

Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

SPECIAL NEEDS INCLUSION PROJECT, SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, 1663 MISSION STREET, 7TH FLOOR, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94103 415.282.7494

SNIPPET #14

Inclusive Homework: Productive and Peaceful Homework Time

Do you want to hear this during homework?

Or this?

“It’s too hard.”

“I love learning.”
“I get it!”

“It’s too easy.”

“Ooh, ooh, come look at what I’m doing.”

“Ugh, ugh, I don’t get it.”

“We learned this in school today.”

“This is boring.”

Homework time presents an interesting set of challenges and opportunities for after-school staff. You have many students with a [wide range of skills and interests](#) doing different homework from different teachers. It may be the time of day where you are most expected to act like a classroom teacher (which is a challenge or opportunity depending on your own interests and skills).

You may also be managing different people’s expectations about the purpose of homework time, and you may not feel equipped to support students in all of the different subjects. Simple second grade math homework may look completely different from any math you’ve ever seen! Students may be wild and restless after a long day or antsy to get to recreation

time.

On the other hand, as an out-of-school time provider, you bring a powerful and unique set of tools to homework time. You may be very good at [making learning meaningful and relevant](#) through “real life” examples. You may know personal interests of your students so well that you can help them make connections to their schoolwork (an important strategy for reading comprehension). Perhaps experience has taught you the importance of having opportunities for movement, so you build in brain breaks. You may be reading this post about inclusion because of concerns about how to more fully include a student with special needs in your program, but the following tips can make homework time smoother and more efficient for all students.

Student Strengths

Whenever faced with a challenge or opportunity, begin your problem solving process by noticing the strengths. You’ve already identified the challenges of homework time (although this is a good time to stop and write them down, being careful to describe student behavior in concrete and observable terms). Now, think about

what strengths your program already has. Consider resources (physical space, materials), communication (access to daytime teachers, parents), students (particular interests, students with strong organization skills or particular interests), and staff (good relationships with students, clear classroom management).

Expectations

Next, find out what different stakeholders (students, day teachers, ASP staff, parents) expect from homework time. Questions to ask: How much homework should be completed? Corrected? Is the priority the amount of time spent on homework or the amount of homework completed? Should staff tutor, or just supervise? What should students do if they don't understand their homework? Can children who are in the same class work together, or check each other's work? Do students have to do homework during homework time?

Then, work together to find common ground. Once those expectations are agreed on and preferably written, it is important to be clear and consistent about them.

Routine

Establishing routine will go a long way toward making homework more productive and peaceful. There are many aspects of routine to consider, including:

- Some students may benefit from writing a checklist before beginning homework. All students benefit from setting a goal before they start their homework.
- Establish a consistent transition for the beginning and end of homework time. Teach the students 2-3 attention grabbers or signals, and practice getting into and out of homework mode.
- For example: I signal with the chime and softly count backward from 10. By "one" students should be at their desks, with planner, homework and materials out and voices off.
 - The first three minutes are completely silent, and students are expected to try the homework before asking for help. I use a visual timer to show the time remaining. After five minutes, I set the timer for the remaining time, and students can ask each other or me for assistance.
 - I give, say, and show five- and two-minute warnings, and signal with the chime at the end. Students put their work in backpacks, record their progress on the homework log, and stand up to do a quick movement game.

Physical Space

You may have limited control over your physical space, but imagine yourself in the shoes of a 7-year-old (or whatever age) trying to get work done. Look, listen, smell, feel the environment to notice what maybe helping or hurting their focus.

- Each child has their own space to work, with their own materials. Some may need dividers (folders stapled together work fine) to maintain their focus.

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- Some students may even need a space away from their peers, or to stand up at their desk or use a fidget while they work.
- Establish allowable noise levels (use visual supports to remind, and practice the different levels). Requiring absolute silence is rarely effective beyond a brief initial period: Teach whispers and appropriate conversation (and practice!).
- Give students a way to signal to you that they need help so they don't end up gathered around the front of the room: have a hand signal, or a clipboard list they can write their name on.



Emotional Space

Homework can be daunting, especially if students are tired, lack skills or background knowledge, or just don't have a lot of confidence. Your encouragement can be huge for student success – even if you don't know much about the content.

- Set up homework time as a time for learning by asking a few students to share something they are learning in school before they begin. Acknowledge their expertise as learners.
- Focus on the process of learning by asking students to think about or tell you the purpose of the homework after they read the directions.
- Reinforce the students' efforts and problem-solving skills, rather than their smarts, as you encourage their attempts to do their homework.
- Make connections to student's lives – e.g., use shopping examples for math, ask “what does this remind you of?” during reading.

Chunks and Choice

Like any sensible adult, children who feel like they are likely to succeed at a task and have some ownership over the task are more likely to dig into it.

- Chunks: Teach students to break the homework into bite-size chunks. Judge the size of the bites by observing how long or how many problems a student can complete before becoming frustrated.
 - You may even start with just one part of one problem at a time!
- Show progress with the chunks: students can graph how much work is completed each day (number of math problems, number of sentences

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Questions you might ask students during homework...

- What problem are you working on?
- What do the directions say?
- What words or directions don't you understand?
- Where do you think you should begin?
- What do you already know that can help you work through the problem?
- What have you done so far?
- Do you have similar problems to look at?
- Can you draw a picture or make a diagram?
- Can you explain what the teacher asked you to do?
- Can you tell me where you are stuck?

From “‘We Do Care,’ Say Parents” by Regina Mistretta in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, May 2013 (Vo. 19, #9, p. 572-580), www.nctm.org

written, number of ideas generated...) or make a to-do list out of the chunks and check off items (so satisfying!)

- Reduce the overwhelm: use blank paper to cover up part of the homework. Check with the teacher about going so far as to cut up the homework into actual chunks.
 - A simple strategy for math worksheets (one of the most daunting homework assignments!) is to simply fold the bottom of the paper up so only one row is showing.
- Choice: Once you have the chunks, it is easy to offer choices. “Do you want to start with odds or evens/ with math or English?”

Communication with Teachers and Families

Sharing student successes with teachers and families can be very motivating for the student. Knowing what the teachers expect (and what they are actually assigning for homework) can keep you in the loop about what students need to do to be successful.

- Homework log in student folder (you can use the checklist they created).
- Use a special stamp on homework completed during ASP (check with teachers – most will love this idea and it can be inspiring for students).
- Ask teachers to share with you their big goals and objectives for the week so you can help students think about the purpose of their homework.

Resources:

Homework Time Afterschool Style (www.afterschooled.org)

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