Using Visual Supports to Facilitate Homework Completion
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Many children (including those with disabilities) have strong visual skills, and these strengths can be capitalized on with visual supports, such as daily schedules, mini-schedules, task checklists and behavior charts. Task checklists or mini-schedules are useful in targeting certain events or tasks in the daily schedule where a child has difficulty. They are used to break a larger task down into smaller, more manageable steps which are easier for a child to handle. These visual supports can be used to teach children new routines and foster independence in established ones.

Benefits of Visual Supports in Homework Time

Parents can teach their children to create visual schedules, mini-schedules, and "to do lists" as part of homework routines at home. When written checklists are used to sequence steps in a task like homework time, this reduces the amount of verbal prompting needed to move a child through each step, which promotes independence and memory skills. Using these types of visual supports can also help to develop self-monitoring skills and increase independence for children at any age.

Creating the Homework Task Checklist

Begin by deciding how things will be visually represented on your child's checklist--does your child understand written words and picture symbols or are photographs necessary. Remember that you don't want your child to have to struggle to understand what the individual items mean. You don't put your appointments on your calendar in another language, so do not use visual supports that are difficult for your child to interpret.

Only place specific steps/tasks on this checklist that have a finite "end" (not desired behaviors); this list is only to help the child understand the tasks that is expected to perform, not to use to remind him to exhibit behaviors (such as "being safe", etc). It is also important to be as accurate and succinct as possible and only place items on the list that you *expect* the child to complete during that specific routine. If you place more tasks on the list but the child doesn't have to complete all tasks on the list, the list will not serve its purpose of informing him of exactly how much is required. If you don't place enough tasks on the list and then add items, the child will not trust that the initial list presented is really all the work he has to do.

When developing the checklist for your homework routine (*see example right*), it is also helpful to include time for a snack and to "unwind" from school. Many children will also need opportunities for movement before beginning homework, so consider including these on your checklist.

> **EXAMPLE: My Homework Routine**
> **3:00:** I have a snack and relax
> **3:30:** I get my stuff (pencil, paper, calculator, books) and go to my homework spot
> **3:35:** I help Mom/Dad make my "To Do List"
> **3:40:** I start my homework
> **4:00:** Mom checks to see if I need a break
> **4:25:** Mom/Dad checks my work
> **4:30:** I edit my work (if I need to)

Decide on a logical location where the support should be kept (i.e., near where they will be doing their homework, etc). For a homework checklist, it might be best to slide it into the front outside of a binder with a clear plastic cover, or slide the list into a clear sheet protector inside the binder. If your child moves around a lot, you can create a portable support out of a photo album/three ring notebook. It is important to make sure that this or any visual support is in a place that is readily accessible and visible. Kids (especially those with difficulties with processing and attending) can benefit if the checklist is in a spot where they will easily see it. This will help them remember to use it.

Embedding Choices within Homework Time

Embedding choices during any problematic routine will decrease the likelihood of the child engaging in challenging behaviors. If a child can have opportunities to make even *small* choices of activities or tasks that he is expected to do (i.e., choosing which he wants do first, second, etc.), it may provide the child with a sense of control and as a result can help prevent some challenging behavior. Choices create situations in which children are forced to think and problem solve, which

provides opportunities for children to make mistakes and learn from consequences. Choices provide opportunities for children to hear that we trust their thinking—this can build self-confidence. Offering choices proactively (not reactively) can also help us avoid getting into power struggles with children.

Generating choices for homework time can be as simple as having the child pick which subject to tackle first, when to take a brief break, what to do for a brief break (i.e., get up and stretch, do some jumping jacks, take a lap around the house, etc.), or what to have for an after school snack. Choices do not have to be elaborate or complicated, but they should be plentiful. Offering more small choices as part of a routine is better than offering one or two larger choices. When using choices, remember to offer choices that you can live with—don't provide one you like and one you don't, because the child will often pick the one you don't like. Never give a choice unless you are willing to allow the child to experience the consequence of that choice.

