



Homework

Homework should primarily be designed to consolidate and practise skills rather than introduce new concepts. Students with an Autistic Spectrum Condition are likely to experience difficulty starting and completing their homework due to an inadequate understanding of the instructions, expectations or the purpose of the work task. This may be interpreted as deliberate refusal. It is essential to explain clearly and visually why homework is important.

The ability to transfer skills from school to home can also be problematic. For example, homework tasks require students to work at home on activities learned in the school setting. Although most of the materials may be similar to those used at school, the setting, time, and people available for support will be different and this may present challenges.

What does a student with ASC experience?

The nature of ASC is such that many students often:

- Demonstrate poor organisational skills.
- Are unclear about what is expected and need expectations spelled out very clearly.
- Have no way of predicting how long an activity will last.
- Are unsure where to start and when to finish an activity.
- Have no way of knowing or anticipating the order in which demands will be made.
- Are unable to when they will get to do what they want to do.
- Have difficulty sustaining concentration on tasks to demonstrate the best of their ability.
- Are uncomfortable with uncertainty.

Why is homework a problem?

Our daily lives are made up of an endless stream of thoughts, decisions, actions and reactions to the people and environment in which we live and are largely dependent upon a set of invisible yet highly important skills we call Executive Functioning (EF). These skills, which involve planning, organising, sequencing, prioritising, shifting attention, and time management can be well-developed in some people (think traffic controllers, wedding planners, etc.) and less developed in others. They are vital in all parts of life, from making coffee to running a profitable business. The skills develop naturally, without specific formal training, and we all have them to some degree - or at least, we all assume we all have them.

Imagine trying to navigate life when EF skills are impaired or non-existent, as they are for many individuals with ASC. Nowhere does this EF skill deficit cause more turmoil than in homework, producing monstrous levels of anxiety and dread in many students. Executive functioning problems make it difficult for many students with ASC to organise their homework, know where or how to get started and sequence the work in order to get it done. They do not know how much time it will / should take to do it or know when it's 'good enough'. As a result, when they then think of doing homework, they are often left confused and overwhelmed.

The following strategies are designed to minimise impaired Executive Function, accommodate the student's profile of cognitive skills helping them to complete their homework assignments with reduced stress for both themselves and their family:

A social story can be helpful in explaining why homework needs to be done.

More detailed instructions may be necessary, particularly when it is an open-ended task.

When possible, write up homework on the whiteboard at the beginning of the lesson rather than the end.

Clarify and verify what is essential and what is desirable.

TA or peer to check that the homework is entered correctly, including when, where and to whom it should be given when finished.

Some schools enter homework details on their website and this is of great benefit to both the student and the parent in ensuring clarity around the task and deadline.

There are many reasons why a student may not complete their homework correctly. Be aware of difficulties with literal interpretation. Some students when asked to find out about a topic will not naturally assume that they have to record the information. An instruction in the homework diary such as 'copy out the questions' may also be taken literally.

Many students with ASC have poor forward planning skills, extended homework projects may need to be structured into smaller steps and presented visually.

Ensure that the student understands that they only have to work for the given amount of time on a homework task. It is important to make it clear that it is not always necessary to finish the task, provided the required amount of time has been spent on it.

Problems with 'flexibility in thinking' means that the student may find it difficult to understand and accept that homework is not always given on the same day.

Provide opportunities and encourage the student to formulate their plan before commencing the homework assignment. This will help to ensure their work is coherent and logical, especially if the homework is an essay. If the assignment takes several days to complete, it is important that the teacher / TA regularly reviews the student's rough drafts and progress, which also increases the likelihood that it will be completed on time.

Special consideration should be given to the student's cognitive strengths and weaknesses. If the student's relative strength is in visual reasoning, then flow diagrams, mind maps and demonstrations will enhance their understanding. If their strength is in verbal skills then written instructions and discussion using metaphors (especially metaphors associated with their special interest) will help.

The use of a computer is beneficial, especially for those students who have problems with handwriting. Guidance and a request for the support of a parent can be helpful in supporting the student. Sometimes a parent is willing and able to act as an "executive" secretary and type the material for the student and then proof read their answers. Homework may be a collaborative rather than solitary activity in some instances.

A student with ASC may benefit from having access to a computer and be more able to understand material if it is presented on a computer screen. Material presented by a person adds a social and linguistic dimension to the situation, which can increase the student's confusion. Teachers should consider adapting the homework where possible so that a considerable proportion of the work is conducted using a computer. Word processing facilities, especially graphics and grammar and spell check programs are invaluable in improving the legibility and quality of the finished product.

A homework diary and planner can help the student remember which books to take home and the specific homework for each evening. Ensure they understand how to use the system. Sometimes students record insufficient information to be able to complete their homework.

Maintain consistent home school links whereby if a parent is unable to help the student solve a particular problem, they are able to contact the relevant person to support in finding a solution for the student.

Provide an option to complete homework during school time. It can be undertaken during lunchtimes or before or after classes – access to supervision and guidance from a Teacher or TA.

Consider providing a Dictaphone to record the teacher's instructions about homework, or the student could record their own notes about the homework tasks and listen to them at home.

Probe the student (1:1) for any misunderstanding or miscommunication – be specific.

Encourage a buddy system as a way of the student seeking further clarity around their homework.

Always set homework tasks within the student's ability and maintain realistic expectations.

Provide regular constructive feedback.

How else can I help?...

Remember that the student requires very literally defined expectation about 'what to do' and 'what not to do' with visual representation as a reference point.

Remember to account for the student's challenges with their working memory and the generalising of their skills – the student may understand in isolation. Transferring skills and referencing back and forth is challenging and simply retelling them won't make them any more successful. The student requires a more concrete path to follow, e.g. providing a visual flow chart / list of simple visual instructional steps will help to keep the student on track and more able to work successfully step by step through the task.

The student with ASC may rush through the homework task and not complete it sufficiently, forgetting the steps – many students tend *to do*, without monitoring how well they are actually doing it. They need to be taught self-monitoring skills and this requires multi-tasking and monitoring how they are doing while they are doing it. To do this you need to have a mental image of what an adequate performance is and what the finished product should look like. To further support the student, it would be helpful to provide a

visual model of the finished / expected product, the sequential steps of the task as a reference point and a self-check list to ensure each step is completed.