



Focus on Homework



Strengthening Partnerships between Family and School

by Stephen L. Soffer, Ph.D.; Angela Clarke, Ph.D.; Branlyn Werba, Ph.D.; Kurt Choate, Ph.D.; Courtney Ferrell, M.A.; and Thomas J. Power, Ph.D.

THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES faced by students with AD/HD include classroom-based issues such as the timely completion of assignments, organizing and finding materials when needed, accurately following instructions, focusing during class discussions and lectures and monitoring errors during independent work (DuPaul & Stoner, 2003). However, academic problems associated with AD/HD do not only occur in the classroom. Home-based problems also can have a negative effect on academic performance; these difficulties include inaccurate recording of homework assignments, not bringing home the necessary materials for homework, difficulty sustaining mental effort to complete homework and poor study habits (Power, Werba, Watkins, Angelucci & Eiraldi, in press).

Most approaches for addressing the academic concerns of children with AD/HD have focused primarily on the development and implementation of classroom-based strategies. For example, teachers may prompt students to pay attention to instructions, use a token reinforcement system to reward task completion or have a student with AD/HD sit in the front of the room. Although often helpful, focusing solely on behaviors in the classroom fails to account for the impact that AD/HD symptoms have on a student's academic needs outside of the school setting and the family's ability to promote their child's success. A comprehensive intervention approach to address children's educational needs ought to involve the school and family working in a collaborative manner.

Families and schools can work together on a number of issues important for the educational success of students, and homework is perhaps the best example. Homework is a natural means for improving the quality of collaboration between teachers and parents, as well as a child's academic performance. By its nature, homework crosses the school-home boundary, as it requires that academic work assigned by teachers be completed outside of the classroom, typically within the home. Homework often is a battleground for parents and their children with AD/HD and can significantly disrupt family routines and dynamics. Focusing on homework as a target for intervention not only can improve family-school partnerships, but can enhance the quality of parent-child interactions.

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Parents learn how to establish a “homework ritual,” which involves setting up an environment that is optimal for completing homework. This includes establishing a regular homework time, finding a setting with minimal distractions and having the necessary materials readily available.



Family-School Success

Family-School Success (FSS) is a parent-training program that includes both a child intervention group and simultaneous parent-teacher consultation. FSS evolved from the Homework Success Program (Power, Karustis & Habboushe, 2001), a six-session parent and child group program designed for students with AD/HD and their parents. Homework Success provides education to parents about interventions targeted to address the homework problems encountered by children with AD/HD. A preliminary study of the effects of Homework Success (Daniel, 2000) suggested that a brief intervention targeting homework problems could improve homework performance but may not be powerful enough for meaningful changes in parent-child interactions and academic performance. On the other hand, FSS is more comprehensive and intensive and designed to strengthen the ability of parents and teachers to engage in collaborative problem solving and improve treatment effects in school and home.

FSS is designed to do the following:

- Foster collaboration among families and schools to promote effective problem solving
- Train parents, children and teachers in effective methods for improving homework performance and study skills

- Present strategies for improving family interactions and reducing parent-child conflict
- Provide parents with a supportive network of families with whom to share ideas and experiences

A unique aspect of FSS is the inclusion of children within the program. There is evidence that involving both parents and children in therapy is more effective than working with the parents or the child alone (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997). A major benefit of including children is that it introduces the intervention strategies to the children, so that they are more likely to work cooperatively with their parents and teachers. The focus of the child group is to provide children with the opportunity to learn in a fun environment some of the same skills that their parents are learning. Skills are taught through games and interactive role-playing. Given that the group consists of children who have difficulty in controlling their behavior, a token reinforcement/point system is used from the outset of the program to reward specific target behaviors.

Each group session of FSS provides parents with instruction in specific content, time to review between-session homework assignments, and open group discussion of the skills taught and parents' success with implementation. The three key components of FSS are summarized below.

