



# Supporting Families to Motivate Their Middle School Student During Homework Time

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Nearly every secondary-age student must complete homework for their classes, and for many students with disabilities, completing homework at home is a struggle. Students with disabilities often require substantial support to execute homework assignments, and this responsibility frequently falls to their families. This dynamic can create a stressful environment for working at home. Although supports may be in place at school to ensure a student's success, at home, families often wonder how to reduce stress and improve their child's success during homework time. This article provides middle and high school special education teachers and case managers with a step-by-step plan for supporting families and their students as they plan for and implement a structured homework routine with built-in supports.

*Amara is a seventh grader at Canyon Middle School and has a learning disability in reading. She receives reading intervention at school and participates in the general education classroom in all content areas. Amara's case manager, Ms. Rameeka, a special education teacher at her school, meets with her weekly to help her stay organized and to check in on her progress across her classes. At first glance, Amara appears organized because she keeps a detailed planner with all her assignments and due dates, her backpack is neat, and she can always answer questions about the details of her classes. Although Amara is organized and prepared for class, her grades are low across her classes, and Ms. Rameeka decides to investigate her grades more. Despite that Amara is organized, turns in her classwork, and passes most assessments, she has many missing homework assignments. When Ms. Rameeka calls Amara's family to ask their opinion on the issue, her father reports that homework time is "miserable." He states that Amara "wastes a lot of time" by "getting off track and distracted by other things." Her father shares that he knows Amara is capable of completing her homework, but he is not sure how to help.*

Homework, a cornerstone of the education system in the United States (Cooper et al., 2006), is present in nearly every student's life. On average, 96% of students from kindergarten to 12th grade report that they are assigned homework to complete outside of school hours (Snyder et al., 2018). Homework is especially prevalent in the after-school lives of

adolescents. Students at the secondary level are assigned about 2 hours of homework each night, with high school students completing an average of 6.6 hours of homework per week (Snyder et al., 2018). For adolescents, the addition of homework after school can be challenging, as there are many competing distractions during their personal time outside of school (e.g., seeing friends, participating in extracurricular activities, working at a job for income). Adolescents may wish to appear autonomous and take on more responsibility outside of school, such as managing their homework independently without their families looming over their shoulder, but they may need more support at home than they let on to complete and prepare their assignments (Epstein et al., 2021). For students with disabilities (SWDs), who on average complete homework at lower rates than students without disabilities, the amount of additional homework support from families may be larger as a result of disability impacts (Gajria & Salend, 1995; Langberg et al., 2016; Polloway et al., 1992).

### Why Fight a Homework Battle?

The debate over the merits of homework has existed for decades (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 1993). Despite varying views on the benefits and merits of homework (e.g., Baş et al., 2017), low homework completion rates are associated with underachievement at the secondary level (Baş et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2006), family conflicts (Anesko et al., 1987), poor relationships between families and school (Olympia et al., 1994), and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Karustis et al., 2000). In the classroom, homework can impact overall student achievement (Patall et al., 2008; Voorhis, 2011). As homework often contributes to a student's final grade, homework can directly influence end-of-year grades (Eren & Henderson, 2008; Ozyildirim, 2021), which increases the possibility of grade retention. At the high school level, academic achievement can relate to a student's graduation eligibility and college acceptance. Outside of school, homework can help build up positive behaviors for students, such as goal setting (e.g., Hampshire et al., 2015), problem solving (e.g., Epstein et al., 2021), and asking for help (e.g., Merriman et al.,

2016). For SWDs in secondary grades, who may have disability impacts that can impede their ability to complete and turn in their homework, families may need additional supports and strategies to support their child with homework at home.

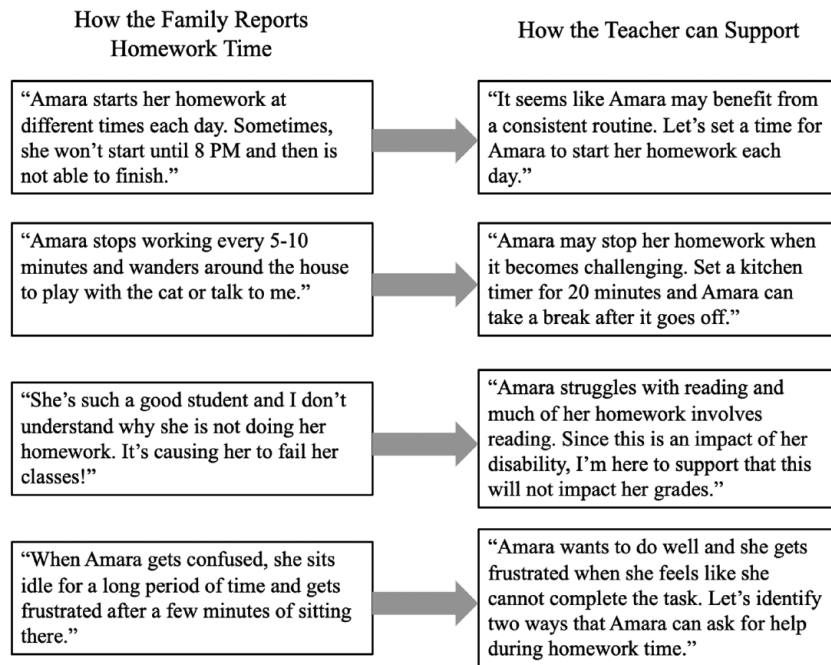
### Adolescence, Disability Impacts, and Homework

