

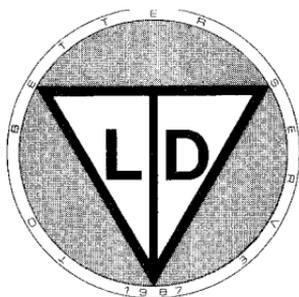
Helping the LD Student with Homework

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expanded version

by Suzanne H. Stevens



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Homework is the single most visible evidence of the LD child's lack of academic success. Every night his parents go through a battle that keeps their home in constant turmoil. At the beginning of every school day a zero goes into the grade book to announce his failure to his classmates. First thing every morning, the teacher's frustration with him is renewed before the lessons even begin. Lack of success with homework daily re-establishes the learning-disabled student in his role as dummy, misfit, and loser.

Yet parents and teachers rarely figure out what to do. The situation is allowed to persist, even as it erodes the child's self-esteem and destroys the patience and optimism of the frustrated adults involved.

This pattern is totally unnecessary.

Homework is the one area in which a significant change almost always can be achieved in just one semester! All it takes is one determined teacher and one cooperative family member, and a youngster's home assignment habits can be totally altered.

Teachers who want to put serious energy into reversing an LD child's pattern of homework failure need to start by analyzing their own attitudes about home assignments. They can't be expected to make a success of a program they don't even believe in.

Teachers often hate to adapt or adjust an LD child's homework. They somehow think it's unfair if one student isn't required to do as much work as the others. This attitude is based on the idea that work must be measured by the number of pages read, problems done, or questions answered. The standard is set according to the size of the finished product rather than the amount of time involved in producing it. Thus, a good student is rewarded for working quickly. In less than half an hour, he or she can read a social studies assignment, write out the answers to the questions at the end of the chapter, have a snack, and go off to play with friends. Meanwhile, an LD student is punished for working slowly. In two hours, he can figure out about half of the words in a social studies assignment, write garbled, misspelled answers to a few of the questions, have a tantrum, and go off to his room to cry. Rather than go through all that agony, most LD youngsters simply avoid the situation. They "forget" to bring their books home, or tell their parents they don't have any homework.

The learning-disabled student usually doesn't do any homework at all. Everybody else works. He does absolutely nothing besides play, feel guilty, and cause trouble. If the LD child completes tiny homework assignments, it is likely to be more work than he ever did before.

Homework is schoolwork, assigned by a teacher, to be done at home, under the supervision of the parents. It directly involves both the home and the school. If an LD student is to succeed with his homework, there must be coordination and cooperation between the parents and the teacher. Mutual understanding must be developed from the very beginning.

The First Conference

Before the end of the second week of school, the classroom teacher needs to join the LD specialist in a formal conference with both parents of a learning-disabled pupil. Through this meeting, the teacher takes the lead in establishing good communication between home and school. And she accomplishes three major objectives. First, she gains helpful information about the child and his previous school experiences. Second, she has an opportunity to explain general policies concerning the way she will run her class. Third, she and the parents can thoroughly discuss homework. Although it will be too soon for the teacher to give specific details on just how the youngster's homework will be altered, she should give the parents an idea of the general approach she will use. The mother and father need to clearly understand how often their child will have home assignments. The teacher needs **to understand just how** much supervision and help the parents **are** willing and able to provide.

In the case of that rare LD child **who** does produce homework, it is likely that the family runs a nightly study hall. This is not healthy and should be strongly discouraged. It is equally common to find parents who have either given up or never gotten involved in **the first** place. There are also some parents **who care very much** and will provide encouragement and supervision, yet who are not capable of supplying the type of **assistance** the child might occasionally need. And, **many** LD children have LD parents. Thus, it is very important to find out exactly how much help can **be** expected from the parents **before** the youngster's nightly assignments

are altered in any significant way.

