

# Resolving Struggling Learners' Homework Difficulties: Working With Elementary School Learners and Parents

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**ABSTRACT:** Struggling learners and their parents often are exasperated by homework. They find it difficult, frustrating, and laborious, producing resistance, slipshod work, stress at home, and conflicts between struggling learners, parents, and school personnel. The author (a) identifies several causes of struggling learners' homework difficulties, (b) explains how teachers can help struggling learners in elementary school succeed with homework and help parents who want to help their child with homework, and (c) explains how elementary school teachers can use listening and problem solving to secure parents' cooperation and jointly solve complex homework difficulties.

**KEY WORDS:** assisting parents, homework difficulties, motivation, struggling learners

Doing homework can be intolerable to children who feel academically incompetent, frustrated, demoralized, and incapable of doing the assigned work. After having spent a miserable day in school, their teachers and parents now insist that they go home and spend an additional 2 or 3 hours being miserable. That many of these children try to evade their academic responsibilities is understandable. There is little incentive to children to record their assignments diligently when they believe that they will receive poor grades on their homework no matter how hard they try. (Greene, 2002, p. 109)

The professional literature supports this view (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001; Bryan & Nelson, 1994; Epstein et al., 1997; Salend & Gajria, 1995). Pollock, Foley, and Epstein (1992), for example, found that students with learning disabilities experienced more "substantial problems" with homework than their nondisabled peers (p. 206). In a national survey of parents, Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, and Jayanthi (2001) found that children with disabilities spent more time on homework and needed more help from their parents than did children without disabilities. Not surprisingly, parents of children with learning disabilities often find homework overwhelming (Bryan et al.; Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee, & Mellencamp, 1994).

Because homework is a joint effort, involving teachers, students, and parents, and because struggling learners are the least able to influence the situation in informed, productive ways, in this article I focus on how teachers can (a) help struggling learners succeed with homework,

(b) help parents who want to help their child with homework, and (c) listen to and problem solve with parents.

Homework difficulties are often caused by work that requires struggling learners to read or write beyond their independent levels. Difficulties are also caused by work that is too complex or abstract and by learning characteristics that interfere with starting, organizing, monitoring, and finishing work (Patton, 1994):

Children with learning disabilities are at risk for a variety of problems that are likely to interfere with doing homework. These risks include deficits in reading and math, poor communication and organizational skills, difficulty with tasks that demand voluntary, selective, and sustained attention . . . poor memory . . . and poor self-monitoring. (Bryan et al., 2001, p. 171)

### **Working With Struggling Learners in Class**

Unfortunately, the empirical literature on improving the homework performance of struggling learners is sparse (Bryan et al., 2001; Patton, 1994). This is a serious problem, as most struggling learners are in general education classes in which they get significant and increasing amounts of homework (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Bryan et al.; Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 1998; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Smith, 2004). Nevertheless, as illustrated by the following suggestions from the empirical literature on homework, social cognitive theory, and instructional practices, teachers can probably do a great deal in class to minimize homework's difficulty and increase the likelihood that struggling learners will succeed with homework (see Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001, for a description of Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, a highly organized, systematic program to involve parents in homework). Among other things, teachers can do the following:

- Stress challenging but familiar work that struggling learners can finish successfully without excessive, laborious effort (Ormrod, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). This includes making assignments short and limiting their number (Cooper, 2001a, 2001b).
- Design assignments to match strug-

gling learners' abilities to work independently (Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton, 1993; Polloway & Patton, 1997). This may involve showing learners how to do the homework, having them explain it and begin it in class, checking their in-class success, and, if necessary, modifying (e.g., simplifying) the work (Epstein et al.; Patton, 1994; Salend & Schliff, 1989). Often, it is best to assign homework that asks learners to practice what they have just about mastered in class (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997; Patton; Willingham, 2004).

- Make sure learners know how long the homework should take, how it will be evaluated, and when and how it will be collected (Patton, 1994; Salend & Schliff, 1989). Avoid confusion by giving one assignment at a time and asking and answering questions about the assignment (Bryan et al., 2001).

