

When Billy Doesn't Do His Homework

QUESTION:

My son Billy has had a terrible year in junior high school, mostly because he doesn't do his homework. I usually remember to ask if he has homework, and he usually says NO, and goes outside to play. In November we heard from school that he was failing — mostly because he had not done his homework. Billy has attention deficit disorder, and so sometimes we expect that he will forget to bring his work home, but it seems that he also deliberately avoids doing it, even when it comes home. Billy gets mad because nearly every night I have to nag him about getting started on his assignments, and get mad because he isn't doing his work and make him stay in for the evening. What could do differently?

ANSWER:

The issue you described represents a very typical playing out of the question, “Who’s in charge?” In this situation, it is clear that Billy is winning. Not only is he not doing *his* homework, but he is succeeding in having you assume part of his responsibility.

Is there a way out? Sure. One solution may not work for all, but here is a suggestion that requires some consistency early on so that Billy gets used to the idea that you are in control of establishing a time for homework, and he is in control of whether or not to do it.

The first thing is to speak with Billy’s teacher about your intentions of getting out of the middle of his homework problem. Let him/her know that your role has shifted to providing a consistent environment for study, and not to get into battles over whether his homework is finished. This is important because you need the teacher’s help in making sure that the expectations are reasonable for Billy, and because he will very likely resist the new plan and decide (for a brief period) that he is not going to do homework at all.

Next, you will need to establish a specific time to be set aside for homework that fits into your schedule. You may want to ask Billy’s teacher what a typical length of time should be — from perhaps 30 minutes to an hour or more, depending on Billy’s age, attention span, etc. Because of Billy’s attention deficit disorder, you may want to build in one or two breaks during this time period. Once you decide on the time, it should not be renegotiated until he demonstrates that he is successful in school.

Third, you will want to find a comfortable place for Billy, where his behavior can be monitored (usually not his bedroom). The desk or study area should be set up where there are minimal distractions (no television, games, etc.), and there should be no talking, unless he needs assistance, no eating, and no sleeping. It is a good idea to keep alternative books and educational materials on hand for those days when Billy does forget his work. If he leaves his work at school, the homework period can be lengthened by 10 or 15 minutes as a consequence.

DO NOT try to make Billy study. Instead, just enforce the homework time. Let Billy know that if his grades improve, you can decrease the study time, but if the grades get worse or stay the same then the time will be lengthened.

If you simply enforce that the time set aside for homework will be spent at the study table, and are available for questions related to the assignments, your job is finished. The purpose of establishing and monitoring a specific study period is to take you out of the power struggle you have been engaged in over doing homework— which is Billy’s choice— and to provide to Billy a consistent study time. Once the time is up, you should congratulate yourself for doing your part in helping your son to assume responsibility for his homework.