Although families may want to assist their student with homework, as students advance into the secondary grades, families become more unsure as to how to best support their student with homework (Epstein et al., 2021), which can result in families disengaging from their child's homework responsibilities. Many students without disabilities may be able to complete homework without additional assistance from a family member; however, SWDs, as a result of their disability impacts, may need additional support. For example, students with a learning disability (LD) are more likely to procrastinate in completing homework in their disability impact area (e.g., algebra homework if the student has LD in mathematics; Walker et al., 2014). Students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) often benefit from additional prompts or reminders, as a disability impact of ASD is self-management skills (Hampshire & Allred, 2018). In addition to difficulty maintaining motivation to complete assignments, students with developmental disabilities often have difficulty independently developing study skills that directly support the completion of homework (Hampshire et al., 2015). As many SWDs may need additional support, but families may not know how to provide such assistance, teachers are in a unique position to provide families with strategies to support homework completion at home.

### Supporting Families as They Support Students

Research has examined the influence that families can have on their child's homework behavior for over 20 years (e.g., Keith et al., 1993). Seminal research from Keith and colleagues (1993) found that family involvement in homework for secondary-age students was associated with an increase in academic achievement and school engagement. As homework continues to be a foundation of the school experiences of SWDs, researchers

Figure 1 Step 1: How teachers can support with identifying model behaviors



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continue to find ways for families to best engage with and support their child at home. For example, Epstein and colleagues (2021) demonstrated ways for families to engage with their teenage student in productive conversations about school and homework by giving families activities and prompts to do so. Hampshire and Allred (2018) used a technology-mediated intervention to support collaboration on homework between the school and families of secondary-age students with ASD. What stands out between the two studies is that the researchers recognized that families may not understand the content of the homework fully, but families are able to provide strategies that support their child in attempting, working, and completing homework. To support SWDs who struggle with homework, teachers can support families by providing them with a concrete pathway to support their child successfully at home.

To support the pathway between home and school, teachers can collaborate with families, to align student and family expectations, through the following six steps to determine an ideal homework plan between families and their child: (1) identify the model behavior for homework time (Epstein et al., 2021); (2) use model behaviors to create a self-monitoring homework checklist (Hampshire et al., 2015; Hampshire & Allred, 2018); (3) identify homework rewards to include in the homework checklist; (4) draft motivating, supportive language for the family to use; (5) finalize the plan with the student; and (6) monitor for effectiveness.

### Step 1: Identify the Model Behaviors for Homework Time

Research and recommendations for involving families of SWDs in the individualized education program (IEP)

process have increased in the past decade (e.g., Rossetti et al., 2017; Suk et al., 2020), and these supports have helped to increase the knowledge that families carry about their child’s disability impacts. Despite the increase in research, there remains a disconnect between a family’s expectation for their child’s performance and their disability impact (Falik, 1995; Sahu et al., 2018). Sahu and colleagues (2018) found that families of students with LD often have inadequate knowledge about their child’s disability, resulting in challenges between home and school. For students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), research suggests that a divide exists between the student’s family expectations and the reality of how ADHD can impact the student in a school setting (e.g., Bisset et al., 2021; Eisenberg & Schneider, 2007). As a result of the communication required to ensure that families understand how their child’s disability could impact their school performance, it is suggested that teachers support families in this crucial first step. To support families with brainstorming this first step, teachers can ask families what their child currently does during homework time and if the current routine is benefiting their child’s homework performance. *Figure 1* goes through

examples of how teachers can support families in these conversations.

