

## Why your ADHD child struggles with homework *....and how you can help*



A free e-book  
HomeworkCoach  
[www.homeworkcoach.com](http://www.homeworkcoach.com)

## ADHD and Homework

If your child has been diagnosed with ADHD, you know that your homework experience is a lot less smooth than it seems to be for your friends with similar-aged students.

While the child next door breezes through homework in under an hour and can be counted on to show up proudly at the bus-stop with a beautifully-created project, completed when due, you are used to homework dragging on for hours each night, and, as often as not, find yourself sending in a note to the teacher explaining that you only just found out that a project was due that day, and can you have a little more time to buy the needed materials?

This short e-book has no magic solutions but it will, first, help you understand some of the behaviors that are associated with ADHD and then provide some practical ideas for minimizing their impact.



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## Executive Functions Impaired by ADHD

To understand why your child keeps forgetting to turn in homework or insists that a huge project can be put off until the night before it's due, it's helpful to think of these behaviors as growing out of a few critical executive functions that are impaired by ADHD.

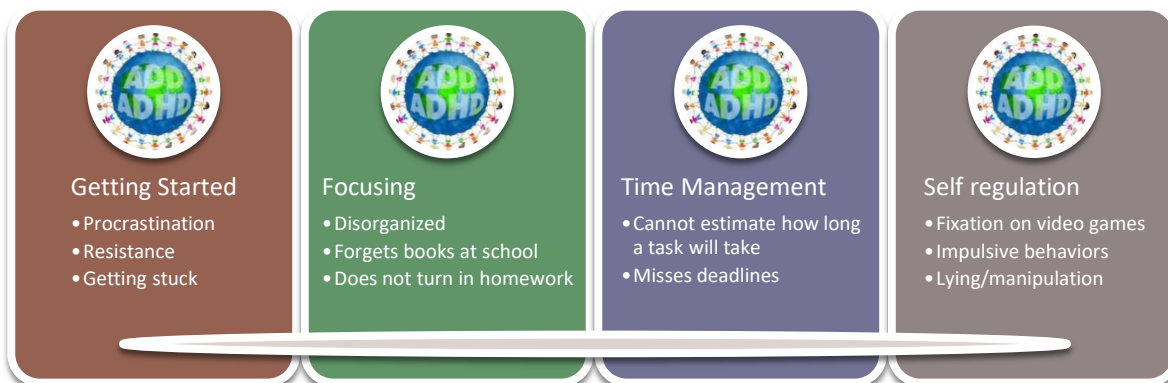
The functions are:

- Getting started (Initiation)
- Focusing
- Time management
- Self-regulation



The following pages describe the frustrating behaviors that are often brought on by your student's struggles with each of those functions, along with our best tips for reducing their impact.

Please note that the value of each tip will vary with the age of your child. For example, it is certainly worth taking time each week to help your 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade child clean out their bookbag, but if you have a high schooler, don't waste your breath, they are likely to resist. In all cases, the more you can get your students involved in designing their own solutions to managing their ADHD, the more successful you are likely to be.



**Your child's homework behaviors grow out of impairment of specific executive functions**

## Getting Started (Initiation)

### Procrastination and Completing Tasks

*John has a large science project due that he has known about since the beginning of the school year. Although he has had six weeks to work on the project, John has waited until two days before the due date to get started. Once John has started on the assignment, he stops after only completing a few sections. He tells his mom that he can't do any more because he is "stuck."*

Students diagnosed with ADHD often procrastinate, putting off tasks or assignments that they don't enjoy until the last minute, and then frantically trying to complete a large project in a small amount of time. Often they know and even want to start on a project but cannot make themselves do it. Imagine that you have paralysis of one arm. No matter how much you want to raise your arm and no matter how much someone yells at you, you just can't do it.

Once these students do get started on a task, they may have difficulty completing it, often getting stuck on the first paragraph of a paper or on the first section of an assignment. This is because many ADHD-diagnosed students become overwhelmed when there is a large amount of work to be done and they begin to feel anxious about their ability to complete it.

Here are some ways you can help:

- **Break large assignments into smaller tasks.**

If your child has a long-term assignment, help him to break it into smaller, more manageable tasks and have him focus on completing one piece at a time. It's often easier to overcome your paralysis if you can start on a small task.

For instance, if your child has a large project due, you can help him to break it down into small sections so that he spends only 15-25 minutes on that assignment each day.

- **Help them get started**

Rather than nag him to get down to homework, sit down with him for a few minutes and, say, do the first math problem with him. Once he has started you may be able to get back to whatever you were doing while he continues on his own.

