

## ASK THE COUNSELOR

### March 2010 Topic: Homework and the Gifted

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The pressure of having homework to do seems to be one of the most repetitive concerns of our Quest students. Because they are high achievers and want to do well, they desire to do a good job of completing assignments, and thus worry about it. It weighs heavily on their minds on a daily basis.

Some students see homework as a reflection of their end progress, instead of one step of an on-going progress. In their minds, mistakes are intolerable. Because of this, assignments take on more meaning than just practicing skills.

This is played out in various ways. We have students who spend hours and hours on completing homework. They do much more than is expected and necessary. We have other students who procrastinate – wait and wait – because they want to do it perfectly, and then dash it off at the last minute because time runs out. Then it is not a true reflection of their learning. This is considered “paralyzed perfectionism”.

There are also students who approach homework as part of school life, do it, and get it done. Mistakes are not taken as a “terrible thing” but as a chance to learn - which is our goal!!

What are the concerns and underlying issues related to homework? In discussing this with my middle school students, I have found out that attitude towards homework and self-esteem as it relates to how well they think they are doing are two major psychological components. Organization is another important factor in being able to finish tasks. “Smart” students aren’t always organized and some do not know how to study because until middle school, they managed to succeed without studying. So it is a misconception to think that all intelligent students know how to achieve success in their academic endeavors.

So, what is there to do to take the angst out of homework?

First, the purpose of homework needs to be clarified in the children’s minds. Homework is for practice and to find out what they do and do not understand. It is not the teachers’ idea of torturing students. Teachers spend a great deal of their time grading papers and assignments to check for student understanding, to see what students need additional support in particular areas, and/or who is ready for enrichment.

Second, there are time limits for spending on homework. Teachers usually tell students how long to spend and what is expected. If not, students need to ask the teacher directly. A teacher never expects a student to spend more than 20 – 30 minutes on an assignment. To start with, it is important that long-term assignments are broken down into smaller daily pieces, so that it is not necessary to get something done in one night. Then, on daily work, it is important that parents make a note of a child's struggle on a difficult assignment and allow the child to return to school with it incomplete if it is not finished in the allotted timeframe. This is good information for the teachers to have. It will help them to see where they need to give additional support so that students can work independently. If a child consistently seems to take a long time on assignments, you may need to dig a little deeper to see what might be impacting this. If it is longer than other classmates, there is something else going on. In any given day, when studying or doing assignments, it is best practice to take two to five minute breaks every twenty minutes to keep learning at its peak for retention of the material.

Third, homework and tests are part of school life, not the end all be all. It is important to have time in a student's life for activities, sleeping, eating, family, friends, and interests. Sometimes our gifted children are overscheduled with extracurricular activities that keep them from having balance and down time. One idea that often helps is to create a weekly calendar that lists all the activities scheduled from the time they get home until the time they go to bed. This should include time allotted for homework, time with the family and friends, etc. More often than not, this helps the student see that they actually have more time than they think, or conversely might help them to determine where they might need to cut back for balance. This visual also helps relieve the sense of pressure they feel when they have their "to do's" rattling around in their head.

As with most pressures, schoolwork needs to be put into perspective and approached with a positive and confident attitude. If help is needed, parents and teachers can assist. But, homework is a student's responsibility, not to be done by anyone else. It is a learning experience in more ways than one; i.e., how to not get stressed about life's daily chores and to realize that the purpose is for learning, not knowing it all.

If students use excuses for not doing homework – other than illness or absence – it is an important signal. Most of the time, the "dog did not eat it," instead the child did not feel like doing it for multiple reasons. So, don't fall for those excuses – check them out and look for insight behind the excuses. For instance, when a student says something is too easy or boring, it is often masking their fear of starting something about which they don't feel confident.

Organizational skills, taking notes, and assignment notebooks are essential for homework success. Listening to instructions is essential. Sometimes, students need help in these areas. If so, those are the first steps. A quiet place with necessary supplies to do assignments and good lighting are important. Learning how to study and take tests can be areas to build upon also. It is important to note that one size

does not fit all. Look for the tools that work for your child. It is not the same for everyone, and now is the time to discover it. There are actually some students who do better work with music in the background, lying on the floor. But, do help them find what works for them now, prior to high school.

There are references on this topic that I use to help students all of the time.

Trevor Romain, How To Do Homework Without Throwing Up

Schumm & Radencich, School Power

Adderholdt & Greesberg, Perfectionism

Good luck. The “road to success is paved with mistakes.” So, what is learned is the most important part of homework. Just do it!!!