- Make homework interesting, relevant, socially acceptable, and worthwhile (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Epstein et al., 1993; Margolis & McCabe, 2004; Patton, 1994). This includes tying homework to discussions of learners' everyday lives, tying homework to stories about people facing conflict or overcoming challenges, letting learners choose one of several homework assignments, eliciting learners' suggestions about the kind of homework they prefer, using behavioral contracts, using reinforcement schedules to systematically deliver powerful reinforcers, and having learners survey or interview their families or read compositions aloud for family members' reactions (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Margolis & McCabe).

- Link homework to struggling learners' short-term (e.g., make the hockey team) and long-term (e.g., become a pilot) goals (Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994). Goals are what people want to do, get, or achieve; they energize and motivate people (Ormrod, 2003; Schunk, 2003; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Consequently, struggling learners are more prone to finish work they view as valuable—work that will help them achieve their goals—than work unrelated to their goals (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Rock, 2004).

- Use peer models in class to show how to do the homework. This can work

exceptionally well if models describe what they are doing and the struggling learners relate to them and view them as similar in ability (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000).

- Check that struggling learners correctly record assignments or take home photocopied assignment information, take home needed materials (Salend & Schliff, 1989), or have an extra set of schoolbooks at home. Often, this involves teaching learners to accurately record and organize information, use assignment books (Bryan et al., 2001; Patton, 1994), plan, and pack essential materials. As an option, place homework assignments, including non-copyrighted materials, on a class Web site or record assignment information as an outgoing message on a telephone answering system (Salend, Duhaney, Anderson, & Gottschalk, 2004).

- Teach struggling learners the study skills (e.g., alphabetization) and self-regulation skills (e.g., self-monitoring) needed to succeed on homework (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Dawson & Guare, 2004; Epstein et al., 1993; Patton, 1994; Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996). This may involve assessing their skills and providing months of well-planned, highly focused instruction.

- Develop after-school homework groups. The literature on peer-mediated instruction indicates that students who are properly trained and matched by personality and task can learn a great deal from one another and usually enjoy working together (Arreaga-Mayer, 1998; Harper, Maheady, & Mallette, 1994; Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001). Teachers can take advantage of this by forming after school homework groups that work together by phone, on the Internet, or at one of the student's homes: "Assignments and projects done with peers and friends help students connect, draw from each other's talents, and communicate about schoolwork at times that they may otherwise be at home alone" (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001, p. 190).

- Use shaping (i.e., principles of successive approximation) to gradually encourage improvements in completion rates and quality (see Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Maag, 1999). If, for example, the targeted behavior is "Ryan will earn a 'B' on five consecutive homework assign-

ments,” the work is at Ryan’s independent level, and the standards for earning grades are explicit, teachers might initially reinforce Ryan for each assignment that earns a “C.” Once he submits “C” work for five consecutive assignments, the reinforcement criterion is raised to the next level, “C+,” and “C” work is no longer reinforced. This strategy of gradually increasing the criterion for reinforcement—commensurate with Ryan’s successes—is followed until Ryan achieves the target of “Bs” on five consecutive homework assignments.

- Frequently provide feedback about homework and teach struggling learners to attribute success to personally controllable behaviors, such as effort, persistence, and the correct use of strategies (Fulk & Mastropieri, 1990; Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Margolis & McCabe, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Shelton, Anastopoulos, & Linden, 1985). Regularly using positive, specific attributional comments—“Ryan, your Mom told me you worked on this for 20 minutes. That’s how long it should take. Rereading to make sure your answers made sense was smart. Your effort and rereading earned you an ‘A.’ Great job!”—can teach Ryan to attribute success to factors he can control: effort, persistence, and correct strategy use (Dweck, 1999; Pintrich & Schunk).

- Frequently communicate homework progress to parents through assignment books (Bryan et al., 2001; Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Patton, 1994) or daily report cards (Strukoff, McLaughlin, & Bialozor, 1987, as cited in Bryan et al.). This is best discussed with parents at the beginning of the school year, when discussing homework policies and procedures and asking parents whether they want to review and sign assignment books or daily report cards.

- Frequently review homework (Salend & Schliff, 1989) and graph success (Bryan et al., 2001; Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; McCabe, 2003; Trammel et al., 1994). Combined with attribution statements, graphing offers a simple but powerful way to build an optimistic, accurate, “I can do it” attitude. If teachers cannot meet frequently with learners to graph progress and attribute success to controllable factors, they might ask a

school counselor to do so (Margolis, McCabe, & Alber, 2004).