*During a phone call with Amara's family, Ms. Rameeka helps them identify how Amara's reading disability could impact her homework time. Because Amara's strength is organization, her family knows Amara's homework will be written down and in her backpack. Because Amara delays starting her homework due to the amount of reading that could be involved, her family decides that they will support Amara with starting her homework at the same time of 4:30 p.m. after school to help her build a consistent routine. Ms. Rameeka helps Amara's family recognize that she benefits from breaks in homework. Her family sets the goal that Amara will work on homework for 20 minutes, then take a 10-minute break. Finally, because Amara's mother shares that she never knows when Amara needs help, her family decides that if Amara gets stuck, they would like for her to ask her family for help or to email one of her teachers.*

### **Step 2: Use Model Behaviors to Create a Self-Monitoring Homework Checklist**

When students engage in the cycle of monitoring their behaviors during an activity, setting goals for their performance, and reflecting on their performance to set future goals, they are engaging in the process of self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulation is an effective practice that has shown to be successful in increasing academic outcomes when integrated into academic activities for students with ASD (Carr et al., 2014) and students with ADHD (DuPaul et al., 2012) and when integrated into reading interventions (Joseph & Eveleigh, 2011). Self-monitoring can be especially helpful during homework because it requires the student to independently assess their own performance while working. Using the model behaviors identified by the teacher and family during the first step, a teacher can work with a family, including the student, to create an individualized self-monitoring checklist for homework time. An example of a checklist, along with identified goals (Step 3), can be found in *Figure 2*.

### **Step 3: Identify Homework Rewards to Include in Homework Checklist**

To reinforce positive homework behaviors, rewards are built into the self-monitoring

checklist. Some students and their families may not have difficulty identifying a few possible rewards for homework time, and other families may need more support. To assist families in identifying rewards, teachers can gather the student's input to create a preference assessment (e.g., Weaver et al., 2017) to give to families, or teachers can administer it to the student at school. From conversations with the student and their family, teachers can work with families to identify small and large rewards that students can work toward during homework time. Additionally, teachers can support families when recognizing when a reward may no longer support the desired homework behaviors for the student or if a student's check mark-to-reward ratio should be adjusted. For example, after some time, a student may no longer desire a specific reinforcer. When this happens, a student may be less inclined to engage in their homework checklist because they do not consider some of the rewards reinforcing. Teachers and families can always redo a preference assessment to ensure that a student has highly reinforcing items available to them.

*Amara and Ms. Rameeka sit down during one of her check-ins to identify some potential reinforcements that Amara could receive for completing items on her homework checklist. Amara brainstorms a few smaller reinforcements she could work toward by completing individual items as well as two larger reinforcements for completing multiple items. When Amara shows her list of reinforcements and her plan to her parents, her mother says, "I don't know; it seems like Amara is getting a lot of rewards for not doing a lot of work. Why can't she just have one reward if she completes all of her homework?" Ms. Rameeka replies, "Because Amara has a disability impact in reading, she procrastinates when homework involves reading because she does not enjoy reading. We must start small to encourage Amara to complete some of her homework. One day, Amara will not need as many supports to motivate her to complete her*

*homework!" Once everyone is on the same page with the homework plan, Ms. Rameeka schedules a follow-up conversation with Amara's family to plan for the next steps.*

### **Step 4: Identify Motivating, Supporting Language and Actions for the Family to Utilize**

As Amara and Ms. Rameeka experienced, families may need additional support to understand their child's disability impacts. For this reason, it can be helpful for families to meet with the case manager to discuss motivating and supportive language that they can use during homework time with their child. In the case of Amara, Ms. Rameeka set up a follow-up meeting with Amara's parents to discuss some language alternatives to use during homework time. To assist this meeting, Ms. Rameeka created a reflection tool, seen in *Figure 3*, to help with the conversation. The reflection tool in *Figure 3* helped to steer the conversation with Amara's family because it supported her parents in reflecting on the language they use during homework time and how they can adjust that language in the future.

In addition to discussing supportive language, case managers can also share ways that families can use language to motivate their student during homework time. One commonly used, research-aligned (e.g., Hollingshead et al., 2016) strategy that families can easily adopt with little training is behavior-specific praise (BSP). Unlike traditional praise (e.g., "Good job" or "Keep it up"), BSP links the specific behavior a student is exhibiting to the praise. Through this acknowledgment of behavior, families express that they would like to see this behavior in the future while rewarding their child because their behavior has been noticed and regarded. Examples of BSP that families can use during homework are in *Figure 3*. Practitioners can also refer to Ennis and colleagues' (2018) step-by-step

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Figure 2 Steps 2 and 3: Example of an individualized checklist with rewards