- **Have a predictable schedule.**

Make sure your child has a set homework time and ensure that he knows that he is to start working on homework tasks at that time. Generally about thirty minutes to an hour after getting home is a good time to start homework, as it gives your child some time to relax before working on assignments. Reward or praise your child for starting on time to encourage that behavior in the future. Students who have a regular schedule are less likely to put off their work.

- **Use a timer to get past “being stuck”.**

Set a timer for ten minutes and encourage your child to work as hard as he can to complete the next part of the task in those ten minutes. Feeling under pressure may encourage your child to find a way to get past the point where he is stuck, allowing him to get back to work. Allow a small reward to kick in after those 10 mins: a quick break to run around the house; or a cookie or other treat.

**TIP:** Use an analog timer not a digital clock, so your student can see the time elapsing. This will help his time management skills. We like the [Time Timer](#) products.

## Focusing

### Organizing and Turning in Assignments

*Jason's homework assignments rarely make it home. He often forgets to bring home his books and other necessary materials such as worksheets. Sometimes Jason will bring home his books but he forgets what his homework assignment was or if he even had one. On the occasions that Jason does complete his homework, he often misplaces it and forgets to turn it in or even to take it to school. The last time Jason misplaced a worksheet, his mother helped him search through his backpack and was surprised to see a completely disorganized mess where papers were jammed into the bottom of his backpack, loose notes were shoved into binders, and English notes and assignments were kept in the same notebook as his science materials.*

Many ADHD-diagnosed students have difficulty with organization. The scenario above may seem all too familiar to parents of these students. However, there are strategies that parents can use to help their ADHD child keep their school work organized:

- **Have your child keep a planner.**

Many schools give students an “agenda planner” where each page breaks the week down into daily sections and offers an area to record homework for each subject. If your child does not have such a planner, buy him one and teach him how to use it. Keeping a planner will help your child keep track of assignments and due dates for each class. Use of a planner, physical or electronic, is not optional!

- **Come up with an organizational system for binders and notebooks.**

Some schools may require that students use one large binder for all classes. If this is the case for your child, ensure that the binder has colored and clearly labeled dividers that separate each course along with a color coordinated folder for each course that is in the binder. This allows your child to keep all of his loose papers in one side of the folder and all of his completed homework assignments in the other. A color-coded system allows him to easily find each subject in his notebook, as well as to keep materials from each class separated.

If your child's school requires separate binders and notebooks for each subject, you can still use a color-coordinated system. Each binder should be clearly labeled with the course name on both the front and spine. Place a folder and notebook of the same color in the binder so that your child has all materials for that class in one place. This allows him to keep track of completed homework assignments and loose papers. Separate items for each class within the notebook, with dividers differentiating graded assignments, handouts, and notes to keep all items easily accessible.

- **Have a system for remembering books.**

Many ADHD-diagnosed students tend to forget to bring home the books they need for homework assignments. Some parents prefer to purchase a second copy of books to keep at home, so that the student has a "school set" and a "home set". However, if this is not a feasible option for your family, there are other ways to help your child remember his books.

One strategy is to have your child make a list of each book he will need for homework throughout the day. When he goes to his locker, he should check off each item on the list to ensure he has remembered everything he needs. You can also have your child keep a different colored rubber band on his wrist to represent each class where he will need to bring his book home so that he remembers what to grab at the end of the day. Finally, many textbooks now have online versions that students can access from home. If this is an option, it may be helpful to simply save all online sites and access codes so that your child does not have to remember to bring home the physical book. You may be able to find out about the availability of online versions of your child's textbooks by speaking with his teachers.

- **Regularly clean out notebooks, folders, and backpacks.**

At least until your child starts resisting your help, it's a great idea to begin the daily homework session by going through his bookbag, notebooks and folders and putting all stray papers in their proper place. By encouraging your child to routinely clean out and organize his notebooks, folders, and backpack, you can reduce having a huge mess of papers that makes it easy to lose assignments and important documents. Additionally, this routine will help your child practice the organizational skills necessary to his academic success.

- **Make sure your child has a clean and well-organized homework/study space.**

Ensure that your child has a clean, well-lit, quiet area for studying, large enough that your child can easily open up his books and notebooks. Pencils, papers, pens, a pencil sharpener, three-hole punch, arts and crafts materials, and anything else necessary for homework and projects should be well-organized, available, and clearly visible. Older students will need an internet-connected computer and printer available for homework. Don't make him walk to a different room to get to the computer, that's a sure recipe for distraction!



