

Parental Involvement in Homework: A Review of Current Research and Its Implications for Teachers, After School Program Staff, and Parent Leaders

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Parents often become involved in their children's education through homework. Whether children do homework at home, complete it in after school programs or work on it during the school day, homework can be a powerful tool for (a) letting parents and other adults know what the child is learning, (b) giving children and parents a reason to talk about what's going on at school, and (c) giving teachers an opportunity to hear from parents about children's learning.

In 2001 we reviewed research on parental involvement in children's homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). The review focused on understanding why parents become involved in their children's homework, what strategies they employ, and how involvement contributes to student learning. The review supported theoretical arguments that parents choose to become involved in homework because they believe they *should* be involved, believe their involvement will make a positive difference in their children's learning, and perceive that their involvement is invited, expected, and valued by school personnel (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). The review also suggested that parents engage in a wide range of activities in this effort, from establishment of basic structures for homework performance to more complex efforts focused on teaching for understanding and helping students develop effective learning strategies (see Table 1 below for summary).

Since then, our work (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, in press; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, in press) and that of others (e.g., Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2002; Simon, 2004) has underscored the importance of teacher invitations in motivating parent involvement. In this paper we draw on findings from the 2001 review and suggest several ways in which schools can invite parents' involvement in homework.

Involvement in student homework can be influenced by several members of the school community: teachers, professionals who work with students and families in before and after school programs, and parent leaders. After school providers are often ideally positioned to act as a bridge of communication between home and school on issues related to student learning and homework (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001). Further, because information about schools is often communicated through informal parent networks (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Sheldon, 2002), parent leaders also can support parents' involvement in homework. The suggestions below focus on how teachers can involve parents in homework and how they may tap the potential of after school staff and parent leaders in supporting parents' homework involvement.

The suggestions are presented in two major sections. The first section—which includes the first four categories in Table 1—focuses on parental involvement activities that (a) contribute to student motivation and performance and (b) can be enacted by almost all families, across cultures, educational backgrounds, and family socioeconomic circumstances. The second section—which includes the last four categories in Table 1—describes strategies that may require (a) relatively strong parental understanding of children's development, learning, and

homework content or (b) school support of skills and knowledge parents need for effective involvement in homework. Our intention is to offer suggestions that support schools' efforts to invite parents' homework involvement across a variety of school communities.

Table 1: What Do Parents Do When They Involve Themselves in Children's Homework?

1. Interact with the student's school or teacher about homework

- Communicate with the teacher about student performance, progress, homework
- Meet school requests and suggestions related to homework (e.g., sign completed tasks, offer requested help, participate in homework intervention program)

2. Establish physical and psychological structures for the child's homework performance

- Specify regular times for homework, establish structures for time use
- Articulate and enforce expectations, rules, and standards for homework behavior
- Help student structure time, space, and materials for homework
- Structure homework within the flow of family life; ensure parental "availability on demand"

3. Provide general oversight of the homework process

- Monitor, supervise, oversee the homework process
- Attend to signs of student success or difficulty related to task or motivation

4. Respond to the student's homework performance

- Reinforce and reward student's homework efforts, completion, correctness
- Recognize and offer emotional support for student performance, ability, effort
- Review, check, correct homework

5. Engage in homework processes and tasks with the student

- Assist, help, tutor, "work with" student or "do" homework with student
- Teach student in direct, structured, convergent ways (e.g., learn facts, derive answers, drill, practice, memorize)
- Teach student using indirect, more informal methods (e.g., respond to questions, follow student lead)

6. Engage in meta-strategies designed to create a fit between the task and student knowledge, skills, and abilities

- Break learning tasks into discrete, manageable parts
- Observe, understand, "teach to" student's developmental level

7. Engage in interactive processes supporting student's understanding of homework

- Model or demonstrate appropriate learning processes and strategies
- Discuss problem-solving strategies
- Help student understand concepts, check for understanding

8. Engage in meta-strategies helping the student learn processes conducive to achievement

- Support student's self-regulation skills, strategies, personal responsibility for homework processes and outcomes
- Help student organize personal thinking about assignments
- Encourage student to self-monitor, focus attention
- Teach and encourage the student to regulate emotional responses to homework

Adapted from Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001)

Strategies for Supporting Student Motivation and Performance in Homework

We focus in this section on basic strategies for supporting student motivation and performance in homework. Because teachers often take the lead in communicating learning goals, we focus on strategies teachers can use to encourage parental involvement. We also discuss strategies teachers may use in interacting with parent leaders and after school staff for further support of parental involvement in homework.

