behave a bit better. (If they do misbehave and are oppositional with a tutor, at least it is with someone else and preserves the relationship with the parent.) While tutoring with a professional tutor can be expensive, “tutoring” with a high school or college student is usually not. I have even worked with parents who were able to recruit neighbors, family members or teachers to help at no cost.

4. Change the format of homework when possible and needed.

Break homework into smaller, more manageable parts for children who are easily



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overwhelmed. Do not allow these children to see all of their homework at one time, as this can be overwhelming. Help them to focus on one subject or day at a time. Place all of the other work into a folder and put it out of sight. Make schedules or lists by day or subject and set the ones not currently in use out of sight.

Speak with the school and determine if changes to the format of homework can be made. Significant changes to format are sometimes allowed. For example, some teachers may allow students to do a hands-on project like a diorama or a play, instead of a book report or research paper. Some simple examples that help children who are overwhelmed easily include cutting up or folding up worksheets and presenting only a segment at a time. Alternate the completion of each segment with a more preferred activity (that the child can still transition away from). After all segments are complete, a highly preferred activity can take place. Check with the teacher to see if a parent can act as a scribe for a child. I encourage parents to write on the top of the work, “[Child’s] ideas; mom/dad’s handwriting.” Parents should write only what the child tells them to. This is also a great strategy for joining with the child and putting the child in a role of competence to direct your writing. Many times, teachers will allow students to type their answers on a separate piece of paper rather than handwrite. For children with significant fine motor difficulties, voice-to-text dictation software can be introduced.

Provide written “strategy cards” to help with homework at home. These strategy cards can be made out of index cards, held together by a single binder ring. The purpose of these cards is to help the child with complex operations or information that requires memorization. For example, remembering the steps of long division — division, multiplication and subtraction — can be particularly difficult for some children. However, if they have a strategy card that contains simple instructions for completing long division, they may be more successful and less frustrated. Other strategy cards may include multiplication charts, spelling or grammar rules, or science formulas. Strategy cards allow the child to function

more independently on homework and accommodate difficulties with memorization.

5. Change the quantity of homework.

When the aforementioned strategies are not enough, parents can request additional help from the school in the form of formal accommodations or modifications that can change the quantity and/or content of homework. Section 504 is a part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that protects individuals from discrimination due to a disability, and can reduce homework demands when appropriate. To qualify for Section 504 accommodations, a student must have a disability that limits one or more major life activity. Some children who were adopted may qualify for Section 504 services if they have a physical disability or mental illness, including conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, epilepsy, food allergies, diabetes, PTSD and many others. Some of the accommodations that may be allowed under Section 504 include: extended time on tests or assignments, shortened assignments, reduced homework, extra set of textbooks for home, enlarged print, positive reinforcement, behavior intervention plans, rearranging class schedules, visual aids, preferred seating, recording lectures, oral tests, copy of class notes, check in/check out with an adult, notifying parents of upcoming tests or projects, and more.

When Section 504 is not sufficient to provide an appropriate education, children may qualify for special education and related services under one of the 13 educational eligibilities covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This act ensures that all children with disabilities are provided with a free and appropriate education. The 13 disability categories that must be addressed by each state are: specific learning disability, other health impairment, autism spectrum disorder, emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, visual impairment, hearing impairment, deafness, deaf-blind, orthopedic impairment, intellectual disability, traumatic brain injury and multiple disabilities.

Children eligible for special education may receive modifications to the curriculum and/or special services such as modified learning

objectives, “alternate” state testing, speech therapy, occupational therapy, remedial or alternate classes, alternative degree plans, in-home and community-based training, vocational training, transition services and more.

Homework is designed to teach responsibility, organization and reinforce academic concepts — all of which are worthy goals. However, in some homes, it creates chaos and disrupts relationships. Difficulties with homework may be particularly pronounced in homes of adoptive families or homes where children have experienced trauma. These children may struggle with the skills needed for successful homework completion. Further, homework drama may impede relationships and does not always promote attachment. For some children, homework will be too much on their already full plate. For others, careful thought and some thinking-outside-the-box problem-solving can help homework to be less dramatic, more productive and more conducive to attachment and building family relationships.

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