There is no point in designing homework alternatives that cannot be carried out within a particular student's home. If there is no one available to provide supervision or assistance, then assignments will have to be adjusted in ways that allow the child to work independently. If the parents are accustomed to supervising a nightly study hall, the teacher can feel free to use the types of adaptations that call for "readers" and "secretaries."

In changing homework to fit the needs and limitations of an LD pupil, the home situation must be taken into consideration. As a general rule, it is best to concentrate on developing reliability and independence during the first two months of school. After the child develops study habits and confidence in himself, adaptations might be added that allow assistants-if such service is easily available in the child's home. But at the beginning, build independence.

Independence

1. Carefully consider the attention span of the particular LD child. Under the very best of conditions, how long can he work at one stretch? In the controlled, quiet environment of the classroom, can he work for ten solid minutes on math? How many minutes of spelling can he do before his mind drifts off to something else? For young children it will probably be two to five minutes at best. For the older ones, ten minutes is usually about the maximum.

Find out how long he can concentrate, and start with that. The student may be given three or four different assignments in one night, but no single one should re-

quire a greater amount of working time than is contained in one of his short bursts of focused attention.

Keep in mind that for the learning-disabled child, doing homework includes getting organized. Five minutes worth of actual work takes ten minutes of finding papers, sharpening pencils, getting to the right page, figuring out directions, etc. Changing from one subject to another means the student needs another ten minutes to get reorganized.

2. Be sure the student has the exact assignment written down correctly. Learning-disabled children have memories that leak. They cannot be trusted to remember their homework assignments. The most practical and effective way to work around this is to insist that the child carry a small spiral notebook in his hip pocket at *all* times. Every home assignment must be recorded in this notebook. And someone must check to be sure that it was written down accurately.

3. Be sure he understands the directions and has two samples to go by (one that was done for him, one that he did himself). The LD student's leaky memory means that today he knows how to carry in addition, tomorrow he doesn't. Just because he did work like this in class every day this week does *not* mean he'll remember how to do it when he gets home tonight. A good set of directions and two samples give him a chance to figure out what to do when he forgets.

4. Only assign work that is practice or review of concepts the child has already mastered in class. If he's just

learning a skill and is still having trouble with it, he shouldn't work on it without supervision. If subtraction problems with borrowing always confuse him, he shouldn't be expected to tackle them alone. As much as possible, assign tasks with which he is nearly certain to succeed.

5. Develop a pattern or routine. Learning-disabled youngsters thrive in structured situations. Doing the same old thing day after day does not bore them. In fact, it seems to make them feel secure.

In teaching a self-contained LD class of fifth- and sixth-graders, our day always started with a highly structured session of LD therapy. We did half an hour of tracing, copying, and handwriting; twenty minutes of phonetic practice and drill; forty minutes of sounding, blending, and reading; and half an hour of dictation, proofreading, and correcting.

By midwinter, I found the routine to be deadly dull. I thought of myself as some kind of a lunatic who hung from the rafters spouting phonics.

One gloomy Friday morning in late February, I indicated my boredom to the twelve boys in my class. "Well, guys," I groaned, ". . . you think you can stand it one more time?"

Bobby, a feisty and outspoken student, tartly replied, "What do you mean, 'stand it'? This is the best part of the day."

The other immediately chimed in with their agreement. "Yeah, we like this stuff."

"Ain't **nothin'** about this that's so bad."

"I'd rather do this than math."

Even the older, more sophisticated twelve-year-olds indicated that they found nothing at all objectionable about our morning routine.

Until that moment, I'd never thought about it. But my boys were right. Those two highly structured hours were the most productive part of our whole day.

In setting up a homework program for an LD student, the more steady and predictable the routine, the better. Ten minutes of math every night. (Every night means Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and **Thursday**—not weekends.) Ten minutes of spelling every night. Fifteen minutes of reading every night. Ten minutes of science or social studies or health every night. Help the student build up a system, develop a rhythm.