Interacting With the School or Teacher About Homework

Parents are often eager to support their children's learning but do not always know how to help or why their involvement is important (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995). Parents should be encouraged to contact the teacher if they have questions about students' homework. Among parents of younger students, questions may be related to directions and due dates or to the substance of homework (e.g., content of assignment, resources for further information or help). Older students and their teachers often prefer to interact directly on such issues, but parents should be encouraged to ask questions if student-teacher communications do not offer sufficient guidance.

Parents and students often benefit when they have written information (in language that the parent can readily understand) about homework policies and purposes. This is most helpful if parents have opportunities to review the ideas with the teacher, ideally during an orientation offering ample opportunity for questions and responses. This information can be tailored to specific educational objectives and repeated throughout the year (objectives may include such goals as practicing skills, developing independence and responsibility, developing higher level thinking skills, organizing material, or simply getting students to read more, e.g., Corno, 1996; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Such information from teachers can also highlight the skills, attitudes, and behaviors often influenced by parents' homework involvement (e.g., more positive attitudes about school, increased time on homework, greater persistence in learning tasks, e.g., Cooper, Lindsey, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

To increase two-way communication about homework, teachers may talk with parents about their mutual goals for children's learning, including specific information about the ways in which student homework supports those goals. Teachers may also encourage parents to make comments about assignments (e.g., areas of difficulty for the student, student and parent responses to interactive homework). Parent leaders can work with teachers and parents to develop open-ended surveys seeking parent feedback on homework, and teachers may alter assignments or offer individual adjustments based on survey results.

Establishing Physical and Psychological Structures for Student Homework

There are many ways of creating structures at home that support children's learning. Specific decisions about structuring depend in part on student needs and on parent ideas about specific involvement activities that "fit" the student and family context, for example, what the home is like and what other demands require parents' time (Xu & Corno, 1998). Specific steps in structuring homework also often depend on student developmental level (e.g., a 7-year-old may

need external structuring; a 15-year-old is more likely to need more autonomy) and personal characteristics (e.g., students who are more distractible will likely benefit from more structuring; students who like to work independently often benefit from less parental structuring).

Teachers, parent leaders, and after school providers may suggest alternative homework routines (e.g., students decide the order in which the work will be done, while parents track time and remind students of remaining tasks) and offer suggestions for organizing homework space (e.g., clear off the table or desk before starting homework). Because after school staff also supervise homework, it's important that they create a comfortable, quiet environment and maintain consistent rules for homework completion (e.g., who can work together, when it's okay to ask for help).

Teachers may interact with parents, after school staff, and parent leaders about strategies that students can use to avoid becoming distracted during homework. For example, the students that Xu and Corno (1998) studied identified several such strategies (e.g., telling themselves not to get up until a specific part is finished, and doing easier parts of the assignment first). Teachers, parents, and after school program staff may also suggest or require that external distractions (TV, CD player, phone) be turned off until homework is done. They may also offer positive reinforcement (e.g., free time, small rewards) to motivate efficient completion of homework. In all, it is very important that adults let students know that they value and expect effort and learning in the homework process.

Providing General Oversight of the Homework Process

Teachers can help parents, after school staff, and family members understand what homework monitoring involves and why it is important (e.g., Toney, Kelley, & Lanclos, 2003). For example, helpful monitoring usually includes being accessible, being willing to help the student understand directions, being available to respond to simple questions, maintaining awareness of the child's emotional state and work patterns, and offering positive feedback on engagement in homework.

Parents and other adults often benefit from knowing what kind of monitoring is appropriate for students with different individual needs (Hong & Lee, 2003). For example, students who are easily distracted or who struggle with learning may need and benefit from relatively close monitoring, as is true of students who like to work near a parent or receive frequent feedback. Students who have strong self-regulation skills or find learning relatively straightforward are likely to benefit from "looser" monitoring and increased autonomy.