Amara's Homework Checklist	
<p><b>Rewards</b>                      5 checks = 1 small reward                      10 checks or more = 1 larger reward</p>	
When it's time for homework, I'm in one of my three homework locations: 1) desk in room, 2) table in kitchen, or 3) the kitchen counter (1 check)	
I started my homework at 4:30 and did not procrastinate (1 check)	
How many 20-minute work periods did I complete? (1 check for each 20-min period)	
Did I return to homework after my 10-minute break timer went off? (1 check for each time I went back to work on time)	
Did I use my strategies if I got frustrated? (1 check for each time I used a strategy) Strategies: Ask for help; take a sip of water; deep breaths; stand and stretch; look at my class notes	
All assignments are completed that I recorded in my homework tracker (1 check)	
<p><b>Small Rewards</b></p>	
Watch 30 minutes extra of television	Pick the next family night movie
Have an extra 30 minutes of iPad time	A fruit popsicle
	Picking car radio music on the commute to school
	Skipping dish duty
<p><b>Large Rewards</b></p>	
A weekend outing to a preferred place	Picking a restaurant for weekend dinner
	A new pack of art pens

Figure 3 Step 4: Reflection tool to assist families with supportive language

My student does this:	I usually respond by:	Why my student may be doing this:
Amara doesn't turn in homework.	After checking her grades, I confront her and ask her why she isn't turning her homework in. I get mad at her for failing and she then gets mad at me and becomes embarrassed.	Amara wants to do well, but she is afraid that her reading disability will impact her homework. Not doing her homework is easier than trying and failing.
Procrastinates working on homework. I often find Amara asleep during her homework time.	I often yell, "wake up" and then make her sit at her desk or in the kitchen where I can watch her.	Doing an activity that is challenging can be hard on a person's brain. Amara must work very hard to understand her homework. This can be mentally and physically exhausting. Although she should not be sleeping during homework, she should have breaks that support her fatigue.
What I'll do instead:		
I will remind Amara that she has many people supporting her to do her homework. Using the system set up by her teacher, Amara will write down any homework questions when she gets confused. I will verbally, positively reinforce her for asking questions, trying her best, and attempting her homework. To support Amara's mental energy, she will have a break every 20 minutes of homework time. Amara can spend her breaks as she chooses and will set a timer so that she returns to her homework at the end of the break.		
Examples of behavior specific praise I can use:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I appreciate you persevering through this problem! I can tell that it is challenging."</li> <li>• "I love how you wrote down questions to ask your teacher tomorrow. That will help you understand the concept more and reminds your teacher to check-in with you."</li> <li>• "You're doing such a nice job regulating your breaks and returning to your homework right when your timer goes off!"</li> <li>• "I can tell you're frustrated, and I see that you're utilizing some of your strategies to help keep yourself calm. Do you think you can check-in with your teacher tomorrow about this assignment?"</li> </ul>		

guide to BSP for additional implementation tips.

### Step 5: Finalize the Homework Plan With the Student

Once the homework plan is established, it is time for the family to ensure that their child is aware of all components of the homework plan and understands their own

expectations. As SWDs benefit from explicit instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2010), families and the teacher, if possible, should review the homework plan step by step, including how and when the student will earn the chosen rewards on their homework checklist. Families may need to review the plan multiple times with their child, model how to take a timely break, or engage their child in the process of talking through the

homework plan by asking questions that check the level of understanding (e.g., "If I sit at my desk during homework, I earn a check! What happens if I sit on the couch instead?" Correct answer: "I would not earn a check for this component of my homework checklist"). It is important to remember that it may take time for a student to feel comfortable with the new homework routine.

Figure 4 Step 6: An example of monitoring for effectiveness using graphing

Amara's Homework Checklist: 3/14/22	
Rewards 5 checks = 1 small reward 10 checks or more = 1 larger reward	
When it's time for homework, I'm in one of my three homework locations: 1) desk in room, 2) table in kitchen, or 3) the kitchen counter (1 check)	✓
I started my homework at 4:30 and did not procrastinate (1 check)	✓
How many 20-minute work periods did I complete? (1 check for each 20-min period)	✓
Did I return to homework after my 10-minute break timer went off? (1 check for each time I went back to work on time)	✓
Did I use my strategies if I got frustrated? (1 check for each time I used a strategy) Strategies: Ask for help; take a sip of water; deep breaths; stand and stretch; look at my class notes	✓
All assignments are completed that I recorded in my homework tracker (1 check)	✓

