

# Homework

# Headaches

## How I got my special needs daughter to do homework

By Cyndi Frye

I was a graduate student in special education, who was taking a behavior management class and performing interventions for each of my twelve students at school, and I absolutely could not get my own daughter with special needs, Chrissy, to do homework. Her temper tantrums, when asked to do her homework, ruined the whole evening for our family. I would just sit there stunned that I, her mother (and an intervention specialist), could not find a way around her yelling, crying, and self-injury. When I needed to undertake a behavior intervention project for my behavior management class, I immediately knew that I wanted to target my daughter's temper tantrums.

Chrissy was premature (27 weeks, 4(1/4 grams) and has had 29 surgeries. Her special needs include mental retardation, hearing impairment, mild cerebral palsy, precocious puberty, microcephaly, and she has a Feeding tube. Chrissy has been in a special education program since her third birthday. Currently, she reads on a 3.3 grade level and is on a 2.5 math level. She just started fourth grade and types or scribes her work but can print all capital letters and numbers.

Before I began my intervention, I had to (a) define the behavior (i.e., temper tantrums and specific behaviors), (b) identify reinforcers that Chrissy likes, and (c) identify a method to track her tantrums. Then, I mentioned to Chrissy the Importance of homework and why her temper tantrums were inappropriate, I simply told her, "I am starting the timer for homework: if you can be at the desk in three minutes, you can record a smiley face on your chart." Chrissy was also told that if she could beat the timer and does not display temper tantrums for five days, she could pick a new book from my special bin. Chrissy knows that I use the bin of new books for special occasions. When she did not accomplish this task, she was instructed to say, "Tomorrow I will try harder." When she did accomplish the task, she was instructed to say, "I am very proud of myself!"

I used an academic reward (a book versus food or trinkets) because of my familiarity with research that found a third grade student responded better to academic rewards, I was interested in facilitating Chrissy's self-awareness and found that homework could be completed more efficiently if the student self-records his/her efforts. Self-praise was added because I found studies that showed students were pleased to receive

tokens, but learning was more rapid and complete with self-praise rather than tokens. Further, a multi-component intervention package has a better chance of improving homework completion.

This multi-component intervention proved to be highly effective at my house by bringing about a positive, peaceful way to initiate our homework sessions and by facilitating Chrissy's self-awareness and self-confidence. The intervention described can be adjusted in many ways based on a student's individual abilities. I suggest changing the length of time acceptable to earn smiley faces. It could be that it may take your child 5 minutes to physically make it to the desk (table, study corner, etc). Use rewards your child really likes, such as a Door puzzle or M&M's (and then eating them, of course!). Your family may already have a special phrase for work well done, and that could be used.

I encourage other parents to try it and would recommend adjusting it to your child's ability level and your family's individual needs. In conclusion, homework doesn't have to be a headache every night.

Positive rewards, clear expectations, academic prizes, and self-awareness can be used at home to make homework time a productive and uplifting part of the day's routine. •

Cyndi Frye lives in Sylvania, Ohio with her husband, Mark, and children, Paul and Chrissy. She currently works as an Intervention Specialist at Highland Elementary School. She attended the Intervention Specialist Institute at the University of Toledo where she developed and implemented her daughter's homework intervention program described here.

www.eparent.com/EP MAGAZINE • March 2007 41