

INSIGHT

Parents and Friends' Association - Parent Forum

A BBC Parents' Guide to Homework and Study

Homework – it's one of those subjects that can cause angst for not only students, but parents and teachers alike. A topic that can quickly conjure up memories of our own time at school and one often associated with stories of stress for students and assignment fails for parents, some 20 to 30 years later, after endeavouring to complete homework for their son or daughter.

According to Director of Clearing Skies, Michele Juratowitch, it needn't be this way if we choose to see homework as an opportunity for children to learn how to establish good habits, and most importantly as a means of building their growing minds each and every day.

THE NEUROSCIENCE BEHIND HOMEWORK

According to Michele, the adolescent brain is constantly 'under construction'.

"Between the age of five and 20 there are some extraordinary changes taking place in the brain; and it's not until about 27 that a young man's brain is fully developed," says Michele.

"When we talk about homework or essentially study skills, we're really talking about the establishment of habits - the establishment of neural pathways in the developing brain," she said.

According to Michele, neuroscience not only provides parents with an insight into the inner workings of the young brain, it is also a great way to engage boys in their learning.

"Young people are fascinated by neuroscience. Thanks to extensive research, we are now finally learning about how the brain works and our young men are very interested in this. We should be encouraging our young people to learn more about their learning, as a way to appeal to their sense of meaning and to give purpose to what they are doing."

"We, as parents, also need to be aware of neuroscience when addressing study skills and habit formation.

"Some of the things we are expecting and wanting from our children, they are simply unable to do. Adolescents'

brains are anatomically and biochemically different from adults' brains; and even within this there are individual differences to consider.

"The frontal lobe, which manages functions such as impulse control, time management and awareness of others, plays a critical role, but it's the last part of the brain to mature.

"What we need most out of young adolescents may indeed not be there yet."

With this in mind, Michele's advice to parents is to provide their sons with 'scaffolding'.



In places such as Hong Kong, you often see bamboo scaffolds; they are strong but biodegradable. As parents we need to provide our children with scaffolding whilst their brains are developing, to help them construct a strong brain as they travel towards adulthood. Our job is to know when to step back or when to take the scaffolding down; to identify when our young people need to do or try new things.

IN THE ZONE

Michele also spoke about the importance of fostering a growth mindset, referencing the work of Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, Carol Dweck, a pioneering researcher in the field of motivation.

The idea behind a growth mindset is "...that we can grow our brain's capacity to learn and solve problems." Those who adopt a growth mindset are more likely to find challenges energising.

This is also linked to self-efficacy, a byproduct of encountering challenge, persisting with tasks and coming out with the belief that 'Ah I can do that!'

"When it comes to study or homework, we need boys to focus on effort, not necessarily the outcome. As parents it's important to look at how much effort your son is putting in and to acknowledge that accordingly.



Self-efficacy builds success. For parents this means supporting boys in their study habits and with assignments, but not doing the work for them. It's important that boys, through experience, build belief in their own abilities."

There are three zones in which students typically sit when it comes to learning and self development - the comfort, stretch and panic zones.

"Many boys like to sit in the comfort zone and when they encounter challenge may become quite anxious. The best learning, however, takes place in the stretch zone," explains Michele, who likens this zone to striving for a goal which seems just beyond reach and stretching out of one's comfort zone to achieve it.

"It's a fine balance and parents have a critical role to play in helping boys to find their stretch zone. If unsure, liaise with your son's teachers, ask them what they feel represents your son's stretch zone.

"Your son should be encountering incremental challenge, and it's important that they start to understand that effort equals results and not intelligence equals effortlessness. Sport is a great place for them to learn this lesson.

"The most important thing to remember is to encourage persistence. By doing this you are developing the brain structure and a personality which will be beneficial to

them as adults. When we swoop in and save our young people we are doing them a disservice. Certainly support them, scaffold them, discuss it with them, suggest they talk to their teacher, but do not rescue them!

"If your son starts to show signs of being stressed about homework or study, the best thing you can do is remain calm. When they are in meltdown their logical brain is not functioning and they'll need yours to fill the void."

SOME PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR ASSISTING YOUR SON WITH STUDY:

Reinforce and reward effort and active learning.

Discuss with your son how memory works.

Encourage your son to have a go at mind mapping.

Support imaginative and humorous memory strategies.

Times have changed - practices such as listening to music, which may have been taboo when we were at school, are now commonplace. Students often use music as white noise; keep this in mind if your son requests some music while studying.

Encourage fun and novelty in learning.

Discuss and model how you manage a big task; be explicit about the tasks you would undertake.

Acknowledge progress and incremental gains.

BRAIN FIT

Just as racing cars need high octane fuel; so do racing bodies and brains.

It's important to get the basics right when it comes to fostering good study routines: nutrition, sleep, exercise, positive communication, nurture and acceptance, health (physical and mental), a specified place and time to study and hydration all have a role to play.

THE PARENT PARTNERSHIP

In support of Michele's insights, BBC staff also spoke about the importance of the partnership between school and home.

"We have a number of structures in place to support you in supporting your son," said Deputy Headmaster, Kyle Thompson.

"We are always here to assist, if you have any concerns or simply a few questions, I would encourage you to pick up the phone, call your son's Housemaster, myself, or our Head of Teaching and Learning. We are all accessible and committed to fostering a strong partnership with parents," he said.

"Many of us are parents ourselves. When we are making decisions and working with your boy, we will often approach it with this perspective in mind."

ACTIVE LEARNERS

Head of Teaching and Learning, Barry Dean, also spoke of the importance of fostering a growth mindset.

"As educators, our expectation is that your son is always capable of learning. We expect great things from our boys and it's important that we share this with them also. It may make them feel uncomfortable to begin with, but it is never ok for us, as educators, to see boys as only being able to achieve at a certain level," said Barry.

"I like to refer to homework as home learning and as

boys reach the Middle and Senior School years, they should be starting to engage in deeper learning.

"At this stage of their schooling, we encourage boys to take ownership of their learning by routinely reflecting on what has happened in their lessons during the day as part of their study.

"Tools such as the Student Planner, assist boys in focusing their efforts and recording their thoughts.

"When boys come and see me to discuss academic pathways, I'll often ask them if they've read a book recently. Most eagerly reply with yes, to which I ask them a series of questions about the novel - the plot, favourite character, its genre. They can usually readily recall all of these details in depth and it illustrates to them the importance of not just merely noting and memorising content, but the need to understand it. If they understand the work they are being taught it becomes a case of refreshing when preparing for an exam, and not cramming in revisions for six week's worth of work.

"At this level, our role is to help boys set effective, clear and measurable goals. We do this by providing opportunities for them to identify specific areas for improvement. Instead of having boys set goals such as 'to listen more', I'll often say to boys - talk to your teacher, if you got a B and are aiming for an A, ask them what an A would look like, what would it involve and use this information to inform your goal setting."

We thank Michele for allowing us to share her insights from this P&F Parent Forum.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

TED TALK - CAROL DWECK: THE POWER OF BELIEVING YOU CAN IMPROVE

www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve?language=en

CLEARING SKIES

www.clearingskies.com.au

BBC PARENT CONEQT

Boys and parents can access a number of study resources via CONEQT, including peer generated advice and tips. These can be found under 'Documents'.

