

# Positive Behaviour Support

## Time Mapping

### 10 Steps to Help Organization Skills

#### 1. Clearly define what needs to be done.

Too often, people view organization goals too simply: "students must write the assignment in his planner." Clearly this is not nearly enough detail for most tasks and may not even be the best starting goal for a particular student. Go beyond giving out assignments; help the student understand how to also approach the task from an organizational standpoint.

#### 2. Move it with motivation.

Almost all students with organizational issues also struggle with motivation to accomplish homework tasks. We often don't realize this lack of motivation can stem from feeling overwhelmed by the task demands. Students with the greatest motivational challenges are often our most intelligent students (e.g. those with high IQ scores). We often assume "smart" means "organized" and say things like "come on, I know you can do this, I know you are smart." Yet, they may have the hardest time motivating themselves when overwhelmed because they have never had to work at learning. Learning just happened if they stayed attentive.

By adolescence, students need to appreciate that completing work - even work that seems somewhat ridiculous to them - has its rewards. It establishes them as hard working in the eyes of others, improves their grades and increases feelings of self-worth through meeting their grade level academic expectations. However, as obvious as this sounds, this level of cause-effect can still be too overwhelming to some students because it requires **delayed gratification**. Most students need to start at a much more concrete level of motivation, with very small work steps combined with reward early in the task completion process. For example, if a student cannot easily work for an hour, have him work successfully on a single part of the task for just 10 minutes before he gets to pause and congratulate himself. Self-motivation increases when students feel confident in understanding and accomplishing the task before them. If a student is not motivated, it doesn't matter how well you help to teach the student how to approach the assignment, they will not implement the ideas. Work directly on helping students tackle their issues related to motivation.

#### 3. Prepare the environment.

Most adults familiar with helping students "get organized" understand this point. Establish a

dedicated workspace for homework that includes the essential tools: pen, pencil, paper, etc. Color coding tasks, making sure the student has an organized binder, possibly access to a time-timer ([www.timetimer.com](http://www.timetimer.com)) create structures that promote success during homework time.

#### 4. Chunk and Time it.

Assignments that sound coherent and structured can still overwhelm a student with EF issues. For example: "write a report focusing on the economy, culture, weather and climate of a specific country." Clear enough, you think? Make sure the student understands how to "chunk" an assignment (break it down into smaller pieces) and how the individual parts create the larger whole. This is true for your whole homework/study session. 4 blocks of 13 minutes is an hours work!

Furthermore, once they "chunk" the project students also need to predict how long each chunk will take to complete. Students have a resounding inability to predict how long projects will take across time. This is an essential life skill! Consider this: Is there anything you do without first predicting how long it will take? We "**time map**" everything, gauging how the task will or will not fit into what we're doing now, an hour from now, later in the day or later in the week.

Homework functions in much the same way. Students are more willing to tackle homework when they can reliably predict how long they will have to work on the task. For example, some students may calmly do math if it should only take 5-10 minutes. However, for some students, the nebulous nature of the activity incites anxiety such that they may feel anxious for 45 minutes over doing a 10-minute math assignment. When the student does not - or cannot - consider time prediction as part of his organizational skill set, he is likely to waste a lot of time rather than use time to his advantage.

#### 5. Use visual structures.

As the school years progress, homework shifts from mostly static tasks doled out by one teacher to mostly dynamic tasks assigned by many different individuals. We expect students to self-organize and know how to juggle the many pieces of learning that make up each class, grade and level of education. Yet, this valuable skill is never directly taught!

Visual long-term mapping charts, such as a Gantt Chart, ([www.ganttchart.com](http://www.ganttchart.com)) can help students plan and monitor multiple activities. These bar type graphs allow a student to visually track multiple projects across time, determine when they are due and how much time is available to work on each. For example, a history paper may be assigned in February and due in late March; a line would run from early February to late March to indicate the time allocated to the project. A math project assigned in early March is also due in late March; another line would represent this project. Visually the student can see that two big projects are due at about the same time, and both are worth significant grade points. This then helps the student understand why he should not wait until the last minute to start one or both assignments. Gantt charts are frequently used in business, but have yet to make it into student software for school/homework planning. However, they are easy to create and use at home or in the classroom.