Whatever teachers do to help struggling learners succeed with homework should be done in a pleasant atmosphere conducive to learning. Developing a pleasant atmosphere requires that teachers frequently smile, attend to students, listen empathically, use a pleasant voice, refer to learners by name, nod their heads affirmatively, and make appropriate and reassuring facial gestures (McCabe, 2003). Such characteristics increase the prospect that learners will look at homework more favorably, especially when these characteristics are combined with instruction and homework matched to struggling learners’ goals and functional abilities, instruction in positive attributions, and the ongoing graphing of learners’ improved homework performance.

### **Working With Parents**

Despite doing whatever they can to help struggling learners succeed with homework, teachers may succeed only partially. Greater success often requires ongoing parent support. Parents are often the key to improving struggling learners’ academic and homework success (Baker, 2003; Bryan et al., 2001; Callahan, Rademacher, & Hildreth, 1998; Christenson, 2002; Patton, 1994). They provide models, instill values, and establish expectations. They are a major source of motivation (Baker). Often, only they can provide the quiet, distraction-free place, the materials and structure, and the immediate reinforcement struggling learners need to succeed with homework.

Sometimes, however, too much is expected of parents (Allington & Cunningham, 2002). An often-asked question is, “Should parents tutor their children and teach them what they need to learn to succeed on homework?” For struggling learners, there are three answers. First, if parents need to teach their child the skill or information, then the homework exceeds the child’s independent level—the child has not acquired the skill or knowledge—and is too difficult (Patton, 1994; Polloway & Patton, 1997). Second, parents may confuse their children if they present materials or concepts differently from how the teacher does. Third, if tutor-

ing or doing homework with their child causes family stress and parent-child conflict, then parents should stop these joint activities (see Bryan et al., 2001; Salend & Gajria, 1995). Continuing these activities increases the odds that negativity, anxiety, and anger will intensify, motivation for schoolwork will deteriorate, and little or no learning will occur.

Despite these warnings, parents can do many things to help their child with homework. They can, for example, provide a set time and a quiet place to do homework, provide help when their child requests, and make well-deserved, encouraging comments. These, and additional things parents can do, are discussed later in this article.

To initiate parents’ supportive efforts—as opposed to asking them to become primary instructors—teachers can do the following: (a) initiate and maintain contact with parents, (b) help parents develop a support plan, (c) suggest specific support activities, (d) provide homework information, (e) ask parents to limit homework, and (f) invite parents to participate in a school-home reinforcement system.

#### *Initiate and Maintain Contact With Parents*

Parents of struggling learners want teachers to communicate regularly with them about homework (Nelson, Jayanthi, Brittain, Epstein, & Bursuck, 2002). They commonly complain that teachers do not initiate or communicate about homework often enough (Munk et al., 2001). Often, when teachers do initiate communication, it is to discuss problems (Allington & Cunningham, 2002).

To improve communication and establish a collaborative relationship with parents, teachers should contact parents early in the school year to explain class and homework procedures and to learn about their concerns, views, talents, interest, and availability. Whatever the nature of the contact—phone calls, e-mails, small or large group meetings, or newsletters with invitations to call—teachers should keep in mind that

[h]ome-school collaboration is an attitude, not simply an activity. It occurs when parents and educators share common goals, are seen as equals, and both contribute to the process. It is sustained

with a “want-to” motivation rather than an “ought-to” or “obliged-to” orientation from all individuals. (Christenson, 2002, Overview)

Teachers need to follow the initial contact with ongoing contact, such as checklists, newsletters, informal notes, phone calls, private meetings, and parent discussion groups. Contacts should define roles; communicate expectations; be clear, positive, and nonthreatening; inform parents about their child’s progress and about what happened and will happen in class (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Nelson et al., 2002; Ormrod, 2003); and give parents easy ways and good times to contact teachers. Such contacts usually go beyond homework and can significantly influence parent cooperation and academic achievement (Allington & Cunningham).