- **Take advantage of school and other resources.**

Even if you have done everything you can to keep your ADHD-diagnosed child organized, it is likely that there will be moments of forgetfulness when he comes home without the appropriate books or unsure of his assignments. Be aware of the resources available for these situations.

Often, schools will post assignments online, which is helpful not only for planning ahead for the week, but also for double-checking the day's assignments. Your child should also ensure he has the name and phone number of at least one student in each of his classes. This allows your child to call a classmate if he needs clarification about an assignment. Finally, speak with your child's teachers and ask for their suggestions for helping your child remember his assignments. Some teachers may be willing to vocalize an assignment in addition to writing it on the board or they may check that your child has written down his assignments.



### **Managing the Time Spent Doing Homework**

*Lauren spends up to three or four hours a night completing her homework. At a parent-teacher meeting, Lauren's mother brought up this issue to Lauren's teachers, who said that Lauren should only be spending one or two hours a night on homework. Lauren's mother can see that Lauren is working hard, but it just appears that homework takes much longer for Lauren to complete. Her mother is concerned about how to help Lauren reduce the amount of time that her homework takes to complete.*

It is quite common for homework completion to take much longer for ADHD-diagnosed students than for non-ADHD-diagnosed students. Children diagnosed with ADHD have impaired working memory and decreased processing speed, which contributes to a task taking a longer time and more effort than it would for a non-ADHD child. Because working memory is where short-term information is stored, ADHD children often "lose" information they need to complete a task when they become distracted by outside stimuli. An example of this is a student who is writing spelling word definitions from a textbook and then becomes distracted by her little sister. The distraction of the little sister has caused the child to stop holding the information she was writing down in her working memory, so she now has to go back and re-read that information to complete the task of writing it down. Because ADHD-diagnosed children are so easily distracted, their task completion time can easily increase and make seemingly easy tasks require extra effort and time to complete.

- **Break homework time into small “sessions.”**

Set a time for 15 or 25 minutes. Have your child work on her homework during this period, and then take a 10 minute break to move around and refresh her brain. Because ADHD-diagnosed children must exert extra effort to complete a task, this break can allow a child time to regroup and get back to work with a clear mind. Using the short session approach can also help to keep your child from getting bored with his homework.

- **Increase supervision levels.**

By being nearby to monitor your child's progress, you can help keep her on track. This also ensures that she has someone around to answer her questions and offer help. Additional monitoring can also be useful because you can remind her about what she was working on if she gets distracted.

- **Utilize teachers and other school resources.**

If your child has an IEP or other plan that allows for accommodations due to an ADHD diagnosis, talk to teachers about what can be done to reduce time spent on homework. For instance, since many ADHD-diagnosed students have difficulty with handwriting tasks you could find out if your child can complete written work on a computer rather than writing it out. Math teachers may be willing to let ADHD students complete math homework on graph paper to lessen the chance of getting confused by miscalculations due to not lining up numbers correctly. Finally, teachers might be willing to let your child do a visual project or oral presentation rather than writing out a report.

## Time Management

### Estimating Time to Complete a Task

*Julia's mother let her go to a friend's house after school because Julia told her that her homework would “only take thirty minutes” and could be finished after dinner and before bedtime. Now, it is two hours after dinner and Julia is still working on her homework.*

ADHD-diagnosed children have difficulty properly estimating how much time a task will take. This can become a more prevalent issue in middle and high school, as the child tries to juggle a variety of tasks (friends, sports, homework, and chores) and may lead to her feeling frustrated and overwhelmed.

- **Teach your child to prioritize.**

Before starting homework, ask your child “where is a good place to get started?” to encourage her to think about prioritizing. Help her consider what assignments are due first and what the most important tasks are.



- **Have set schedules and routines.**

In your home, post a daily schedule that shows what is expected for the day and how much time each activity should take. This gives your child an idea of the order of the day and a way to judge if she has time for additional activities like going to a friend's house. Keeping a routine and being aware of how time is broken up throughout the day will help your child to better manage her time.

- **Make to-do lists.**

Have your child make a list of all the things she needs to do each day. Include everything, sports, rehearsals, even a favorite TV show, so she can learn to manage all her time, fitting in homework, chores and fun activities.