Conjoint Behavioral Consultation

Sheridan and colleagues (Sheridan, Kratochwill & Bergan, 1996) developed a model for family-school collaboration called Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC). There are four steps to this approach.

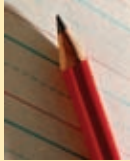

1. The parent and teacher jointly identify the most important problems.
2. They analyze the nature and function of each problem.
3. They plan and implement the specific interventions.
4. They make modifications in the intervention plan as needed.

This CBC model is used in FSS and serves as the foundation for the family-school approach to intervention.

Daily School-Home Report Card

A daily school-home report card involves the teacher providing ratings of academic performance and the parent providing reinforcement at home based upon school performance (Kelley, 1990). The teacher and parent work together to develop the goals and rating

TABLE I Strategies to Promote Homework Completion and Accuracy

Homework Target	What can teachers do?	What can parents do?	What can students do?
Completion 	Assign a reasonable amount of homework Establish rewards and consequences for completing homework Break long-term projects into segments and establish due dates for each segment	Schedule a regular time and location for homework Break homework into segments and establish reasonable time limits for completion Allow child to take a short break (1–2 min.) between segments and use a timer to track the amount of time until the break Reward child for completion with a privilege	Record complete assignment, due date and necessary materials in homework assignment book Check with a reliable classmate to ensure that the necessary materials are taken home Ask to have an extra set of textbooks to keep at home or bring home all textbooks every day
Accuracy 	Practice skills necessary to complete homework in class Ensure that homework is recorded correctly and completely in student’s assignment book Provide written homework assignments (i.e., on the chalkboard or school Web site)	Instruct child in the skills necessary to complete homework before s/he begins the assignment Limit distractions during homework Reward child for accuracy with a privilege	Ask teacher or parent for help before beginning homework Work carefully during homework Check and double-check homework

system included in the report card to meet the individual needs of the child. At one or more points during the day, the teacher rates each behavior, and the child brings the note home daily. Parents have the opportunity to provide positive feedback for any behavioral improvements and can write notes back to the teacher. This report card facilitates home-school collaboration and provides a concrete way for the child, parents and teacher to document positive behavioral changes.

Systematic Homework Intervention

The homework intervention component focuses on making changes to both the broad range of situations that sets the stage for doing homework (for example, amount of homework assigned and the setting where homework is completed) and the consequences of homework completion, such as TV privileges and teacher feedback. Parents and teachers work together to make sure that homework has a specific purpose, assignments are within a student’s skill level and a reasonable amount of work is assigned. Parents learn how to establish a “homework ritual,” which involves setting up an environment that is optimal for complet-

ing homework. This includes establishing a regular homework time, finding a setting with minimal distractions and having the necessary materials readily available.

Consequences for homework include all the ways that parents, teachers and others respond to homework-related behaviors. Teachers can support homework goals by providing feedback about work completion and grading homework on a timely basis. Parents can use behavioral consequences, such as positive reinforcement like providing specific praise or material rewards.

FSS teaches goal setting and other strategies that involve dividing homework into units of work and setting goals for each unit with regard to completion and accuracy (Power et al., 2001). The parent and child set time limits for each unit of homework and then jointly evaluate whether goals have been attained. If goals are achieved, the parent gives both verbal praise and concrete rewards, such as tokens to be exchanged for privileges or prizes. The parent and child use a “goal-setting tool” to summarize and track the completion and accuracy for each section of

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Sample Daily School-Home Report Card

Please rate my child on each of the following behaviors for the morning and afternoon classes.