In **junior** and senior high, teachers need to work together to coordinate the homework assigned to learning-disabled pupils. If a youth has five subjects—English, history, math, science, and an elective—each teacher should agree to regularly give a certain amount of homework. If each teacher held assignments down to a maximum of fifteen minutes per night, that would be an hour and fifteen minutes of work, plus **organizing time**. For older students, that's a reasonable **amount of** time for the daily homework routine. A combination totaling somewhat less would be more suitable **for** younger children.

6. Adjust the assignments in size, not quality. If, in **five** minutes of time, a child is capable of doing **either ten** easy math problems **or** five harder ones, **sacrifice the** quantity instead of the quality. Assign **work that is** challenging and meaningful, **yet not beyond the skill** level of the student involved. Except for **special purposes** (like getting a chronic nonperformer into the habit of doing his work), do not assign homework that's so easy it's an insult to the child's intelligence.

7. Eliminate copying entirely, and **keep** writing to an absolute minimum. In an unsupervised study situation,

the LD student's weaknesses can make him so frustrated that he gives up in disgust. If it's necessary to assign some writing task, it's better to have him do it at school where someone is available to help him when he gets stuck, sympathize when he gets discouraged, and pick up the pieces when he blows up. Homework should increase learning, not frustration.

8. Give the student an escape route. Teachers will not always succeed in accurately predicting what an LD pupil is capable of doing on his own. It is especially hard to judge how long it will take him to do a particular task. When an assignment proves to be too difficult, the child needs a method that will gracefully get him out of the painful situation.

For children who can use a clock, a time limit is ideal. In the front of his notebook, the student should have a list of the maximum amounts of time to be allowed on each subject. If his routine study schedule includes fifteen minutes daily for spelling, the limit for that subject would be about twenty minutes. If any spelling assignment took more than twenty minutes (time out for trips to the refrigerator does not count), he'd draw a line, write down the time, and *quit*.

For those who can't tell time (and that will be many of them, including a lot of the older ones), a phone call to the teacher offers escape in emergencies. The child may not know how long he's struggled with some task, but he does know when it's giving him trouble and he's had all he can stand. If the teacher is called at that point, the youngster can either get help with the assignment or get permission to give up.

When homework becomes torture, students turn off.

If an escape route lets them give up today, chances are they'll come back and try again tomorrow. Sometimes children need permission to fail.

9. Always do something to recognize that the assignment was successfully completed. Homework does not always have to be collected or corrected. But at the time it is due, the teacher must at least scan it over, comment on its overall quality, and give the student credit in the grade book. Even if the LD pupil is the only one in the class who completed the work on time, and the due date is postponed, his success should be noted. Neglecting to give credit for home assignments gives **the** impression that they're not all that important. If their **efforts** aren't regularly recognized, LD children are very quick to turn off to homework.

10. Assign nothing that the child cannot **successfully** complete entirely on his own. If the social **studies book** is just barely within the youngster's level of readability, he might be using it successfully at school **where he can use** a neighbor to help when he gets stuck on a **word**. Adjusted assignments that are realistic in **the** classroom are often too difficult for totally independent study.'

¹ Much of the material discussed thus far in this article is reprinted from *Classroom Success for the Learning Disabled* by Suzanne H. Stevens, with permission from John F. Blair, Publisher.

The Second Conference

No matter how much help is available for the child at home, teachers should adjust and adapt assignments so that learning-disabled students are able to do the majority of their homework on their own. This can be done if the classroom teacher and LD specialist will begin the school year with an investigative attitude toward the LD pupil and his homework capabilities. By adjusting, revising, experimenting, readjusting, adapting, and trying again, the student and his two teachers need to find out exactly what he can and will successfully do independently.

During the first four to six weeks of school, parents should be encouraged to avoid any direct involvement with their LD youngster's homework. Their role is to provide him with an appropriate time and place to study, show interest, and offer encouragement or sympathy when needed. Other than that, they should stay out of the homework picture as much as possible. It may not be wise to maintain this hands-off policy throughout the entire school year. But in the opening weeks of school, it is highly recommended.

