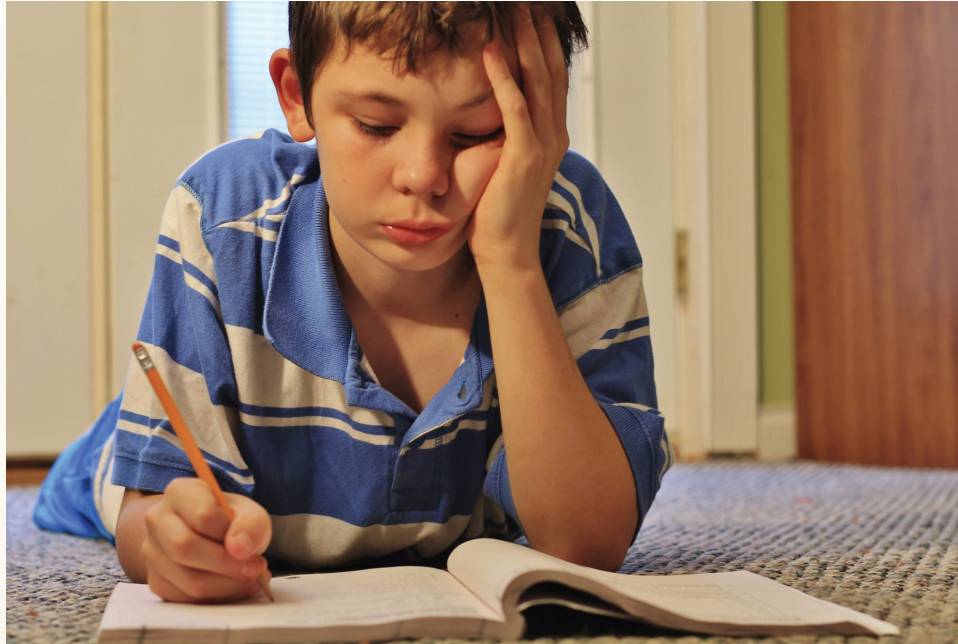


# Top **5** Homework Frustrations —and Fixes for Each



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From the ADHD Experts at

**ADDITUDE**

Strategies and Support *for* ADHD & LD

# ADDITUDE

## Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—  
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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# Top 5 Homework Frustrations — and Fixes for Each

Specific solutions for your child's very specific homework challenges, from distractibility to disorganization to frustration and beyond.

BY ANN DOLIN, M.ED.

## WHAT IS YOUR CHILD'S HOMEWORK STYLE?

Most kids who struggle with homework are struggling for specific reasons. Some are disorganized; some are easily frustrated; others rush. Does your child fit any of these common profiles?

### DISORGANIZED DANNY

Many children with ADHD have difficulty with paper flow, meaning they can't keep track of the assignments coming in and out. Let's call this child "Disorganized Danny." Dealing with his messy binder can be frustrating for parent and child alike — particularly when the homework is completed and then lost before being turned in!

For Disorganized Danny, the key is to **treat organization like a subject**. Instead of kicking off homework time with a math assignment or a vocab list, start by dedicating a few minutes to organization. Go through your child's binder with him, sorting through papers and working together on some organizational strategies. If your child struggles to file papers in a 3-ring binder, for example, ask her if she'd like to try an **accordion folder** instead — and teach her how to use it properly.

Also, use a **launching pad** to help Danny handle chaotic mornings. Each night, have your child place everything for school — backpack, library books,

For more organizing tips, read "The Daily Habits of Organized Kids," at <http://additude/nr>

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sports equipment, etc. — in a box placed by the front door. When the child leaves the next morning, he has everything he needs — and can “launch” into the day in an organized fashion.

Organization won’t work unless it’s practiced consistently. With this in mind, Disorganized Danny should conduct a **clean sweep** once a week. Every Sunday for 20 minutes your child sits and organizes his binder — while you sort through your purse or the junk drawer. Everybody does something to maintain organization, and your kid gets in the habit of keeping his school things tidy.

## PROCRASTINATING PENNY

We also have kids who tend to procrastinate — “Procrastinating Penny,” let’s call her. We often see this child’s tendency to put off homework assignments as a character flaw; we assume she “just doesn’t want to.” But, in reality, in many cases the child wants to start — she just feels overwhelmed or underprepared.

