

Should children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder be exempted from doing homework?

Dr Tony Attwood, April 2000

A major cause of anguish for children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, their families and teachers is the satisfactory completion of homework. Why should this group of children have such an emotional reaction to the mere thought of having to start their homework and such difficulty completing assigned tasks? There may be two explanations. The first is based on their degree of stress and mental exhaustion during their day at school and the second is due to their profile of cognitive skills.

The stress of being at school As with their classroom peers, a child with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder has to learn the traditional educational curriculum but they encounter additional learning experiences and sources of stress than do other children in their class. They have an additional curriculum, namely the social curriculum. They have to use their intellectual reasoning to determine the social rules of the classroom and the playground. Other children do not have to consciously learn social integration skills but these children have to decipher the social cues and codes and cognitively determine what to do and say in social situations. Often their primary feedback is criticism for an error with little recognition from others when they make the correct response. Learning only from your mistakes is not the most efficient way to learn. Thus these children have to concentrate on an extra curriculum that leaves them intellectually and emotionally exhausted at the end of the school day. They also have difficulty reading and responding to the emotional signals of the teacher and other children, coping with the complex socialising, noise and chaos of the playground, the unexpected changes in the school routine and the intense sensory experiences of a noisy classroom. Throughout the school day they rarely have an opportunity to relax.

It is essential that we recognise the degree of stress experienced by such children, as the signs can become evident in their behaviour and mood. The signs include the child who is described as a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in that the indicators of stress are not conspicuous at school but the child is a very different character at home. They may be quiet and compliant in the classroom but intolerant and aggressive immediately they return home. Some children become extremely anxious in the morning before going to school and school refusal or walking out of school can be a sign of unbearable stress. Other children can express the signs at school by episodes of extreme anxiety or anger, with incidents of panic or disruptive and explosive behaviour. Others suffer chronic stress, which contributes to a clinical depression. When I talk to children with autism and Asperger's Syndrome who are having difficulty learning the social curriculum and coping with the stress of school, they often explain that they want a clear division between home and school. Their comment is "School is for learning, home is for fun or relaxation" Thus the prospect of interrupting their much needed and deserved fun and relaxation with homework is more than they can cope with.

Profile of Cognitive Skills Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder have an unusual profile of Cognitive skills that must be recognised and accommodated when they are undertaking academic work at school and home. One aspect of the profile is impaired Executive Function. The profile is similar to that of children with Attention Deficit Disorder in that they can have difficulty planning, organising and prioritising, a tendency to be impulsive and inflexible when problem solving and poor working memory. Other features include a difficulty generating new ideas, a need for supervision and guidance and determining what is relevant and redundant as well as poor time perception and time management. There is also the likelihood of an unusual profile on standardised tests of intelligence especially with regard to verbal and visual (or Performance Scale) intelligence. Some children are verbalisers and have a relative strength in reading, vocabulary and verbal concepts while others are visualisers and 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. The child's cognitive and learning profile is usually recognised by school authorities and special provision made for the child in terms of an assistant in the classroom to facilitate their academic progress. The teacher knows how to adapt the curriculum for a child with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder but this knowledge and service are not usually available at home.

The following range of strategies are designed to minimise the impaired Executive Function, accommodate their profile of cognitive skills and help the child complete their homework assignments with less stress for the child and family.

Create a learning environment. The area where the child works must be conducive to concentration and learning. A useful model is the child's classroom with appropriate seating, lighting and removal of any distractions. The distractions can be visual such as the presence of toys or television, which are a constant reminder of what the child would rather be doing or auditory distraction such as the noise from electrical appliances and the chatter of siblings. Ensure the working surface only has equipment relevant to the task. Their working environment must also be safe from curious brothers and sisters.

A daily homework timetable can be made by a parent with guidance from the teacher to define the expected duration and content of each homework activity or assignment. This can be extremely helpful if there are problems with the child's allocation of time to each homework component. Sometimes the homework can take hours when the teacher intended only several minutes on a specified task.

A timer can be used to remind the child how much time is remaining to complete each section of homework. It is also important to ensure that time scheduled for homework does not coincide with the child's favourite television program. If it does, they may have priority use of the video recorder and can watch the program after their homework.

If regular breaks are necessary to promote concentration, the work can be divided into segments to indicate how much work the child has to complete before they can take a momentary break. The usual mistake is to expect too much prolonged concentration.

Teacher's preparation of the homework The teacher can highlight key aspects of the homework sheet, written material and questions so that the child knows which aspects are relevant to their preparation of the assignment. They can ask the child to formulate their plan before commencing the assignment to ensure their work is coherent and logical, especially if the homework is an essay. If the assignment takes several days to complete, it is important that the teacher regularly reviews the child's rough drafts and progress, which also increases the likelihood that it will be completed on time.

