

Building **BETTER** Homework **HABITS**

How to Talk to Your Kids to Promote Change

Ann Dolin, MEd

THERE'S NOTHING MORE STRESSFUL than nagging your child each night over homework or arguing in the morning about misplaced assignments.

In my nearly thirty years of helping kids with ADHD do better in school, I've found that nagging and lecturing a child about schoolwork might produce short-term changes. But this approach does not help students take ownership and form healthy homework habits. And it doesn't prevent the stress parents feel while barking orders at their kids like they're the "homework police."

What does work is fostering self-reflection so that students are able to have a frank discussion of what's working or not working for them. It's often the case that kids can solve many of their own academic challenges when guided the right way, even when they are initially reluctant.

That's why at my practice we help students assemble a toolbox of strategies and learn which ones to use and when to use them. Most importantly, we provide the structure to practice over and over until they become a habit.





The Stages of Change

So how can you reduce your family's stress and help your child build stronger study habits and more independence? One of the best ways is by understanding how kids form a habit and then reframing the way you talk to your son or daughter about their schoolwork.

For this, I follow the Transtheoretical Model*, more commonly called the Stages of Change. Our executive function coaches use an initial informal diagnostic to understand a new student's starting point, and then to move him or her from one stage to the next.

This method of habit formation allows your child to take greater ownership and responsibility. The end result is a toolbox of lifelong strategies for students to perform to their potential—not only in elementary, middle and high school, but throughout college.

Here are the stages of change:

1. Precontemplation: *"No, I don't need help. I don't see a problem, so I'm not willing to change."*

In this stage, your child refuses to do an assignment, says the work "is stupid," and does not see a drawback to wait-

ing until the last minute to start a complicated assignment.

Arguing with your child when they're in this stage does not help. Instead, I would suggest turning yourself into a detective to listen and empathize.

Child: *"This history teacher is so unfair!"*

Parent: *"I completely get where you're coming from. I can see why this is frustrating."*

Relate to your child and be emotionally there. Without an objective, positive adult influence, the cycle of negativity will continue.

Children in this stage may only be open to getting help with what needs to be done that day, such as homework assignments due the next day. It often takes time for trust to develop before they're open to assistance with ongoing tasks like staying organized, long-term planning, and study skills.

2. Contemplation: *"Maybe... I guess I'll think about it."*

At this stage, your child is stuck. They acknowledge that perhaps the strategies they're using aren't working very well. They are open to considering a change but aren't yet gung-ho about a modification.

In this stage, your child might feel worried about failing a class and the embarrassment they will suffer, but they're also worried that if they try and don't succeed, it will be even worse. They might say things like *"Yeah, I could do that"* or *"Sure, I'll try."* But they really won't put forth much effort, because they don't have enough motivation or confidence to make a change.

You can help your child in this stage by asking powerful, open-ended questions about the pros and cons of making a change.

Many kids with ADHD forget what they're supposed to do for homework because they don't write it down. Some teachers regularly post assignments online, but others leave it up to the student.

If your child has this continuous habit, you can prompt them to problem-solve by asking, *"What's another way to know what you have to do?"*

Or, if it's such a bone of contention and you've tried these things before, leave it alone, and figure out how else you can be helpful.

You can better earn trust by asking, *"What's the one thing you want to get done tonight?"*

3. Preparation: *"What strategies might work for me?"*

In this stage, your child has tried a few things to ease the nightly homework battle, but did not experience much success. Now he is feeling motivated and needs guidance to get started, but he is also feeling disappointed in himself and is suffering from a lack of confidence.

I would suggest helping your child define the problem, the likelihood of the problem having an impact on them, and then come up with an action plan together.

If your high schooler waited until the last minute to study for a cumulative biology test, you might ask a question such as, “On a scale of 1–10, how important is this test to you?”

At this point, you can help your child take a look at their schedule and find specific times when they can study for their next biology test so they feel better prepared.

Executive function coach Kathi Gould, MEd, likes to use a fun technique called Bites, Munchers, and Gobblers to help her students prioritize and manage their time.

A bite can be compared to a cheeseburger slider. It’s a small task that will only take a few minutes to complete, like emailing the teacher to ask a specific question.

A muncher is a full-sized sandwich. It’s a larger task that might take your child an hour or more, like writing Cornell Notes on this week’s history chapter.

A gobbler is a large pizza. It’s a complex, multi-step task that will take days to complete, like an English literature essay.

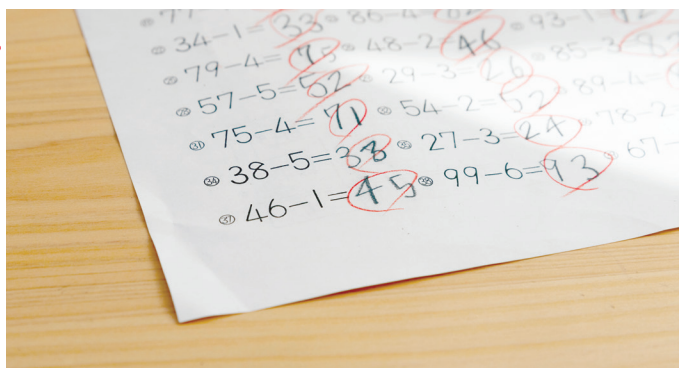
4. Action: “I’m trying; I am changing my behavior now.”

At this stage, your child is building independence and has found tools that work for her to take charge of his schoolwork. It takes a long time to get to this stage, often far longer than parents and kids realize.

However, your child will still need accountability to prevent falling off track when you’re not by her side (or in between sessions if your child’s accountability partner is a tutor or executive function coach).

In this stage, I would suggest weekly check ins where you ask your child powerful questions like:

- “How was your week?”
- “What went well?”
- “What got in your way?”



5. Maintenance: “I have a new habit that takes the place of the old behavior.”

Now your child is fine tuning their behavior and practicing over time. This consistent practice creates a new habit that they’re able to do mostly independently. Sometimes, however, they will slip back into an earlier stage. It’s important to acknowledge the slip and help them get back on track.

In this stage, you can ask your child to think about how they would feel if they broke their new study habit and how to avoid that from happening.

Getting help from others

It’s okay to hand your “homework police” badge over to a third party.

Working to help your child change habits for tackling procrastination, dealing with digital distractions, organizing their paperwork, and studying for an exam requires a lot of consistency and patience. Kids are generally more resistant to their parents than they are to others, including teachers and tutors. If you need help to restore the peace in your home due to the stress surrounding academics, know that you are not alone and it’s always okay to call in backup.

Many students with ADHD benefit from working with an experienced executive function coach to help manage their work and schedule and to master the skills they need to succeed in school (and life!). A qualified coach is able to prompt students to brainstorm and solve many of their own problems, which inspires motivation and confidence, and reduces academic stress for the entire family. 🌱



As a former teacher, author, and speaker, **Ann Dolin, MEd**, is committed to equipping parents and students to succeed academically and enjoy the K-12 journey together. Since 1998, her team at Educational Connections (www.ectutoring.com) has helped thousands of kids overcome obstacles and achieve goals through one-to-one tutoring, test prep, executive function coaching, and college consulting. Dolin is an expert on academics and ADHD. She was a board member of the former Washington, DC, chapter of CHADD, has spoken several times at the annual CHADD conference, and has been featured in the Washington Post and Parents Magazine. She serves on the editorial advisory board of CHADD’s Attention magazine and on the board of the International Dyslexia Association.

LEARN MORE

*To learn more about the Transtheoretical Model, go to <https://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/mph-modules/sb/behavioralchange/theories/behavioralchangetheories6.html>.

