

Does Homework Have You Ready to Just SNAP?

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We in the Washington Metropolitan Area live in a wonderfully information-rich environment. In every area of life our children can choose from a dazzling array of extra-curricular activities and academics. In athletics alone, for example, the options include soccer, lacrosse, football, baseball, softball, track, cross country, ice hockey, field hockey, tae kwon do, tai chi, swimming, basketball, dance, volleyball, weight training, agility training, gymnastics, aerobics, yoga, and so forth. And each activity has different possible levels of participation, including some sort of year-round version for the very committed. Now add orchestra, string ensemble, band, jazz band, marching band, symphonic band, drama, student government, key club, and, well, you get the idea.

In addition to the long list of enticing extracurricular activities, our children must keep up with an ever more demanding academic load, certainly a much more rigorous course of studies than I had to contend with as a high school student in the early 1970's. It wasn't until I was a senior in high school that I was assigned to write a single ten to twelve page research paper. Students now begin writing research papers in elementary school. And there are SOL exams to study for; science fair experiments to design, conduct, and present; plays to rehearse, and a lot of daily homework to complete – all jammed into a weekly calendar that would leave anyone feeling dizzy.

So, how do we help our students navigate the rush of modern life so that they can benefit from the wide range of enriching experiences and yet avoid being swallowed by the frantic pace of life? One way is to **SNAP** — *Schedule, eNumerate, Assist, and Pack up*.

Scheduling

One of the difficulties of organizing is that our experience of time is often elastic. Some hours fly by, and others seem to crawl. Sometimes we are efficient and get a lot done in an hour. At other times, our output is much less. All this makes planning especially tricky. Though our perception of passing time and our level of productivity will always vary, there are some fundamentals for time management: make time visible, organize blocks of time beginning with the large and moving to the small, and plan for rest and for the fun stuff, too.

Help your child create a visual schedule, so that each hour is represented spatially as the same size. Such a calendar will help you to envision the big picture. Making your calendar on your computer using an application like Outlook or iCal lends the added advantages that you can set up a regular weekly schedule and still very easily customize each week as necessary and that you can program in reminders for those irregular items that you forget because they do not happen daily or weekly. Whether you're creating a paper calendar or a digital one, begin by scheduling in the essentials:

sleep, meals, school, study/homework, extracurricular activities, and transportation. A week consists of 168 hours, no more, no less. If you cannot fit everything into the 168 hour week, then something must be cut. Maybe only one sport per season is feasible, for example. Always build in slack so that when unexpected events intervene, you'll still be on schedule.

Now add in long-term assignments like research papers and science fair projects, which nearly always have clearly defined interim due dates. Add these items to the calendar, not on the date that they are due but on the date that they must be worked on. If interim due dates have not been assigned, help your child to create them by thinking the project backwards. Begin with the final due date. Then enter date for completing final draft, which should be at least a couple of days before the due date. Then the date for completing rough draft. Then the research days. Then the date for completing the outline. Then the date for choosing a topic, and so forth. Any time a new long-term project is assigned, interim due dates should be added to the calendar right away.

One way to help balance work and play and rest is to be sure to put play and rest on the calendar, too. In conflicts among the three, shortchanging any of them is a cause for stress. If everything goes onto the same calendar, schedule conflicts can be anticipated and avoided. Also, by scheduling down time and fun time, you acknowledge and honor your child's needs and desires as well as the priorities of parents and teachers.

Enumerate Today's Tasks

Let's say 90 minutes have been allocated for homework and/or study. Be sure to look in all the necessary places to get the complete list of tasks. Look at the agenda book, homework handouts, online assignment lists like blackboard.com, and at the monthly calendar for parts of any long-term assignments currently in progress that need to be completed today. Be sure to define all tasks clearly. Unclear definition of task: "Do some work on Supreme Court project." Clear definition: "Complete all written work on the first of the three Supreme Court cases." Help your child decide on an order for the tasks. Usually it is a good idea to begin with the most difficult items, so that as fatigue sets in, the tasks get easier. Sometimes, though, there are several small assignments that are best dispensed with before beginning a single, larger task.

When tasks are routine, like memorizing a list of definitions, or like reading a section of a history textbook chapter, it is usually possible to accurately estimate the amount of time they will take. For others, like writing a persuasive essay or like designing a travel brochure for the state of Montana, predicting the necessary time to complete them is difficult. In the same way that a gas expands to fill its container, such tasks tend to expand to fill the available time. Keep the time "containers" small by setting a deadline for each segment of the assignment – 5:30 outline, 5:45 paragraph one and thesis statement, and so forth.

Assist

The fine art of assisting includes avoiding the extremes of doing nothing and finding that after 45 minutes no work is completed, or of doing everything so that the work gets

completed but your child does not learn anything. Monitor the work by sending your child off to his or her work area with the first task and a time limit within which to report back. Set a timer that reminds you to check in if you haven't heard back. After each item is completed, be sure it gets put in the appropriate notebook or folder, and send her off with the next task. Keep an eye on the level of fatigue, and suggest a break now and then. Going for a short walk or shooting baskets in the driveway for ten minutes are good ways to give the mind a rest and the body a bit of activity. Breaks should not include video games or TV, though either may be a good reward for completing all of the evening's work.

If your child usually asks a lot of questions during the work or tends to drift off task, try sitting at the kitchen table together. Do work of your own, like balancing your checkbook, writing work emails, or paying bills. If a question arises, it can get asked and answered with minimal interruption. Such an arrangement allows you to unobtrusively monitor the homework, to model your own workflow, and to know when it's time for a break.

Pack Up

The final task of the day is always to pack everything away so that the next morning nothing is forgotten amid the morning rush. All completed work should go into a designated place in the binder or folder for that specific subject. Alternatively, some students prefer to have a single folder for completed homework for all subjects. Completed work for long-term projects should be put with all of the other work on that same project.

The SNAP method of arranging won't make homework effortless, but it will smooth the process considerably — and maybe keep your nerves from snapping.

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