After the above suggestions have been implemented, the homework success project can proceed into a second phase. At this important transition point, another parent conference is necessary.

Because their role is vitally important in this process, parents need to be included in *two* beginning-of-the-year conferences. The first one is done at the opening of the year as part of the process discussed earlier. The second one needs to be scheduled for five or six weeks later. It is in this second meeting that the teacher and LD specialist

will explain the specific details of the child's school program and homework assignments.

By then the teachers have had time to get to know the youngster and design methods, materials, and assignments appropriate for him. They have also had the opportunity to give very careful consideration to the various homework adjustment techniques likely to be useful with this child. It is at this point that the school will enlist the parents' cooperation and clearly set forth the role they are to play in dealing with their child's homework.

The Homework Helper

After the learning-disabled student has demonstrated how much he can and cannot do independently, it may be decided that his needs and his home situation are suitable for a homework helper system. The person selected to act as an LD student's homework helper must have a cooperative, understanding attitude toward the child, must be available at regular, logical study hours, and must be willing to take on the job. One or both parents, a brother or sister, any relative living nearby, a neighbor or special family friend, a volunteer from a church or community center-there are many likely candidates available. The person chosen to supply this special service must clearly understand two basic rules: even with high school students, the helper will not work with the child for more than an hour and a half daily (less for younger children); and, always, the youngster will do at least half of his homework on his own. (Rules and guidelines for the homework helper are thoroughly discussed in *The Learning-Disabled Child: Ways That*

Parents *Can Help*, by Suzanne H. Stevens, John F. Blair, Publisher, 1980.)

If the learning-disabled student has a helper available at home, the teacher is free to use many of the following types of adjustments and adaptations.

Any time the child is given an assignment that is intended to be done with his helper, the teacher should have him star it in his pocket notebook and explain exactly what role the helper is to play. "Get your mother to read these five pages of social studies to you," or, "In looking up the vocabulary words, you and Barbara take turns finding them in the dictionary." Either the helper should feel free to use his or her own judgment on the type of assistance needed or the teacher should provide a reliable method of getting this information to the helper.

A simple code system can indicate the degree of help needed. When the student writes down his assignment, and his "good neighbor" or teacher checks it for accuracy, it could get one star if the helper is needed as partner, two stars to indicate a "secretary" or "reader" is necessary. Work to be done independently would get no star. No matter what method is devised, the LD child's homework helper should have the teacher's home phone number for emergencies.

1. A "reader" or reading partner

A good reader can cover many pages in a very short time. The average fourth-grader would probably need twenty minutes to get through the same material an adult could read aloud in about half that time. Thus, in adapting an assignment by having it read *to* the child, it

will not be necessary to adjust the size of the assignment at all. As much as possible, learning-disabled youngsters should be encouraged to do at least some of their own reading. However, the use of a reader is recommended for large assignments in history, science, and literature (especially poetry-poor readers butcher the rhythm, rhyme, meter, and flow of verse).

2. A "secretary" or writing partner

While still in high school, I had a part-time job working with a very bright ninth-grade boy who **was a total** nonreader. I was not his teacher or his tutor. **I was his secretary.**

In all of his classes, Rob did the regular assignments by having me do **all** the reading and writing. To do reports or answer questions at the ends of chapters, he **dictated to me just as a** business executive would to a **stenographer**. Since I **don't take** shorthand, I was often hard pressed to **keep** up with **the** flow of ideas that poured forth from my **student's quick** mind.

Acting as a scribe, my job was to **accurately record exactly** what Rob said. The school graded **all** of **his work for** content only.

Rob was a good student and made good **grades**.