Morning

1. **Completed seatwork:**
 3 points = 100%
 2 points = 85%
 1 point = 70%
 0 points = less than 70%
2. **Followed teacher instructions:**
 3 points = excellent
 2 points = very good
 1 point = good
 0 points = not done
3. **Wrote assignments in assignment book:**
 3 points = 100%
 2 points = 85%
 1 point = 75%
 0 points = less than 50%

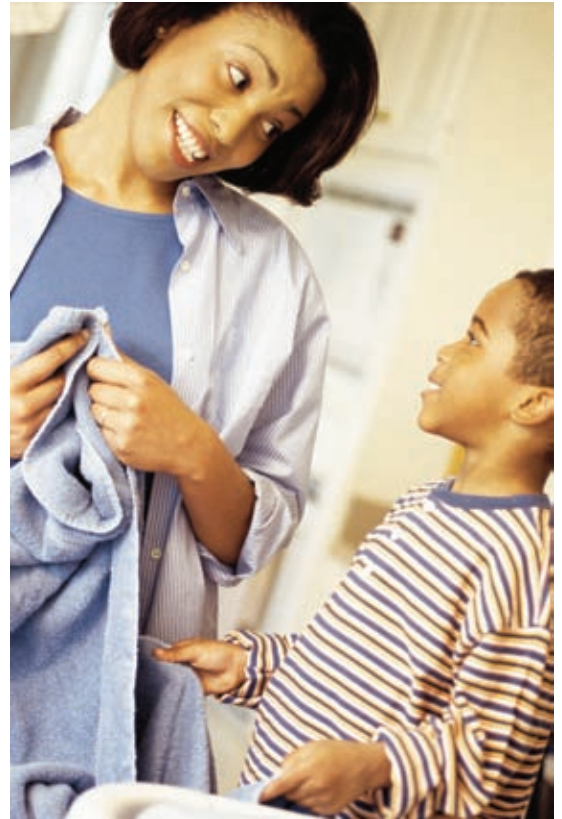
Afternoon

1. **Completed seatwork:**
 3 points = 100%
 2 points = 85%
 1 point = 70%
 0 points = less than 70%
2. **Followed teacher instructions:**
 3 points = excellent
 2 points = very good
 1 point = good
 0 points = not done
3. **Wrote assignments in assignment book:**
 3 points = 100%
 2 points = 85%
 1 point = 75%
 0 points = less than 50%

_____ = Total Points

Teacher initials/comments _____

Parent initials/comments _____



Sample Goal-Setting Tool

Use one goal-setting tool for each unit of homework. Remember, parents should work together with their child to set goals for completion, accuracy and judging performance after the assignment is completed. Do your best!

- Step 1 What is my goal?**
 # of items completed _____
 # of items correct _____
 My time estimate _____ minutes
- Step 2 How did I do?**
 # of items completed _____
 # of items correct _____
- Step 3 Did I reach my completion goal?**
 Yes – far above goal = 2 points
 Yes – met my goal = 1 points
 No – goal not met = 0 points
- Step 4 Did I reach my correctness goal?**
 Yes – far above goal = 2 points
 Yes – met my goal = 1 points
 No – goal not met = 0 points
- Step 5 Total Points** _____ points

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homework. Goal setting allows a child who has previously experienced considerable difficulty completing homework in a timely manner to have more frequent success with meeting goals that they were actively involved in setting. This approach also gives parents a clear understanding of reasonable expectations for homework completion based on their child's actual performance. Table 1 summarizes helpful strategies for parents, teachers and students to improve homework performance (see page 25).

Family-School Success Outcomes

Preliminary studies from numerous FSS groups conducted over the past three years strongly suggest that the program leads to large reductions in homework problems and AD/HD symptoms seen at home, as well as moderate improvements in parent-child interactions. Future developments of this intervention program include a focus on (a) intensifying the school-home collaboration component to improve the impact on classroom behavior and academic functioning and (b) including individualized family sessions to enable each family to tailor the FSS strategies to their unique situation.

Conclusions

The educational problems faced by children with AD/HD are wide-ranging and

typically highly impairing. Intervention strategies implemented solely in the school classroom fail to capitalize on the contributions that the family can make to promote children's academic success. Family School Success is designed to help parents and teachers work together to address a student's educational needs. In addition, programs such as this show strong promise in improving relationships that are critical to successful child development, including parent-child, teacher-child and family-school relationships. ■

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