

HOMework ... A LESSON IN FRUSTRATION

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Over the past eight years, I have learned to hate the concept of homework for my son who has PWS. He is now entering eighth grade. It has only been within the past two years that I have been successful in stopping this practice. It was either stop it or allow it to destroy our family time. The following editorial article is my family's view on this common educational practice. As my son grew older, the challenges of homework grew more intense. There may be students who have PWS and families who do not face this challenge. But for those of us who do ... this article is for you.

Homework is a concept or task that all of us experienced as a child. A teacher taught us the material; we performed in-class exercises; and then we practiced what we learned in out-of-class work. Homework can teach many students responsibility and accountability. It can help the student transfer the learning process from school into the home environment. For many students with PWS, however, transferring or generalizing what is taught in school to the home is the difficult part. Homework can create at-home chaos and emotional upheaval for the family.

Transferring learning from one environment to another is a common challenge that many students who have cognitive or learning differences experience. What that means is that a child may seem to have a clear understanding of a concept or task at school, but when he or she is asked to perform that task outside of the area in which they learned it, they are often unable to do so. Add to that the fact that many of the methods by which we were taught are not the same methods used to teach our children today. So when well-meaning parents try to reinforce or re-teach a concept during homework time, the child with PWS becomes confused and anxious because the parent is explaining things in a new or different way. Battle can then begin when the student with PWS wants to complete the assignment but the parent lacks the expertise to

teach the material in a consistent manner.

Many students with PWS often do not see parents as teachers (even though that can be one of our undercover primary responsibilities). As parents we are very aware that many children and adults with this disability rely on the "expert" or "boss" in a situation for the final decision. Parents are not often viewed as the math (or reading or science ...) expert.



We know that many people who have PWS are **visual learners**. We also know that they have **poor auditory short-term memory**. If exact instructions or assignments are not clearly written down, the student often can't remember what or how to

complete the work. The parent is often placed in a "no win" situation – the parent's word against the child's word. As emotions escalate, logic and learning are lost. The end result is an evening of frustration and tears.

Many students with PWS work very hard all day long to stay focused and in control. They are faced with many challenges academically, behaviorally, and socially. They view home as a place to unwind, relax, and work on home-related activities. When the task of homework faces many of these children, they can quickly escalate to tears, tantrums or both. I have called teachers at home during these times to let them briefly hear and experience all that can go into a "simple

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misunderstanding.”

Siblings often try to help out as well. This is especially true when the sibling is older than the child with PWS. However, the younger sibling quickly surpasses the older child in the area of academics. At times this situation can be very successful. There are other times when the whole household gets pulled into the emotions that accompany misunderstanding.

I have heard parents remark that if their child did not do homework they would be “giving up on” him or her. I strongly believe that we are not giving up on our children when we ask for sanity and peace in our homes. Homework often interferes with our ability to keep our family life under less stress. We face so many challenges; out-of-school work should not be one of them.

Parents become experts at interjecting learning so that the child is unaware of what we are doing. This is a strategy not unique to parenting a child who has PWS. We often use this on all of our children. We “sneak in” ways for our child to use math skills. “We have four people eating supper tonight, and they each get two dinner rolls. How many dinner rolls should we cook?” We also utilize the news or favorite TV show to point out geographic locations. Mind you, we must be very clever and sneaky in doing this teaching.

I do feel that home should be the place where

we teach home-related responsibilities and expand upon social opportunities. We should be teaching and reinforcing grooming and household tasks. As the “parent-teacher,” we are responsible for teaching bathing and other hygiene tasks. We also instruct on bed making, laundry, and cleaning responsibilities. Finding appropriate recreational opportunities is also a job we undertake.

I have always been willing to assist in “homework” such as a trip to the library to obtain a good book for recreational reading. I have also been willing to provide a structured time with my son and a few friends so that he can expand his social skills. Inviting friends for a visit can teach many valuable lessons – phone skills, speech and language skills, sharing, as well as many other life skills.

When we look at our own work commitments, we all become a bit cranky when we start to do too much “work” during our family time. Most children with PWS have some degree of cognitive (learning) and/or behavior limitations. They need to have expectations in the area of homework modified – eliminated. As the child and family advocate, we need to communicate the need for home time to be a time of positive social and leisure opportunities. Educators need to support the separation of schoolwork and homework. We are not giving up; we are focusing on different yet very important areas of our child’s learning.