Being positive and nonthreatening does not mean that teachers cannot discuss difficulties. It does mean, however, that teachers need to put difficulties in perspective by also attending to the struggling learner’s positive attributes. Being positive also suggests that teachers’ first few contacts focus on specific examples of what struggling learners did well—“Ryan read to some first graders today and read two third-grade stories with almost perfect comprehension”—rather than problems. Often, years of experience have taught parents of struggling learners that teachers’ calls bring only bad news (Allington & Cunningham, 2002). Several calls emphasizing the positive might improve expectations and help secure cooperation.

To initiate contact successfully, teachers must respond to the parents’ availability, language, and educational achievement. If parents work during the day, evening meetings or phone calls will get far better responses than late-afternoon contacts. If parents speak little English, teachers need to speak the language or get a translator. If parents have poor reading abilities, teachers should not ask them to read to their child or respond to newsletters and notes. Instead, teachers might call them or develop a daily telephone voice message for all parents. And if parents had bad school experiences when they were students and expect disrespectful treatment and negative comments, several calls

from the teacher emphasizing the child’s legitimate successes and positive attributes might reduce defensiveness. In essence, for contacts to succeed, teachers must respond to parents’ needs.

#### *Help Parents Develop a Support Plan*

Early in the school year, teachers might meet privately or in small groups with parents who want to help their children with homework (Polloway & Patton, 1997). Rather than overemphasizing problems, teachers should first focus on the learner’s strengths and then help parents develop an easy-to-use homework support plan—a plan consistent with their preferences and resources and likely to avoid family arguments. Teachers should emphasize that they will be available to help parents, and, if needed, follow up and work with them to revise the plan. Ideally, parents should feel self-efficacious about the plan (Bryan et al., 2001), believing that they can implement it consistently and effectively.

As part of a support plan, parents might, for example, (a) schedule a daily homework and reading time for the family, when televisions, radios, and the like are off, and everyone reads or writes; (b)

prepare a well-lit, quiet area for doing homework; (c) request an extra set of books from the school; (d) provide short breaks after each assignment; (e) check homework daily, to see that it was finished; (f) sign their child’s homework and specify their child’s effort; and (g) praise their child for reasonable effort. These activities are supportive rather than primarily instructional:

The primary role of parents regarding homework should be to support and reinforce what is taught at school. If homework is properly designed . . . [it will lend itself] to this type of involvement. . . . Parents’ involvement in acquisition-stage teaching . . . should be discouraged. (Polloway & Patton, 1997, p. 93)

Figure 1 provides a list of supportive suggestions that teachers might give to and discuss with parents.

Although some parents may reject the support role, most will likely appreciate it, especially if they and the teacher reached consensus by analyzing the learner’s problems and listening intently to understand one another.

#### *Suggest Specific Support Activities*

If parents have the desire, time,

#### **Homework: How You Can Support Your Child** **Mrs. Marylee McCormick, 3rd Grade Teacher** **Hypothetical Elementary School**

1. Make homework routine: Have your child do homework in the same place, at the same time, daily.
2. Be positive about homework: It’s a chance to practice new skills.
3. Let your child do the homework: It’s okay to offer help as long as your child does the work.
4. Help your child decide the order in which to do homework: The order doesn’t matter as long as the work is done correctly.
5. Set a time limit for homework: If the work is too difficult, contact me.
6. Talk with me about homework expectations: Ask me about the time it should take and how difficult it should be.
7. Notice correct problems first: Give your child feedback that emphasizes his or her correct answers and the correct use of learning strategies.
8. Be prepared: Make sure your child has the needed books, papers, assignment details, and writing materials.
9. Recognize frustration: If your child’s frustrated, let him take a short break. If frustration continues, have your child stop work.
10. Reward the work: If your child’s effort is reasonable, let your child know that you’re proud of his or her effort.