Teachers can also offer support that is likely to increase the effectiveness of parental monitoring, such as homework sign-off sheets for parents, requests for comments or questions about homework performance, or suggestions for detecting and responding to signs of distraction or frustration. Helpful monitoring may also include efforts to focus student attention by posing questions or comments (e.g., "Good work! How did you think about solving that one?" or "That's really interesting.>"). Adults may also help students avoid unnecessary time on assignments (e.g.,

if students are to draw a picture of a math problem, they should be encouraged to focus on how the drawing depicts the problem, not the colors to be used in completing the work).

Responding to Student Homework Performance

Students benefit when parents and other adults offer specific positive responses to student homework performance. Parents' ability to offer appropriate responses often benefits from having information about the concepts addressed in homework, evaluative information about the student's homework performance, and information about the learning goals supported by homework tasks. The more specific and knowledgeable parents can be in offering feedback and reinforcement, the stronger their impact on learning and student self-efficacy is likely to be.

Teachers, parent leaders, and after school staff can also give parents and other adults specific examples of *how* they can support children's homework performance. Teachers may offer suggestions for short questions parents can ask the student about the day's homework and can include ideas about *how* to offer helpful and autonomy-supportive responses (e.g., wait for student questions before helping). Suggestions may be most helpful when they support parents in thinking through the amount of independence the child needs and offer specific suggestions for appropriate positive responses (e.g., Ng, Kenney-Benson & Pomerantz, 2004).

Adults can influence children's motivation for homework by offering sincere compliments on work and specific suggestions when performance is poor. They can support student self-confidence by telling children they know they're able to do the work based on examples from recent learning situations. Teachers and other adults may also offer helpful responses supportive of student self-motivation for completing homework (e.g., suggestions for maintaining motivation, such as thinking about free time after homework or taking a limited break after completing a section of the assignment).

Epstein and colleagues' approach to interactive homework may also be very helpful in guiding parent responses to student homework (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). The Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) program engages the student in sharing homework tasks with a parent. Parents are asked to be interested and responsive but are not asked to teach specific skills (essentially, TIPS makes students responsible for homework even though parents are integrally involved). TIPS activities appear especially helpful in encouraging students to recognize that teachers want their families to know what they are learning, want parents to participate in the process, and want students to own primary responsibility for the learning outcomes. (For more information on TIPS see www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/tipsmain.htm.)

Strategies for Parent Teaching Activities During Homework

We focus now on more complex motivational and instructional strategies that parents and others may use in helping students with homework. Some strategies are relatively direct and short-term, while others involve more elaborate or extended approaches that can be supported as needed through school- or community-based education and intervention programs.

Engaging in Homework Processes and Tasks With the Student

Teachers can help parents engage in homework processes by providing specific, time-limited suggestions for helping students in ways that support the broader learning goals of homework assignments. For example, teachers of younger children might suggest that parents read with the child or listen to the child read for 10 minutes 2 or 3 times a week. This is likely to be possible within most family schedules; it also offers parents a way of explicitly valuing children's schoolwork and reinforcing their learning. A suggestion that parents review two problems in a larger math assignment with the child is also likely to be feasible within most family schedules; it also offers parents information about what the student is learning as well as an opportunity to express the parent's valuing of the student's work.

Teachers may also support parent and after school staff awareness of direct teaching strategies that may be useful helping students with homework. Schools and teachers can offer important information about *when* direct teaching is likely to be helpful—for example, when homework involves practice or memorization. Parents may also benefit from knowing that direct teaching strategies are often most appropriate for students who are younger, experience difficulty with work, or request help. Suggestions for the amount of direct teaching that is appropriate for students at different developmental and grade levels can be particularly helpful, as are suggestions for teaching activities that meet individual student needs (e.g., Cancio, West & Young, 2004; Cosden et al., 2001).

Information about appropriate indirect teaching strategies can also be very helpful to adults who are involved in student homework. It can be particularly important when the learning objective of homework is not derivation of correct answers but development of analytical, problem-solving, or communication skills. Parents may need examples of indirect teaching strategies (e.g., asking questions, discussing student responses and their fit with the task) as well as information on understanding when indirect strategies are likely to be most helpful (e.g., a science project, developing a report, writing a poem). Learning about indirect and direct teaching strategies expands adult repertoires of helping skills and enables involvement activities most appropriate for different kinds of learning tasks.