As discussed earlier, helping a learning-disabled student write a major report or term paper is not a job for an amateur. Unless special arrangements are made between home and school, the homework helper should not be expected to provide assistance with assignments that require more than one solid page of writing. (Twenty English questions requiring answers of two to three sentences each-yes. A short story-no. Five discussion questions of one to two paragraphs apiece-yes. An essay on democracy-no. Notes on material read for a report or term paper-yes. The term paper itself-no.)

With work that requires writing only one or two words per answer, a partnership arrangement is best. Writing one to three sentences might work with a partner for some LD students. For writing paragraph-length or longer answers, the secretarial approach is advised.

Whenever the LD child is doing the writing, he must feel free to ask his helper how to spell anything needed. The word requested should be given immediately, dictated to the pupil in syllables. (The helper should not attempt to lead the child through some process that makes him try to spell all or part of the word. Unless specifically instructed to the contrary by the student's teacher or LD therapist, just give him the word.)

3. A copyist

Copying math problems from the book to the paper is often a routine part of the homework helper's job. For some students, an assistant might need to do *all* copying required in all types of assignments. In other situations, the child might be able to use a partnership approach or merely a proofreader.

4. A proofreader and editor

Learning-disabled youngsters need to be encouraged to do as much of their own writing as can reasonably be expected. Assistance with proofreading and corrections is often the only help that is needed.

Example A

A fifth-grader who's a reasonably good reader, who has some difficulty with copying and spelling, and who has no trouble with handwriting and math is assigned the following

homework: Read five pages of social studies and answer three questions at the end of the chapter; answer ten true/false questions on a reading worksheet; do twenty math problems; write one sentence with each of five spelling words.

The child could complete his social studies and reading by himself. He could also do a rough draft of the five sentences for spelling.

When his helper joins him, she **could proofread** and correct the sentences, act as his partner or secretary with the social studies questions, and **conclude** her part of the day's work by copying the math problems out of the book.

The student could then use the last part of his study time to work his arithmetic problems on his own.

Example B

A tenth-grader with little problem in reading and handwriting, but serious difficulties in copying, spelling, and punctuation has the following home assignment: **Read** a short story and write two- to three-sentence answers to six discussion questions; read four pages of biology, draw a leaf, label each part, write one paragraph to explain how each major part works; do a math worksheet; look up five words in the glossary of the history book and copy the definitions onto file cards.

This student could begin by doing all the reading on his own. He could probably write the answers for English and get the history definitions copied onto file cards. He could definitely do the math worksheet and draw the leaf with its labels.

When the helper enters the picture, she would start by proofreading and correcting the spelling and punctuation on everything the student had written or copied. For the biology paragraphs, she should act as "secretary."

Any time a learning-disabled student is capable of doing his own writing and copying, encouragement and proofreading should be liberally provided.

5. A “*typist*”

This is really a copying task and does not necessarily call for the use of a typewriter. But it is a specialized kind of service that will often be needed.

After getting their written work proofread and corrected, LD pupils are frequently told, “Now go copy this over so the teacher can read it.” That job is impossible for most LD youngsters of all ages.

Regardless of the size of the assignment, the student’s homework helper will have to provide this recopying service. Although the final draft might not be produced right before the child’s eyes, the time used for the service counts as time used by the homework helper.

William, an eleventh-grader, had a very efficient homework system. His mother helped him with history, English, spelling, writing, and “typing.” His father assisted in science, math, and copying. Although the two parents worked with their son separately, they never gave more than a combined total of an hour and a half of help per night.

A major term paper was assigned for English class in the spring. William’s class started working on the project right after Christmas. The youth’s teacher led him through every step of the process. Only three parts of the endeavor had to be done outside the school: reading, note taking, and writing the final draft.

As soon as the research began, William and his parents started cutting down his nightly help by five minutes. By the end of two months, the boy had accumulated three hours of reserve time for his mother to use for the typing process. (If it ran over, he had to work off the rest afterward.) William and his mother had a firm agreement: He had the perfect but messy first draft in her hands at least three days before the finished term paper was due. Either typewritten or longhand, she had his finished copy ready on the appointed day.