Using the Homework Task Checklist and Providing Feedback

While your child is first using the checklist, stay near to answer questions and monitor breaks (stretch, bathroom, get a drink, etc.). As the tasks are completed have the child either check off completed tasks or remove the task picture symbol from the list to signify that this task is finished. If your child asks you what he should be doing, redirect him to look at his task checklist instead of *directly* answering the question. This will not only teach him how to use the list correctly, but it will also help teach him to be less reliant on your help at every step of the homework process. If the child is not following the list, redirect him by reminding him to look at his checklist. When redirecting the student to use his list, you can also simply point to or tap the visual to minimize use of verbal prompts. Reducing the amount of verbal prompting that the child needs from you will also help foster the child to be more independent.

In addition to giving this corrective feedback to help keep the child "on track" and engaged, be sure to offer *frequent, specific* praise for good work. How frequent? Think about this--on average children typically comply with the rules a lot of the time. But how often are they actually complimented for their behavior or even told that they met your expectation? It's important to remember to recognize successes (even small ones!) by "catching them being good" with a high enough frequency. The goal is to aim for a ratio of positive to negative interactions of at least 4 to 1—this means that for every 1 time you give corrective feedback ("That's *not* what I meant by 'pick up your clothes', they need to go into the hamper if they're dirty"), you also try to tell the child about 4 things he did well ("Thanks for clearing your breakfast dishes").

Another important part about giving behavioral feedback is to make sure it is clear and specific enough. Rather than simply saying "good job", you can be more specific by saying "Nice job being responsible—you started that homework without a single reminder from me". This way the child knows exactly what he did well and is more likely to be able to repeat that behavior in the future. This also helps to teach him that when you ask him to "be more responsible" that means doing things like starting homework without being repeatedly reminded by an adult. The specific feedback you give further defines your expectations of what "responsible behavior" looks like.

Recognizing and Rewarding Homework Success

In addition to giving positive feedback about successes in the homework routine, some children may need a little extra motivation to help get them through it. For some children, this may involve adding a preferred activity as the last item on his homework checklist. Once he completes all the other items, then it is time for the more fun one (*see example list right where "free time" is last*). If the preceding items on the list are not completed, then the last item (e.g., the fun one) will be impacted (e.g., time for it is reduced or eliminated).

Example "yes/no" chart:		
When?	**What?**	**All Done?**
3:15	I get my stuff (pencil, paper, book) and go to my desk	
3:20	I make my "Homework List"	
3:25	I start my homework	
4:00	Take a quick break	
4:25	Mom/Dad check my work	
4:30	I edit my work (if I need to)	
4:45	I have *free time* until dinner	

This is an example of providing a preferred activity on a daily basis, but you can also set other types of daily goals, weekly goals, or both.

If setting a weekly goal, it may be more realistic to identify a fair criteria that the child will need to meet by the end of the week in order to earn the reward. For example, if the child meets the week's homework expectations and earns almost all check marks or all "yes's" on his chart (e.g., no more than 1 "no" earned on weekly homework chart), then you and your child can celebrate this success by doing something fun over the weekend or you can allow your child to have an extra privilege (*see example list right*).
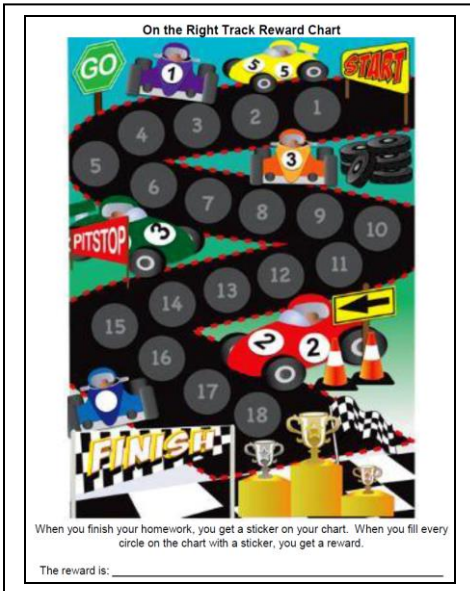
Another way to incorporate a visual support to reinforce homework completion is to use a simple homework chart (*see example left*). Every time the child completes a homework assignment, he receives a sticker on the chart. If the

On the Right Track Reward Chart

When you finish your homework, you get a sticker on your chart. When you fill every circle on the chart with a sticker, you get a reward.