- **Teach your child to self-monitor how time is used.**

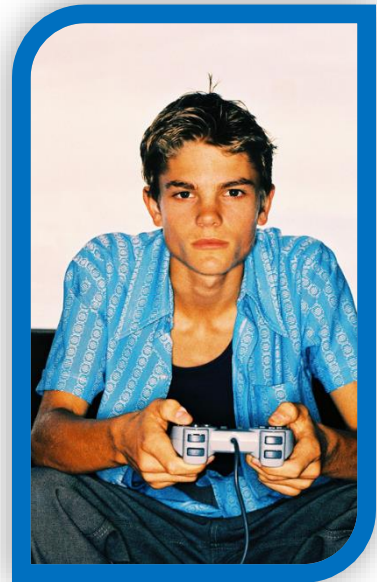
Encourage your student to track how long it takes her to read a book chapter or how long it takes to finish 20 math problems. This will help her gain a better understanding of how long specific tasks take so that she can schedule her time realistically.

## Self-Regulation

### Fixation on Video Games

*Mark will come home from school and play video games for hours. His parents are confused by Mark's ability to switch from being completely unable to focus at school to fixating on the television for long periods of time. His parents are worried that Mark spends too much time with video games and want to encourage other ways for Mark to spend his time.*

Screen fixation (particularly on video games and television) is a common phenomenon in children diagnosed with ADHD and may seem counterintuitive since children who are so easily distracted from homework have no problem staying focused on video games or TV for hours at a time. Studies suggest that when kids play fast-paced video games, their brains release dopamine which creates feelings associated with rewards, thus offering positive reinforcement for the child to continue playing. Additionally, dopamine is thought to play a role in attention, allowing ADHD-diagnosed children to increase their focus. Many ADHD children may struggle with self-confidence and therefore, do not get the same pleasing rewards in daily interactions as they do when playing video games. Here are some ways you can help your child become less fixated on video games:



- **Set limits.**

Set a time limit for how long your child can play video games or watch television so that he is not spending all of his time in front of the screen. Use a visual timer so that your child knows when his time is up.

- **Encourage your child to become more socially involved.**

Making friends and being socially interactive can be difficult for ADHD-diagnosed children for a number of reasons. These children often have low self-confidence, difficulty with appropriate social skills, and may be teased by their peers. Find a sport or activity that your child enjoys and encourage him to become involved in a group or class where he can do that activity. He will get an intrinsic reward from succeeding at something he enjoys, which can in turn help raise self-confidence. Additionally, he will have the opportunity to interact with others who share his interests, which may make it easier to form social relationships.

- **Encourage your child to be active.**

Instead of playing video games when he gets home from school, have your child go outside and play. Physical activity releases endorphins that provide a rewarding feeling similar to the ones kids get from video games; additionally, the physical activity will help your child to stay healthy and fit and, having burned off some energy, may make him more able to settle down to homework. Access to video games should be a reward that follows homework completion.

### **Lying/Manipulation**

*Sarah has come home without math homework for several days in a row. When her mother questions her about why she has not had any homework in math, Sarah says that she did her math in study hall and left it at school so she wouldn't forget to turn it in. The next day, Sarah's mother receives a phone call from Sarah's math teacher stating that Sarah has not turned her homework in for the past week and that Sarah keeps saying she "left it at home". As Sarah's mother continues to speak with the math teacher, it becomes clear that Sarah is being dishonest with both her teacher and her mother and that Sarah is most likely not even doing her homework.*

Lying behavior is more common in ADHD-diagnosed students than in non-ADHD-diagnosed students. Often ADHD students will lie because they are so used to failure and criticism; it is easier to lie than to admit their failure. Other times, they may lie because they want to avoid getting in trouble or being criticized for not doing their best work.

Alternately, lying could be a result of communication and processing issues where ADHD-diagnosed students "zone out" and then lie to fill in the blanks or they forget what they originally said and so make up a new answer. So the lie is wishful thinking rather than a deliberate lie: "Mom asks if I've done my math homework. I can't remember if I've done it or if

we even had homework. But she'll get mad if I say I don't know. Maybe we did do it in class... *Yes, mom I did it in class and left it at school.*"

Below are strategies that you can use to help address and lessen these behaviors:

- **Try to understand the root of the lying.**

If you can understand why your child lies (processing and communication issues, zoning out, avoiding trouble, or to avoid embarrassment) it will be easier to address the behavior in future situations. For instance, if she is lying because of a communication and processing issue, it may help to remind her that she doesn't need to know all the answers and it is okay to say "I don't know" or "I don't remember" or even "I wasn't paying attention and I missed what was said." If your child is lying to avoid embarrassment, remind her that we all make mistakes, but honesty allows us to fix those mistakes and is a better choice than trying to cover it up. Ensuring that you do not criticize your child for failure can help to prevent her from lying out of shame and embarrassment.