Their system worked beautifully.

If the teacher cannot find a way to get typing service provided for an LD student's major writing project, some other form of adaptation is essential.

6. A drill director

Learning-disabled students almost always need someone to call their spelling words out for them. They also require help in learning and memorizing factual information like definitions, important names, and special dates. Some of this type of practice is likely to be included in almost every homework session.

Through the use of the following technique, the homework helper can be of great assistance as the LD child struggles to get facts firmly planted in his memory. Develop a drill pattern based on a three-step process in which the child reads the fact aloud, *repeats* the fact aloud from memory, and *writes* the fact (copying, if necessary). For mastering spelling words, the same basic approach applies: The student should *say* the word aloud, *spell* the word aloud (reading it, if necessary), then *write* the word (again, copying, if necessary).

When practicing any kind of material to be memorized, always include the step of having the child write it down. (The children usually hate this step, but it is absolutely necessary.) The learning-disabled youngster is often able to spell a word with his mouth, but not with his pencil. He needs to get the "feel" of a word or fact before he can really hope to remember it.

7. An interpreter

Despite the fact that the teacher has carefully explained the directions and seen to it that the student has

two examples, there will still be many occasions when he needs someone to help him figure out what he's supposed to do. Although the assistant may not need to get involved with carrying out the work on the assignment, she will often have to help the student get started.

8. *A timekeeper*

Since the teacher adjusts an LD student's homework in accordance with specific amounts of time to be allotted for each subject, the child will sometimes need someone to tell him his time is up.

Regardless of the pupil's age, the home and the school must agree on the maximum amount of time that can be devoted to each school subject in one night. There should also be a specific time limit governing the length of an entire home study session. (This subject is discussed fully in *The Learning-Disabled Child: Ways That Parents Can Help*, pages 97 to 101.) These clearly agreed upon limits should be written down and strictly enforced.

Unfortunately, many learning-disabled youngsters are perfectionists and will drive themselves mercilessly. For them, success is not enough. They don't want a C + , or even a B. They want A's every time. They expect things of themselves that are not realistic. Unless someone stops them, they'll just keep on torturing themselves. It is the homework helper's responsibility to call a halt and say, "You've done enough." Situations requiring such an action will sometimes qualify as emergencies, and the teacher should be called for advice. If it is frequently necessary to impose the time limit, a conference with the teacher is indicated. When

the LD child cannot complete his assignments night after night, something is wrong with the adjustment and adaptation system.

Within each homework session, the assistant needs to supervise the student's pace. His faulty concept of time will not allow him to balance his work so that he can get everything done. Without someone to move him along from one subject to another, he'll tend to spend forty minutes on a reading assignment that should take fifteen minutes, then not have enough time left to even start on his math and spelling.

9. An organizer

The learning-disabled have such a poor concept of time (regardless of whether or not they can use a clock) that they usually need someone to organize a logical daily study schedule. Every day the helper should look over the list of work to be done and draw up a "battle plan." As in the examples earlier in this section (proof-reader and editor), the helper should say, "Okay. We've gone over the directions; now you go do all the reading and write your five sentences for spelling. Call me when you're done. And if it takes more than twenty-five minutes, I'll come tell you to stop."

Keeping track of books and materials is also an area in which learning-disabled children need patient, close supervision. They can be real space cadets when it comes to remembering where they put things. If left to their own devices, their books and papers will get scattered all over the house.

Forgetting to take his homework to school is often a major problem with the LD student. The homework

assistant should help the youngster develop a foolproof system whereby he will always remember to grab his papers and books as he heads out the door in the morning. It is the child's responsibility to get his completed assignments successfully into his teacher's hands. It is not the helper's duty to chase the schoolbus down the street every morning, yelling, "Have you got your homework?"

In the hands of a wise teacher, homework can be a great confidence builder.

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