



Motivating Children to do Homework: The Timer Method (Grade School version)

Many parents state that it is difficult to motivate their children to complete homework. Many children are overwhelmed by all they have to do when they get home from school. Additionally, some children need more immediate rewards for doing homework since the “reward” for completing homework seems so distant to them (e.g., failing tomorrow’s quiz). While this program may not help children “love” homework, it can help motivate them to do their homework without constant parental nagging or lecturing (e.g., “You’ll never be successful if this keeps up”).

Setting up the program

- It is often helpful to set-up a “home note” system with your child’s teacher. This is a process where the child is sent with an index card or blank notebook each day to school. The teacher (or child) writes the assignments on this card (the teacher has to initial it to make sure it is correct), and it is the child’s responsibility to bring this card home each day. If he or she “forgets” the card, they have to go back to the school immediately to retrieve it. This note will allow you to review what your child needs to do each day. This suggestion is especially helpful for children with ADHD or ADD who have a hard time organizing assignments; however, you should talk to your child’s teacher first regarding how comfortable they feel in setting this system up. If your child’s teacher is too busy to do the home note system, the child must list out their own homework assignments on the notebook before they get “wind-down” time (see below).
- This child should have an assigned “study area.” This should be a place in which all other distractions are removed, the child has a desk to work on, and there is plenty of light. It should be a family rule that the child should not be bothered while in this study area by other family members (especially siblings).
- The point system or connect-the-dot programs should already be in place before starting this program.

The procedure (to be followed each school day)

1. The child is given a certain amount of time to “wind down” after coming home from school. The child must give the parent the “home note” (see above) before being given this wind-down time. A time period is selected (e.g., an hour is usually good) where the child has access to all privileges (e.g., T.V., friends, computer games, the phone, other games the child likes to play). This gives the child time to “unwind” before beginning their homework. It is good for the child to know, in advance, when this time period will be (e.g., between 3:00 and 4:00 pm).
2. The parent gives the child a reminder that their wind-down time is coming to an end “in 5-minutes.”



3. The parent now removes all privileges from the child and tells them to **begin** their first homework assignment. This homework assignment is selected from the “home note” card that the child gave the parent when they came home. The parent reminds the child that they will be able to earn points (or connect a dot) if they complete what your’re asking them to do by a certain time (e.g., 6:00).
4. Get a timer and tell the child that you simply expect them to show effort for 15-20 minutes- you don’t expect them to get everything right. As long as the child is making a good effort and working, their time is going and you stay there to help. If the child becomes distracted, wanders off, or “gives up”, the parent matter-of-factly states that the child’s time has stopped and they will come back when the child is ready to “try again.” You can try staying in the room and using your ignoring skills; however, if the child becomes combative, feel free to leave the room. *It is important that the child, however, stays at their desk.* He or she determines how long homework lasts- not you. As soon as they are willing to pick up their pencil and try again, you come back and announce something like, “Oh good! Glad you are starting again! I can come back now.” Stay there and praise effort (not outcome) make it a positive experience as long as the child is demonstrating effort (even if they are being a little grumpy about it).
5. After 15-20 minutes of effort, give you child a break for an equal amount of time. They can participate in all of their privileges for this period of time. If necessary (based on their home note), have the child come back and complete another 15-20 minutes of effort. During grade school, it is not recommended that the child do over 60 minutes of homework per day. This is 60 minutes of *effort*- not including dawdling or complaining time.
6. The child should see assignments being checked off his or her home note. The parent praises the child, allows them to connect a dot or receive points as long as the child completed the assignment within the deadline.

Troubleshooting:

- It is **not** the parent’s job to constantly stay with the child and direct his or her work (e.g., nagging). It is only the parents’ job to make sure they are at the study area and that all privileges are removed. If the child leaves the study area, the child is escorted back. If the child whines or complains, this behavior is ignored and time is not accruing.
- Explain all these procedures to your child before officially beginning the program.
- Make sure the child is motivated by the bigger item they are earning through connecting dots or earning points. The program will likely fail if the child is disinterested in the item.
- If there are several small assignments (e.g., take only 5-minutes to complete) these can be combined into 1 assignment group. If there is a very large assignment, break it down into smaller steps. This way the child can take breaks while completing big assignments.



- For long-term assignments, like book reports, you may want to have the second 20 minute section be devoted to helping with these assignments. You may need to help the child break down the task into smaller sections.
- Parents often ask, “What if the child rushes through their work?” Many children do this just so they can just get done. But remember, we are rewarding time spent- not completion. So when this goal changes, the child’s behavior may as well. However, this is not always the case. If the child continues to rush through assignments so they can be “done.” Talk with the child about how their time may stop if you see them begin to rush.
- It may be helpful to role-play this before doing it “for real.” Have the child play the role of the parent and give them the stop watch. You play the role of the child and have the child “catch” you getting off task, complaining, or rushing by stopping the watch and walking away. Feel free to role-play some of the things your child does during homework, as long as you do it in a playful way so the child does not think you are making fun of them.