**FIGURE 1. Suggestions for parent support. Adapted from “Homework doesn’t need to create stress for students and parents,” *SpeakOut: The Peak Parent Center’s Newsletter*, Fall 2003. Copyright 2003 by the Peak Parent Center.**

resources, temperament, and academic abilities, teachers might suggest homework activities that provide practice or enrichment without making parents “referees” or “traffic cops.” For example, if a struggling learner has a reading problem, teachers might ask parents if they want to

- read assigned materials or books to their child and discuss them;
- listen to an audiotaped book or watch a videotaped book with their child;
- read materials to their child immediately before he reads them independently;
- listen to their child read what she has practiced in school;
- do paired-reading with their child;
- take dictation from their child;
- take their child to the library;
- define and illustrate words, when asked;
- name unknown words, when asked;
- play reading board games; and
- review assigned concepts by showing and discussing photos, DVDs, or videotapes.

Homework involving parents should be easy to moderately challenging—it should not require frequent correction or more than brief, occasional instruction (Polloway & Patton, 1997). If moderately challenging, such homework can be highly motivating, as struggling learners can excel before their parents.

If parents volunteer to try specific support activities, such as paired-reading, teachers should give them concise, well-written materials describing the activity, demonstrate the activity, and be available to meet again or talk by phone to answer questions. To help parents maintain motivation, alleviate uncertainty, and feel self-efficacious, teachers might conduct several training sessions on homework or related topics throughout the year or help parents form small support groups. Often, such follow-up is important to build trust and help parents correctly understand and implement activities (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Baker, 2003).

One creative way to show parents how to help their children with specific activities (e.g., paired-reading, dictation) is for teachers to share brief videotaped demonstrations (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003). Rotating these videos among parents gives them concrete information that

may decrease uncertainty while increasing effectiveness.

*Provide Homework Information*

Teachers might ask parents whether they want to (a) have homework information sent home daily, (b) sign that they reviewed their children’s homework, and (c) note their children’s efforts and describe their difficulties. If so, teachers might discuss the benefits of homework planners (Bryan et al., 2001; Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Patton, 1994), interactive class Web sites, or photocopied assignments. (Web sites and photocopied assignments may be necessary if struggling learners have difficulty recording assignments.)

By signing the planner, Web site form, or photocopied assignment, and noting their child’s efforts and difficulties, parents communicate to their child that they and the child’s teachers are cooperatively monitoring homework. Generally, if homework matches learners’ independent levels, they will have few, if any, difficulties, precluding any punitive associations

monitoring might evoke. Figure 2 shows a mock photocopied assignment with a place for parents to evaluate their child’s effort and note difficulties.

By checking assignments and commenting on their child’s efforts and difficulties, parents give teachers some of the feedback needed to match homework to struggling learners’ independent abilities. Parents also give teachers an opportunity to reward learners for reasonable effort.

*Ask Parents to Limit Homework*

Teachers might ask parents if they want to limit their child’s homework, as only they see their child’s difficulties at home. Often, parents appreciate being asked to end homework if their child is frustrated or has spent reasonable time (e.g., 30 min) on it. As part of their request, teachers might ask parents to write a brief note or complete a brief rating scale, like the one in Figure 3, describing their child’s effort and difficulties.

To avoid assigning more homework than struggling learners can handle com-

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 4/20/05 Due: 4/23/05

A) Read pages 34 and 35 in your social studies book. Write a new title for these pages.  
New title: \_\_\_\_\_

B) The words below are from your social studies book, pages 34 and 35. Put a check (✓) in front of those words you think you fully understand and can explain to other students. Put a dash (—) in front of those words you don’t fully understand.

_____ 1. war	_____ 5. soldier	_____ 9. defeat
_____ 2. battle	_____ 6. navy	_____ 10. surround
_____ 3. victory	_____ 7. swift	
_____ 4. march	_____ 8. wounded	

\*\*\*\*\*  
Please check your answer:

1) My child made \_\_\_\_\_ effort to successfully compete this assignment.  
( ) an excellent ( ) a good ( ) a poor

2) My child had ( ) no difficulty  
( ) these difficulties:

3) Would you like me to call you before or after class hours (class hours: 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., 12:15 p.m. to 2:45 p.m.) to discuss your child’s homework?  
( ) Yes ( ) No

4) What number should I call? ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_.

**FIGURE 2. Mock assignment sheet.**

fortably, teachers might ask learners and their parents to record, for 1 or 2 weeks, time spent on homework. In departmentalized programs, teachers should share these data to avoid overwhelming learners. Such sharing is consistent with Nelson et al.'s (2002) finding that parents wanted teachers and parents to communicate "on an ongoing basis to keep on top of homework issues" (p. 384).