Creating a "Fit" Between Learning Tasks and Student Skills

Parents and others who interact regularly with children often bring another major strength to student learning processes—their knowledge of individual student's learning styles, interests, and work preferences. Teachers can play an important role in offering suggestions for making effective use of this knowledge. For example, students who feel overwhelmed by assignments are often responding to their perception of the task as a whole. Information about ways of breaking complex learning tasks into sequential parts can enhance parents' and others' ability to offer targeted, specific, and productive help in such situations.

Teacher suggestions about learning patterns and needs that characterize children at different developmental levels can also help adults key their involvement to appropriate developmental expectations. Teachers can make specific suggestions about how to recognize what a student

currently understands and what guidance and teaching activities are likely to help the student achieve the next level of understanding. Such suggestions are often most effective if built around scaffolding principles, for example, offering substantial support in the initial phases of learning, followed by “fading” of support as the student gains skill and confidence in the area (e.g., Pratt, Green, MacVicar & Bountrogianni, 1992).

Several programs based on these principles have been developed. For example, Shumow (1998) reported on a program designed to enhance parents’ understanding of students’ developmental abilities in mathematics. Several program features were related to gains in parents’ understanding of their children’s problem-solving abilities and their use of appropriate strategies for supporting student self-regulation and engagement in learning. These features included regular written suggestions for parents as well as regular parent-teacher phone conversations about the student’s cognitive development and progress in learning. These conversations included questions and answers, parent and teacher observations about students’ learning strategies, and joint anticipation of students’ next steps in learning. Shumow suggested that the conversations were particularly helpful because they encouraged parents to notice their children’s strategic thinking and enabled them to place their children’s learning within the developmental and conceptual framework guiding classroom math instruction.

Interactive homework with parent-teacher interaction can be developed for a variety of curriculum areas. Because creation of these assignments is time-consuming, however, a committee of teachers for each grade (at the district level) might be involved in creating assignments prior to the start of the school year. For maximum effectiveness, such assignments should include attention to the individual needs of both gifted and struggling students.

Engaging in Interactive Processes That Support Student Understanding

Parental involvement focused on helping children understand learning tasks often requires considerable knowledge. Parents whose own schooling did not include experience in understanding principles underlying varied learning tasks often benefit from school-based educational programs designed to support relevant knowledge and understanding. Programs may include written materials to help parents understand the basic objectives and components of a learning task as well as specific suggestions for checking on student understanding (e.g., “Can you tell me how you got that answer?”; “What do you think is the most important idea in this section of your report?”). Programs that help parents engage in this kind of involvement may also offer demonstrations of developmentally appropriate teaching activities, opportunities for practice of varied strategies, and information about assessing students’ progress (e.g., Starkey & Klein, 2000).

Engaging in Meta-Strategies to Help the Student Learn Processes Conducive to Achievement

This set of strategies is often grounded in information to parents about specific attributes that help students learn more effectively. Research suggests that these include positive student attitudes about learning and homework; positive student perceptions of personal competence and efficacy for learning; student perceptions of personal control over learning outcomes; and self-regulation skills pertinent to goal-setting, organizing and planning, persistence in the face of

difficulty, and management of emotional responses to homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). If parents have information about the student skills and attributes that are associated with better learning across grade levels and subject areas, they can focus their involvement efforts in part on support for these outcomes. Teachers, after school providers, and parent leaders can be instrumental in focusing parents' attention on these processes that continue—across grade levels, learning objectives, and subject areas—to support student learning.

Conclusion

Student homework creates opportunities for important interactions among schools, families, students, and other adults who help care for children. Well-designed homework helps students learn; it also offers parents opportunities to see what students are learning, talk with children about their learning, and interact with teachers and other school-community members about ways to support student learning.

Because they are at the center of the homework process, teachers play critical roles in helping parents become effectively involved in student homework. In sharing ideas for homework involvement with parents, school-age care professionals, and parent leaders, teachers increase community support for student learning. The strategies suggested in this paper are likely, individually and in concert, to support effective parental involvement in student homework.

For more information visit the Family-School Partnership Lab at www.vanderbilt.edu/Peabody/family-school or email Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey at kathleen.v.hoover-dempsey@vanderbilt.edu.

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