The reward is: _____

Examples of Additional Privileges:
1. Stay up 5 minutes extra before bed
2. Family game night
3. Computer game time
4. Do a puzzle with a parent
5. Read an extra bed time story
6. Pick what's for dinner for the family (from a choice of approved meals)
7. Help plan weekend activities
8. Ride bikes with a parent
9. Help decorate for a holiday
10. Special activity day with a parent
11. Pick what we watch on TV
12. Have a sleep over with a friend
13. Go out for ice cream
14. Go out for pizza
15. Spend the night with grandparents
16. Play dress up
17. Bake something with a parent
18. Roast marshmallows
19. Family karaoke night
20. Help decorate their room

child does not complete the homework, then no sticker is earned on the chart. In this system, stickers cannot be removed for non-completion of homework. Once all the stickers have been earned and the chart is filled, then the child might be allowed to receive an extra privilege or reward.

Teaching Your Child to *Self*-Monitor Homework Progress

Some children may benefit from having their own *self*-monitoring chart for them to use to reflect on how they are doing with their homework routine. The difference between a reward chart and a self-monitoring chart is that on a reward chart, the adult gives the feedback to the child about how s/he performed and rewards the child accordingly. In *self*-monitoring, the child to taught to rate *himself* on the behaviors listed. For example, the student can rate himself regarding his ability to meet the homework expectation on a scale from 1-3, using a "yes/no" or other method (*see example chart right*). At the end of the week, the parent and child can review the child's progress and celebrate successes. If desired, the parent and child may choose to celebrate a successful week by doing something fun together. Parents may also award privileges for success at the end of the week,

EXAMPLE: Homework _Self_-Monitoring Chart					
	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Weekend
Was I Respectful? This means I: ➢ Asked for help politely ➢ Remembered to say "thanks"					
Was I Responsible? This means I: ➢ Started homework without extra reminders					
Was I Ready? This means I: ➢ Completed homework and put things away before free time					

but the reward is *not* the main purpose of self-monitoring. The goal is to help the child become more aware of his own behavior and how that impacts his success (or setbacks).

Remember that when first introducing a self-monitoring chart, the adult must lead the child through how to accurately rate his performance. Implementing a self-monitoring system correctly may

also involve some continued discussion with the supervising adult, to make sure the child is rating himself accurately and fairly.

Last Idea: Scheduling Homework Time

Children need to know that there is a time to eat a snack, a time to do homework and also free time, but free time starts *after* homework is done. For this reason, children may need to see when homework time falls on their after school schedule. Parents can help their children create an after school schedule in order to accomplish this. Once the schedule has been developed, then parents can use it to redirect their children (i.e., by saying "Right now is homework time. The sooner you get it done, the sooner you can have free time."). Through this children learn that if the "homework part" is not finished, then the child cannot move on to the next part of the schedule.

It may also be helpful to schedule homework time for the child's most difficult class(es) *every* school day at a certain time. If the child says they have no homework in that subject(s), they can spend that time reading ahead in textbooks, making up missed work, doing extra credit, studying something related to the troublesome subject(s). If they say "I left my books at school," parents can have them read a book related to this subject. After consistent implementation of this practice, parents may find that the child starts to bring home more actual assignments from this subject.

Additional Resources

The following websites provide access a variety of free homework charts:
➢ http://www.kidpointz.com/printable-charts/homework-charts/
➢ http://www.freeprintablebehaviorcharts.com/homework_charts.htm
➢ http://www.playcreategrow.com/1/post/2013/09/homework-tips-and-2-free-reward-chart-printables.html

For access to additional ideas, charts and other behavior support tools, please contact Michelle Lockwood at michellelockwood@njcie.net.