



*Trauma Momma, Homework Drama!**

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

By Natalie Montfort, PhD

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 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 be working 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 chaotic environments 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 our 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:

Change the mood and attitude of everyone involved

Join with your child to build your relationship 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, 3 positive remarks or praises are needed to counter every 1 correction or redirection. However, this group of

children arguably need 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 2 out of 3 homework assignments, this might sound like, “Way to go! You remembered 2 out of 3 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.

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. Lastly, 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.

Change the format of homework when possible and when needed

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

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 activities. 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. With careful thought and some thinking-outside-the-box problem-solving, homework can be less dramatic, more productive, and more conducive to attachment and building family relationships.

**Editor's Note: This article previously appeared in the July 2017 issue of Adoption Today Magazine and is reprinted here with permission of the author and Adoption Today Magazine.*



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