Visual structures can represent entire projects and then also be used for individual chunks, creating the visual organizational framework students need. Once assignments are understood as needing to be worked on across time, we can encourage students to chunk tasks to be worked on during specific weeks, then make related lists of things to do on specific days.

## **6. Prioritize and plan daily.**

Learning to prioritize is a valuable skill and helps the student get things done. Keep in mind that many of us make daily lists but don't always complete all tasks on our list, and that priority is largely based on the value we place on the assignment. Within the school setting, "value" is often dictated by the teacher. Priority is a factor of the task's value overall, its deadline and the time to complete it. However, just because a task is due does not mean a student needs to make a decision to complete it, especially if it is a low priority or low value task to the student or the teacher. For example, during her sophomore year in high school my daughter was looking at her math grades online. I looked over her shoulder and saw she had mostly A's and B's but noticed she had two F's. I exclaimed, "Robyn, you have two F's", to which she replied, "Mom, they were each worth one point. They were hardly worth doing." Robyn realized that in light of the many assignments she had to juggle for all her classes, projects with the least point value were not worth doing; she'd rather save her time and effort for the larger, more important projects.

With a prioritized plan in hand, many students will still struggle with actually working on the tasks. Some students with 'high' intelligence may have difficulty getting themselves to work on projects not of their liking. Their attention span may be no more than 7-10 minutes.

Help students succeed with their daily schedule by teaching them to take frequent small breaks at the end of each block. For example, a graduate student in theology found he could only push himself through 10-minute work cycles before feeling overwhelmed or internally

distracted. He used a **visual time-timer** and gave himself a short stretch break every 10 minutes. Once he completed a number of these short work cycles he gave himself a larger reward. The key to using self-reward is to **make sure the small reward isn't likely to be distracting or absorbing** (computer games, TV, reading a book). Instead make these small breaks quick and refreshing, just to refocus attention: sensory based activities (stretching or movement), a small snack, a quick trip to the bathroom or pencil sharpener.

## 7. Hunt and Gather.

Simply put: students need to plan time into their schedule to locate different resources to complete a task. For example, research at the library might be a "chunk" they plan for on their homework list (don't forget travel time!).

## 8. Consider Perspective.

Homework is more effectively completed when students start by considering the teacher's perspective before diving into the assignment. An assignment done well is one that meets the teacher's expectations and follows the teacher's instructions. A high school student went to great lengths to develop a computer program for his computer programming class. His teacher came to me exasperated, explaining that while well done, the project was totally unrelated to the class assignment.

Perspective taking can be quite overwhelming to many students with organizational issues. A strategy called "social mapping" (Winner, 2007) can help students understand how expectations, actions and reactions affect not only how we are viewed by others, but how their responses ultimately impact the way we view ourselves.

## 9. Communicate and then communicate some more.

Homework assignments often result in students needing help from others. Knowing when and how to ask for help can be challenging for students. Avoid assuming students - especially "bright" students - should intuitively know how to ask for help, clarification or even how to collaborate with others on assignments. These skills are not nearly as simple as they seem and may need to be explicitly taught. Tip: as students age into middle school and beyond, most students are turning to their peer group rather than their teacher for help. This helps to establish peer support networks desperately needed for success in college.

## 10. Completion and reward.

Having a clearly defined "end" to a task is important for the concrete thinking minds of students.

Completing a block of study will ultimately have a positive effect on students mood and that small sense of accomplishment will encourage motivation to continue on the positive and proactive approach they have taken to addressing their lack of study. **It will take time** however but this can all be mapped out visually for the student, ideally by themselves.

**"Planning takes time!"** This is a message we need to constantly reinforce with students. Whether students are using organizational skills for homework, doing chores, preparing for a weekend activity or something as simple as getting a snack, as children grow and develop, tasks become increasing complex and dynamic with each passing year. Everyone needs to work together in identifying and teaching any or all of the 10 steps mentioned in this document. . In doing so, we give ourselves the tools not just to handle study, but to be successful in all areas of life.