*Recommend Other Resources*

Many schools have homework hotlines and after-school homework assistance centers. Teachers might discuss with parents how to use them. If learners or their

parents are reluctant to use them, teachers might offer to visit the assistance center with them or join a hotline call. If parents continue to reject these resources, teachers should acknowledge their opinion and quickly drop the issue. Paradoxically, this can increase the likelihood of future agreement on this and other issues, as it communicates to parents that they are full, equal partners in decision making.

An increasingly available source of homework support is the Internet, which has numerous homework assistance Web sites (for a listing and user guidelines, see Salend et al., 2004). With the proper text-to-speech software and training, struggling

learners with reading problems may be able to use it effectively. For example, teachers or an assistive technology consultant might teach struggling readers to use text-to-speech software, such as BrowseAloud (free at [www.accessingenuity.com](http://www.accessingenuity.com)) and TextAloud ([www.nextuptech.com/TextAloud](http://www.nextuptech.com/TextAloud)). BrowseAloud reads aloud Internet pages. TextAloud is more flexible; it also reads aloud electronic documents, such as Word files.

Often, chronic homework problems are symptoms of educational issues that require counseling or an educational evaluation. If teachers suspect this, they should meet with the counselor or educational evaluator (e.g., reading specialist) to learn about the services and procedures for making referrals. Before making a referral, however, they should discuss with parents the possibility and their rationale. As part of the discussion, teachers should present parents with relevant, easily understood examples of the learner's work (e.g., a portfolio or an audiotape or videotape of the learner reading) adequate to justify the referral.

*Invite Parents to Participate in a School-Home Reinforcement System*

If modest efforts to improve struggling learners' homework have been ineffective (e.g., assigning interesting, independent-level work; starting homework in class; working with a peer), teachers might invite parents to participate in a home-school reinforcement system. Typically, teachers complete and send parents a short, simple checklist or statement evaluating the quality of the learner's homework; parents agree to give their child a predetermined reinforcer (e.g., putting a quarter in a bank, playing a board game, watching a favorite television show, having a parent read to the family) for successfully completed homework and to ignore unsuccessful or uncompleted homework.

To promote self-efficacy (i.e., a person's belief about his or her ability to succeed at a particular task) and avoid dependence on extrinsic, artificial reinforcers, teachers should encourage parents to pair reinforcers with task-specific feedback and positive attributions: "Ryan, your teacher said you did an excellent job on last night's homework. By spending 10

**Homework Difficulty Rating Scale**  
**Mrs. Marylee McCormick, 3rd Grade Teacher**  
**Hypothetical Elementary School**  
**Anyplace, NJ 08043**  
**mm08043@anyplace.edu**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date assignment given \_\_\_\_\_

Name/type assignment \_\_\_\_\_

Difficulty

1) Was the reading too difficult?	Yes	Maybe	No
2) Was the reading material too long?	Yes	Maybe	No
3) Were the concepts (e.g., subtraction) too difficult?	Yes	Maybe	No
4) Was the assignment too complex?	Yes	Maybe	No
5) Were the directions confusing?	Yes	Maybe	No

Effort

1) Did your child try to do the assignment?	Yes	Maybe	No
2) Did your child work on the assignment for more than 5 minutes?	Yes	Maybe	No
3) Did your child work on the assignment for more than 10 minutes?	Yes	Maybe	No

Is there anything else I should know to make homework more successful for your child?

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Would you like me to call you before or after class hours (class hours: 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., 12:15 p.m. to 2:45 p.m.) to discuss your child's homework?  
 Yes  No

What number should I call? ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_.

**FIGURE 3. Sample homework difficulty rating scale.**

extra minutes checking your spelling, you caught all the errors. Nice job.” As children routinely and successfully finish homework, teachers should ask parents to gradually, almost imperceptibly, replace extrinsic, artificial reinforcers with ones natural to their way of life (e.g., replace quarters with hugs or catching a baseball for 10 min) while continuing to make positive task-specific comments.

