What to do about homework: Suggestions from an adoptive parent, special educator, and psychologist (and son!)

Natalie Montfort, PhD
& Elijah Montfort

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About me - Educator

• The Westview School, a private school for children with high-functioning ASD
  – Middle School teacher
  – Behavior Specialist
About me - Psychologist

- Attended Fielding Graduate University and earned a doctoral degree in clinical psychology.
- Licensed Clinical Psychologist (Texas) and Director of The Stewart Center at The Westview School
About me – Adoptive Parent

• Two boys, 16 and 13 years old
  – Elijah’s (16) prior adoption disrupted; moved in with us at 8, adopted at 10
  – John’s (13) two prior adoptive placements failed; placed with us in June, adopted in Dec. 2017
About Elijah – Educational History

• Disrupted educational experience
  – Inconsistent attendance during pre-k/k
  – Changed schools in kindergarten
  – Attended part of 1\textsuperscript{st} grade public school
  – Homeschooled for end of 1\textsuperscript{st} grade to part of 3\textsuperscript{rd} (2 months in public school in 2\textsuperscript{nd} grade)
  – Out of school for several months in 3\textsuperscript{rd} grade
  – Finished 3\textsuperscript{rd} grade at Westview School (private)
…Elijah’s Educational History, Continued

– Attended 4th grade at zoned school
– Transferred to new school for 5th grade
– 6th grade private school (closed at end of the year)
– 7th grade private school for most of the year (withdrew in February due to trauma insensitivity)
– Home for a month, then finished 7th at Westview
– 8th grade public middle school
– 9th to 11th grade in the SAME HIGH SCHOOL!
About Elijah -

- Tiger Crew (hip-hop dance team)
- Black belt in mixed martial arts
- Boy Scout, working on Eagle project
- Wants to be a welder
- Enjoys: wakeboarding, horses, and dogs
- Twice exceptional student since 4th grade
Disclosures

• I am a trainer for The Attachment & Trauma Network’s Creating Trauma Sensitive Schools Program
• No financial disclosures or conflicts of interest to report
• Names (and any other identifying information) of individuals were changed to protect privacy… except Elijah’s!
A Unique Perspective on Homework

• As a psychologist, I have coached families through this struggle.

• As a mom, I have experienced it first-hand in my own home!

• As an educator, I understand the intended goals and importance of homework. I assigned it 4 nights/week!
As an Educator

• The intended goals of homework
  – Reinforce concepts taught at school
  – Teach responsibility, planning, organizing, and independence

• However, children who benefit the most from homework are those children who already have these skills!

• How can we help the others?
As a parent

- As the parent of children with developmental trauma, I have lived the drama of homework!
- Children who create the most drama around homework often lack the academic, organizational, attentional, and/or executive foundations necessary to manage the demands of homework.
As a Psychologist

• I have seen homework damage family relationships (parent-child, parent-parent), self esteem, motivation to learn, desire to attend school, and more

• I have seen homework cause stress, anxiety, shame, depression, explosive behavior, and outbursts leading to hospitalization or arrest

• (In these cases, the intended goals of homework were not met)
Traumatized Children and Homework

• Traumatized children require special considerations
  – early environments with chaos, abuse, neglect
  – medical diagnoses of FASD, ADHD, learning disabilities, etc.
  – little to no home support
• Traumatized and/or adopted children may need more out of school intervention (e.g., attachment-building with parents) which leaves less time for homework.
• Medical diagnoses and/or exposure to trauma may mean a child needs more practice with academic skills, which leaves less time for intervention (/attachment).
• What is a parent or educator to do?!
Considerations for homework in the home of children with developmental trauma...
Consider ‘Readiness’ for Homework

- Developmentally, homework may not be appropriate
- *Executive functioning* is required for homework
  - Develops age 2 to young adulthood
  - Immature/delayed in children with developmental trauma
  - Impacted by ADHD, FASD, learning disability, ASD, depression, anxiety, and other clinical disorders
- For children with developmental trauma and EF problems, homework may be an exercise in futility!