- **If you suspect your child is lying, be honest about it.**

Tell your child "Something about this doesn't seem right to me. Are you sure that's what happened?" You can also point out discrepancies to help your child see why you are confused or unsure about the truthfulness of her statements.

- **Don't assume she is lying.**

If your child's lying behavior has been going on for a while, it can become very easy to just assume that she is never being truthful. However, this may have a negative effect on your child in that if she knows you will never believe her, she has no incentive to be truthful. If your child tells you there is no homework in a class where she always has homework, rather than assume that she is lying, you can have her call a friend or check the school website to ensure she has the correct information. This can be much more productive than constantly accusing your child and having her assume you don't trust her.

- **Use consequences and rewards to encourage behavioral change.**

If your child consistently lies about homework assignments or other school-related issues, use logical and consistent consequences to address the behavior (for instance, losing the privilege of playing with a friend after school). Over time, she will learn that lying does not lead to positive results. However, it is very important to also offer praise or some other form of reward when your child is honest with you. This is essential, as research suggests that behavioral change is more likely to occur as a result of reward than consequence.

## How Can a Homework Coach Help?

A homework coach is, in some ways, a fancy term for someone who helps your student complete their daily school assignments and study for tests. Nannies or the next door neighbor's high schooler or the parents themselves can often handle this role quite well.

In recent years, however, niche services like our own HomeworkCoach have developed specific methodologies for training young professionals to be effective homework helpers. A good homework coach will come armed with tools to help ADHD or special needs children become more organized, more structured in their approach to homework and more motivated to succeed in school.



Here's what parents say time and again when they call about our HomeworkCoach program:

- "Our son is quite bright enough to do the work – he doesn't need a tutor – but he won't complete his assignments and does not know how to study effectively."
- "Our daughter is ADHD and has lost all her self-confidence; she thinks she is not as smart as the other kids. When I work with her, she can get A's, but I don't always have time."
- "Both my husband and I work; we come home exhausted and can't face a night of battles over homework."
- "My daughter takes forever to get started on her homework and then is up half the night working on it. There must be a more efficient way!"
- "I know I can help my kids with homework but they don't think I know anything. I am sick of nagging them. I need a patient third party to come in and take the stress out of evenings."

If any of these statements resonate with you, a homework coach may be a good solution. A good coach will help your student set goals, complete and turn in homework, tackle longer term projects in a timely manner, and build the executive function and study skills needed to ultimately succeed on their own. They will take the stress out of your nightly routine and allow your relationship with your children to become more positive.

The cost of a homework coach can vary from \$15-25/hr for someone you find yourself on Craigs List or a college job board, to \$100-150/hr for a learning specialist or ADHD coach with dazzling credentials. HomeworkCoach has sought to keep its fees reasonable by hiring caring young professionals rather than learning specialists, providing them with the training and ongoing support that will allow them to be effective with ADHD students. Under our Premium Plan, coaches hold regular consultations with an on-staff Executive Functioning Specialist. See our [website](#) for current pricing.

## Parent Resources

Here are some books and articles that you may find helpful.

**A New Understanding of ADHD in Children and Adults: Executive Function Impairments.** By Thomas E. Brown

[Available from Amazon](#)

*Dr. Brown's work is the theoretical underpinning for much of this eBook.*

**ADDitude magazine:**

<http://www.additudemag.com>

*This magazine's online version offers many resources and articles for parents with children who have been diagnosed with ADHD, including information for students with comorbidity (students who are diagnosed with ADHD and another disorder, such as a learning disability).*

**CHADD:** <http://www.chadd.org/>

*CHADD is a national, non-profit organization that focuses on educating the public about ADHD and advocating for ADHD-diagnosed individuals. Although there is a fee to join the organization, the website offers several free resources as well.*

**NIMH:** <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder/index.shtml#pub10>

*The National Institute of Mental Health is a government agency that offers information about a number of mental health issues, including ADHD. Their ADHD page offers basic information on ADHD as well as links to free booklets and fact sheets on ADHD.*

**CDC:** <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/index.html>

*The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is another government agency whose site offers a tremendous amount of information about ADHD including links to free materials and resources, scientific articles and research, and data and statistics about ADHD.*

**LDA:** <http://www.lidaamerica.org/aboutld/parents/index.asp>

*The Learning Disabilities Association of America includes free resources and articles for parents, teachers, and professionals about ADHD.*

**HomeworkCoach Coaching Tips:** subscribe at

<http://forms.aweber.com/form/15/1252747015.htm>

*HomeworkCoach will email you weekly tips to help your child complete homework more effectively and with less stress in your household.*

