

Homework strategies

For autistic children and their families, homework can be a huge source of stress and conflict. This resource outlines some potential techniques and strategies that may make homework easier to deal with, for everyone in the family.

Take away the requirement to do homework

This is not always possible, but it can be the simplest way to solve homework-related problems. Talk to your child's teacher about whether they would consider assigning less homework for your child, or cutting out homework entirely.

It can help to describe the problems homework causes in your household, and make the point that an emotionally distressed and/or exhausted child will not be retaining anything they learn from doing homework. Having to do homework can also decrease a child's interest and motivation for schoolwork during the school day.

If your child's teacher is reluctant, consider proposing a trial period – no homework for a week or a month – and then meeting again to discuss whether there have been improvements in your child's mood, behaviour, and motivation at school and home.

If homework requirements are non-negotiable, here are some strategies that may work to make homework easier on your child.

Check whether your child's homework is too easy, or too difficult

It's normal for autistic children to develop skills and hit milestones differently to their peers – an autistic child might have some skills that are significantly ahead of their peers, while really struggling with other skills that their peers have already mastered. This often leads to children being given homework that doesn't fit their abilities – either it's too hard and they are unable to do it at all, or it's too easy and they're too bored to concentrate on it.

If your child's homework isn't suited to their ability levels, talk to their teacher about adjusting it. For older children who are struggling with a particular subject, it can also help to get your child a tutor to help catch them up.

Create a set routine

Doing homework at the same time every day, for the same length of time every day, can help children manage their negative feelings about homework. For some children, a strong negative reaction to homework is caused by the relief of no longer having to be at school being interrupted by more schoolwork – knowing that this is coming, when it is coming, and how long it will last can help to regulate those feelings in advance.

Your specific routine will depend on your child's age, how much homework they are generally expected to get through, and what works for your family. Some children do best when they get all their homework out of the way as soon as they get in the door; others need a break to do something they are interested in to give their brains a rest before starting on homework. Some children will do better ploughing through all their homework in one day; others will do better with frequent breaks.

Set accurate expectations

Along with a set routine, knowing how much homework to expect and what they'll need to do can help children to regulate their feelings about homework. Talk to your child's teachers about what homework is assigned each week, and whether you can be warned before any changes (particularly for older children who may be given bigger projects at various points in the school year).

Check whether your child understands their homework

For autistic children, understanding their homework means not only understanding the academic concepts they're learning, but also what homework they are expected to complete; how long written assignments should be; when homework is due; where and when it should be handed in; and other expectations that may not be clear.

If your child is consistently struggling with homework-related instructions, talk to their teacher about providing visual reminders – writing homework tasks and due dates on the board in the classroom; writing due dates directly on homework assignments; clearly labelling anywhere homework is expected to be placed to hand it in, etc.

Incorporate things your child loves

Having something to look forward to about homework can help children cope with it. Try playing music your child loves, or having their favourite TV show or YouTube videos playing in the background while they work.

If noise will be too distracting for your child, try having their favourite toy present while they do their homework (for younger children, frame this as having the toy help with homework – you can even have your child explain what they're doing to the toy as they're doing it), or provide a favourite snack as 'homework fuel'.

Make the environment work for your child

If your child needs to move around or fidget a lot, create a homework environment that lets them do that. Maybe they need to be surrounded by all of their fidget toys; maybe they need to do homework standing up, or jump up and down between each question. For some children, having physical activity incorporated into homework (“Run around the garden and then write the answer to this maths question”) can make it more fun and help them concentrate.

Some autistic children find any amount of background noise impossible to tune out – if your child has difficulties with background noise, try making them a silent bubble somewhere in the house. (This can be difficult or impossible in families with pets, siblings, and/or not much space; noise-cancelling headphones, letting your child work somewhere odd like a garage or garden shed, or making a game with siblings out of seeing how long they can stay silent can call help.)

Make it a game or a challenge

Some autistic children love getting to win games or show off their abilities – if this is your child, making homework into a competitive game can make it more enjoyable. This could look like setting a timer and seeing how many maths problems your child can solve before it goes off; challenging your child to finish a homework task before you’ve finished an unrelated task like folding washing; commentating on your child’s progress as if they’re in an Olympics race; or any other games that work for you and your child.

Be a body double

Body doubling is a technique that helps many neurodivergent people stay focussed on tasks their brains are refusing to engage with. It involves being in the same space as your child, and completing a similar task (if your child has older siblings, having them do their homework in the same space can help; if they don’t have siblings or the siblings are more distracting than helpful, try making grocery lists, doing your own work-related tasks, or finding any task that involves sitting and writing things down).