Memory problems If the child has difficulty remembering exactly what was set for homework and remembering relevant information during homework, a characteristic of impaired executive function, a solution is to buy an executive toy. A small cassette recorder used for dictation can provide a record of the teacher's spoken instructions and the child can add his or her own comments or personal memo to the recording to remind them of key information. The child and their parent will then know exactly what was said and what is relevant to the task. Another strategy is to have the telephone number of another child in the class to ask them for the relevant information.

A homework diary and planner can help the child remember which books to take home and the specific homework for each evening. An executive diary or 'filofax' from a stationary store may make this strategy more appealing to the child. The techniques are explained as being appropriate for adult executives rather than for children with learning problems.

Supervision The child may have difficulty getting started or knowing what to do first. Procrastination can be an issue and a parent may have to supervise the start of the homework. Once the child has started, this is not the end of the supervision. A parent will also need to be available if the child requires assistance when they are confused and to ensure that they have chosen the appropriate strategy. There can be a tendency for such children to have a closed mind to alternative strategies and a determination to pursue an approach when other children would have recognised the signs that it would be wise to consider another approach. A technique to show that there is more than one line of thought is to provide the child with a list of alternative strategies to solve the particular problem. The child may need to know there is a plan 'B'.

Parents and teachers soon become aware of the degree of supervision required which can be a major problem for a parent with other family commitments when the child is doing their homework. Supervision is also necessary to help the child prioritise, plan, assist with word retrieval problems and maintain motivation. Motivation can be enhanced by specific rewards for concentration and effort

Emotion Management Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder are notorious for their difficulty coping with frustration and criticism, and their inability to manage their emotions. They can become quite agitated when confused or having made a mistake. An adult will need to be available to help the child remain calm and logical. The adult will also need to model calmness, which can be difficult when both child and adult are confused as to what to do. It can end in tears for both parties.

Cognitive Style Special consideration should be given to the child's cognitive strengths and weaknesses. If the child's relative strength is in visual reasoning, then flow diagrams, mind maps and demonstrations will enhance their understanding. If their strength is in verbal skills then written instructions and discussion using metaphors (especially metaphors associated with their special interest) will help. Additional strategies include the use of a computer and keyboard, especially for those children who have problems with handwriting. Sometimes a parent acts as an 'executive' secretary and types the material for the child and proof reads their answers. Homework may be a collaborative rather than solitary activity. The parent is not being over protective or neurotic, they just know that without their involvement, the work would not be done.

Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder often enjoy having access to a computer and may be more able to understand material if it is presented on a computer screen. Material presented by a person adds a social and linguistic dimension to the situation, which can increase the child's confusion. Teachers should consider adapting the homework so that a considerable proportion of the work is conducted using a computer. Word processing facilities, especially graphics and grammar and spell check programs are invaluable in improving the legibility and quality of the finished product.

If the parent is unable to help the child solve a particular problem, a solution is to come to an arrangement with the teacher where by the teacher is contacted by telephone without hesitation as to the time of day or night and they can talk directly to the child. Regular use of this approach can lead to a significant reduction in the type and amount of homework.

Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder require special consideration when learning new material. Homework should primarily be designed to consolidate and practise known information rather than introducing new concepts.

Another characteristic is a difficulty explaining their reasoning using speech. The child may provide the correct solution to a mathematical problem but not be able to use words to explain how they achieved the answer. Their cognitive strategies may be unconventional and intuitive rather than deductive. One may need to accept their correct solution even if the logic is unclear to the neurotypical mind. One problem with this characteristic is that it may be difficult for the parent to correct the alternative reasoning when the child has a 'mental block'.

Teaching a child with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder requires special skills and a parent is not expected to have those skills. As a parent, one is also more emotionally involved than a class teacher and it can be difficult for them to be objective and emotionally detached. One option is to hire a homework tutor to provide the skilled guidance and supervision. However, this may be beyond the financial resources of most families.

A controversial suggestion If homework is associated with such anguish, what can be done to reduce the despair of the child who is exhausted from their day at school, the parent who tries to motivate their child and the teacher who recognises that homework is not the most effective means of education for such children? If the regular amount of homework is demanded of the child then everyone must recognise the considerable degree of time and commitment that is necessary from all parties to ensure it is completed satisfactorily and on time. One option is to enable the child to complete their 'homework' at school. It can be undertaken at lunchtime and before or after classes in their home class or the school library. However, they would still require supervision and guidance from a teacher or assistant. In High School, some children have been able to graduate taking fewer subjects and the extra time available in the school day dedicated to homework.

If all these strategies are unsuccessful, what is the alternative? 'Should children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder be exempted from doing homework?' If the strategies outlined in this article are unsuccessful or unable to be implemented, then my reply is 'yes'. Sometimes this advice is to the great relief of the child, their parent and probably their teacher. You can quote me on this.

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