- ‘Pre-homework’ vs homework may be more successful
  - Show & tell is more relationship-building than long division!
Consider the Importance of Relationship

- **Without the relationship, there will be no learning.**
  - There will be no homework.

- **Maslow’s hierarchy of needs**
  - **First**: basic needs of physical safety (food, water, shelter)
  - **Next**: physical safety/emotional sense of safety and security
  - **Then**: sense of acceptance and belonging
  - **Last**: learning and higher-order processes
Consider the Importance of Relationship

• For children with developmental trauma, this felt sense of safety and security may be difficult to achieve
  – PTSD = heightened level of alertness for danger, foreshortened sense of future, avoidance of triggers that cause the child to feel unsafe or scared, anger, irritability, numbness, detachment, sleep disturbances, and more.
  – Fight, flight, or freeze

• Trauma and adoption/foster care? There may be attachment disruption.
Consider that Homework Can Cause Harm

• The unintended consequences of homework drama can:
  
  – Damage self-esteem,
  – Hinder attachment,
  – Potentially retraumatize the child (chaos, yelling, feelings of failure and rejection)
  – (when this happens, homework is not reinforcing learning or positively teaching!)
What Traumatized Children Need

• Children in this state need reduced or no homework.
• They need to feel proud of the work they are able to do and not shamed for their grades or what they cannot complete.
• They need understanding from teachers as their capabilities may vary from day to day or week to week due to triggers, stress, anniversaries, etc.
What Traumatized Children Need

- A supportive school has the power to help a family build attachment and build a learner.

- Parents need to feel confident that putting the relationship and attachment first is acceptable and the fastest route to their child being able to meet academic expectations in the future.

- Not all children will have their emotional sense of safety and security met.
  - These children are likely to struggle academically
  - Homework may not be in their best interest for quite some time (if ever)
What Traumatized Children Need

• Education about trauma to not feel bad, stupid, guilty.
  – Brain is busy with safety, and there is not as much room for learning. Soon, body and brain will feel safer and be more ready for learning.

• Psychoeducation does not enable children to be lazy (as some fear), but instead, helps make sense of their experience and look forward to learning as something they can or will be able to do.

• These reassurances can help children to externalize their difficulties rather than internalize them, which runs the risk of damaging their self-esteem.
Consider the Assignment

• **Some assignments themselves are triggers or upsetting.**
  – family trees,
  – timelines or lifelines,
  – projects requiring baby photos,
  – writing assignments, especially emotional (happiest/scariest memory),
  – certain books.

• No trigger is too small- even a math word-problem or reading passage can be a trigger that impedes the ability to complete the assignment accurately or at all.

• Generally, an alternative assignment can be provided.

• Communication with the teacher and school is key.
The following suggestions offer opportunities for strengthening relationships and squashing homework drama.

Whether children are ready for homework routinely or rarely…
Change the Mood and Attitude of Homework

• Join with the child to promote attachment and model the skills you want developed.
  – Physical proximity
  – Redirect back without judgement or shame

• Celebrate little victories.

• Praise effort over outcome.
  – Praising effort = more effort, praising outcome = less effort

• Inform the school about homework difficulties
Change the Environment

• Optimize the environment for the child’s areas of weakness
  – Reduce distractions
  – Use lists, schedules, timers, ‘race’ the clock
  – Help with prioritization

• Take the ‘home’ out of homework
  – Parks, libraries, tutorials, or before or after school
  – Reduces stress at home, and children may behave better in these settings
Change the Format of Homework

• Break homework into smaller, manageable parts
  – Cut/fold worksheets
  – Break up projects or lengthy homework packets
  – Type or use voice to text
  – Have parent scribe

• Hands-on projects substituted for written work

• Use ‘strategy cards’ for rules, reminders, formulas

• Change the quantity of homework assigned
  – §504 accommodations or special education modifications
Questions?
Natalie Montfort, PhD

Clinical Psychologist/Director

The Stewart Center at The Westview School

713-973-1842

nmontfort@westviewschool.org

www.westviewschool.org