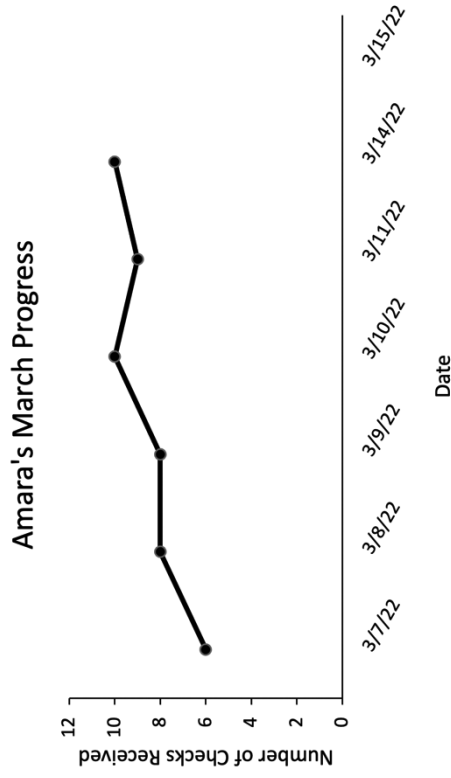
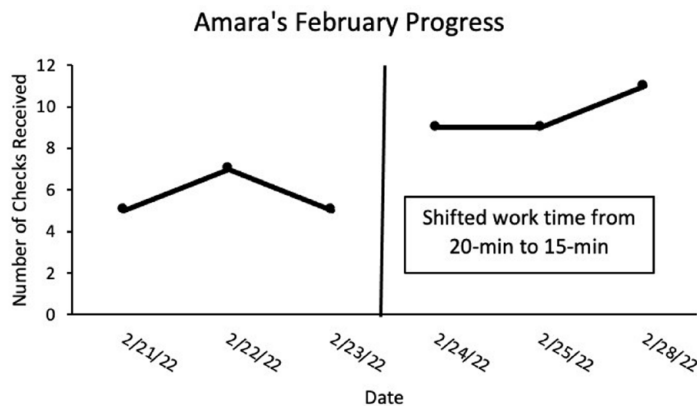


Figure 5 Documenting intervention adjustments: Amara's progress



Students may decide during this review and instructional period that they would like to change an element of their homework plan—that is OK! Teachers can help remind families that the student must be interested in the homework plan for it to meet the needs of the student. To support families in checking if the homework plan is effective or if it needs any modifications, teachers can collect data on the student's progress.

### Step 6: Monitor for Effectiveness

To determine if the homework checklist intervention is effective, or needs any adjusting, the support team can collect data from different sources, such as observational and performance data (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2016). To gather and maintain observational data, families can keep an informal log where they log homework behaviors. To pinpoint specific behaviors to monitor during homework time, teachers can work with families so that maintaining the log does not become an overwhelming task. Performance data can be taken directly from the homework checklist by adding up the total check marks received for the day. This total can be kept in a log or graphed by the student (see Figure 4; McDougall et al., 2017) to track the effectiveness of the homework checklist over time. Teachers can work with the student and their family to set performance for homework time to support with determining whether the homework checklist is supporting the student. Through pulling data from more

than one source, the teacher and family can more precisely decide if the checklist needs to be adjusted.

*Amara's family works with Ms. Rameeka for a few weeks to ensure that her homework checklist is effectively supporting Amara with her homework. At first, Amara is very excited about earning some rewards for her homework, but she quickly becomes frustrated and fatigued after working on one task for 20 minutes. As a result, she is not earning many checks to exchange for rewards, and her homework checklist scores are low for 3 days in a row. After modifying her homework checklist to 15-minute blocks of work, Amara's homework checklist scores go back up to above 8 points (see Figure 5). With this adjustment, Amara is able to earn breaks more often, which results in attempting more challenging homework and completing more assignments. Her success using her homework checklist is reflected in her class grades as well as her checklist data. Additionally, Amara's family reports that although homework time can still be challenging at times, overall, homework time is more positive because Amara is supported.*

### Conclusion and Next Steps for Educators

Teachers can implement homework plans with their students if they believe that a student may need more support at home to complete homework independently. Teachers, or families, may decide to implement a homework plan if they observe low homework grades or incomplete, including missing, homework assignments for the student. If a student is unable to have a homework checklist at

home, it can be implemented in a school setting (i.e., during a study hall) or after school (i.e., tutoring or after-school program). If a teacher notices homework behaviors that may need support at home and is interested in beginning a homework plan with one of their students, the teacher can begin the conversation with the family during a conference, IEP meeting, or phone call. The goal of the homework checklist is for the teacher, student, and family to create a cohesive plan that supports student independence at the secondary level.


### DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### FUNDING

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, through Grant H326M150016, and Institute of Education Science, through Grant R324A200012. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the U.S. Department of Education.

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TEACHING Exceptional Children,  
Vol. XX, No. X, pp. XX-XX.  
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