### Listening and Problem Solving

How teachers listen to parents in private or in small-group meetings is critical to helping them feel comfortable, encouraging conversation, securing their cooperation, and solving homework problems. The better that teachers listen, the more information they get and the more they understand, increasing the likelihood that they can appropriately address parents’ and learners’ needs. As Ormrod (2003) thoughtfully noted, communication “provides a means through which parents can give us information [that] . . . might suggest ideas about how we can best assist or motivate their children” (p. 503).

To listen effectively, teachers need to listen empathically. Physically, this requires facing the parents, leaning slightly forward, keeping an open, relaxed body posture, and making comfortable but attentive eye contact. Psychologically and socially, it requires respecting the parents (e.g., assuming their goodwill, focusing on their agenda), striving to understand the intellectual and emotional essence of what they try to communicate, briefly paraphrasing and summarizing understandings, listening for parents’ feedback to see whether they believe they were accurately and fully understood, and exploring their concerns until they indicate they have been understood (Egan, 2001). Although this can take considerable time, it need not if the topic is narrow—helping with homework—and parents quickly feel understood. If listening is done to understand parents, it can increase their trust of teachers and teachers’ influence (Egan).

Because parents often feel uncomfortable or intimidated in schools, teachers should focus on parents’ needs, take their cues from parents, and not dominate conversations. Stephens (1977) offered a simple but effective four-step model sup-

porting this: (a) Establish rapport: offer the proverbial “cup of coffee” or briefly make small talk to establish common connections; (b) obtain information: ask parents about their concerns or their objectives for the meeting; (c) provide information: offer suggestions to resolve parents’ concerns or to meet their objectives; and (d) summarize what was covered and agreed to: keep it simple, explicit, and positive. A critical fifth step, which influences the success of subsequent meetings, is follow-through. Teachers must follow through on each comment and make their follow-through visible to parents. This establishes trust—trust that teachers mean what they say, trust that the learner and parents are important.

Throughout the process, teachers should remember that they can never fully know what happens in a learner’s home and that his or her purpose is to develop positive relations with the parents and to improve the learner’s homework. Also, throughout the process, teachers should avoid educational jargon, be positive, listen empathically, and frame suggestions in tentative terms: “Perhaps we can best help Ryan by rewarding him at home and in school when he successfully completes homework with a ‘B.’ Would you like to explore this to see whether it might work?” Tentatively framed suggestions minimize or eliminate perceptions of control, reducing the likelihood of resistance.

If the homework situation is complex and solutions are not forthcoming, teachers need to use more systematic problem solving. The sequence is straightforward: Define the problem; list factors that perpetuate it; list factors that if strengthened might resolve it; list factors that if weakened might resolve it; brainstorm potential solutions, without evaluating them; critique and rank solutions in terms of potential effectiveness and practicality; agree on individual responsibilities; and schedule a meeting to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation (for complete explanations, see Margolis & Brannigan, 1990, or Margolis, 1998). Writing critical points on a chalkboard or flip chart for all to see and dedicating adequate meeting time (e.g., 50 min) make the process far more organized, understandable, and effective. It also tells parents that they and

their child are important, increasing the likelihood of resolution.

### Conclusion

If struggling learners routinely have difficulty successfully completing homework, with moderate effort, in reasonable time, teachers must address their problems. If not, the problems will likely worsen and negatively affect the learners’ grades, achievement, and behavior. Thus, solving homework problems must be a priority.

By designing homework to match struggling learners’ independent levels and functional abilities, preparing learners for their homework, linking homework to learners’ goals, and using shaping, feedback, and positive attributions to create an optimistic belief that success is likely, teachers can improve the likelihood that struggling learners will succeed with homework. Similarly, by working with parents who want to help their children, and jointly problem solving more difficult homework problems, teachers can increase the likelihood of success.

There is no doubt that this takes time and effort and that teachers and parents will not always succeed. If, however, they follow the guidelines and suggestions in this article, they should succeed frequently. By doing so, they can profoundly and positively influence the lives of struggling learners who suffer through and resist homework. By doing so, they can help change pessimistic “I can’t do it” attitudes into optimistic “I can do it” ones. Certainly, this augers far better for struggling learners, parents, and teachers than letting problems intensify to the point of alienation and disengagement.

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