To help children who procrastinate, first **lower the barrier to entry**. What does this mean? Make starting homework so easy that anyone can do it — even Procrastinating Penny. There are two main ways to do this:

1. *By task*: Pick one small task that your child can do to get started. If he’s been assigned an essay, have him start by writing the title page. If she’s been assigned a math worksheet with 20 problems, get her to complete the first 2 — then follow up with a short break.
2. *By time*: Some children need a timer. I find it’s best to use 10 minutes — I call it the “Tolerable 10.” Just tell your child, “Okay just focus as hard as you can, as best as you can, for just 10 minutes.” Once time is up, allow him to walk a lap around the living room or do a quick stretch.

Whether motivated **by task** or **by time**, your child will see that once the barrier to entry has been lowered, the job isn’t really that hard.

Procrastinating Penny often doesn’t know how much time to dedicate to a long-term assignment — and ends up doing the whole thing in a mad rush the night before it’s due. As a parent, you need to help Penny understand time in a more concrete way. Try using a simple reward system to motivate your child to complete small parts of the project. For example, take a large Tootsie Roll and break it into four parts, and say to your child, “What are four things you need to do to get this project done?” Once she’s identified four reasonable steps, explain that you’ll reward her with one piece of the Tootsie Roll each time a step is completed. Remember, we’re not trying to bribe our kids. We just want to help them think in steps, which is super valuable for long-term projects.

**On your mark, get set, work! Find additional strategies to get kids to start their homework at a reasonable time, at <http://additu.de/start-hwk>**

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## DISTRACTIBLE DAVID

Since inattention is a core ADHD symptom, it makes sense that a lot of our kids are distractible during homework time — let's call these children “Distractable David.” Distractibility comes in two forms: We have our fidgeters, and we have our daydreamers.

**Fidgety kids** are always moving, like little Energizer bunnies. These children might rock back and forth in their chair, or repeatedly click their pen, or twist their hair over and over again while doing homework. For parents or tutors helping them — particularly those without ADHD themselves — this constant movement can become annoying and distracting.

However, research shows that these kids need to fidget in order to focus — so telling them to “sit still” is actually counterproductive. Instead, give them a “**fidget toy**,” which is a small handheld object that can be fidgeted with in a non-disruptive way. I like the Tangle Junior ([tanglecreations.com](http://tanglecreations.com)), but you can also use a stress ball, unfilled balloons, or a small strip of Velcro taped to the bottom of the desk — your child can rub his fingers on it while he works, without anyone else being any the wiser!

On the other end of the spectrum are the **daydreamers**, who tend to take a 15-minute assignment and drag it out to an hour or longer — simply because they're unable to stay focused. They may start looking out the window, or doodling on the corner of the paper, instead of paying attention to the task at hand.

To deal with this type of distractibility, use a **reminder system**. Ask your child how many reminders he thinks he'll need to finish it — if he's unsure, start with three. Then, as parents, it's our job to stick to that number. The first time, gently get his attention and say, “You're working on number 5 of your math worksheet right now.” Distractable David will start again, and the next time you see him drifting, try again: “This is your second reminder; I'm only going to give you one more.” If you see him drifting off again, “You just have two more problems! This is the last reminder I'm going to give you, so finish up as best you can.” This strategy takes the “nagging” element out of the equation, and makes your child aware of his own distractibility.

You can also help daydreamers by setting a **stop time**. This allows the child to see an end in sight, and structure her own time accordingly. Tell your child, “It's 4:15. This assignment needs to be done by 4:45. I'll give you three reminders like we discussed.” Then — and this is the key part — at 4:45, you need to make sure your child puts away the assignment — completed or not. Most kids really, really hate to go to school without their work done, and this strategy helps them manage their time and see that, even if the assignment is difficult, it's not endless. If your child continues to struggle, alert the teacher to what you're doing, and consider asking for an accom-

**Children with ADHD often remember more — and learn more effectively — when they're allowed to move. Read up on the most recent study on fidgeting at <http://additu.de/fidget-study>**

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moderation for less homework.

P.S. A great tool for setting a stop time is the Time Timer ([timetimer.com](http://timetimer.com)), which helps kids see how much time has elapsed and how much time they have left.

## RUSHING RYAN

Then there are the kids who speed wildly through their homework, just to get it done as fast as they can — we'll call this kid "Rushing Ryan." Ryan does his homework very quickly, without regard for whether it's right or if he's demonstrating his best work. He just wants it done as quickly as possible.

With Ryan, use a **designated homework time**, which is based on the premise that children of each grade level should spend a certain amount of time on homework. A good rule of thumb is that children should be spending 10 minutes per grade level each night. So a 3rd grader should have about 30 minutes of homework, while a 6th grader can have up to 60. If your 3rd grader is miraculously completing all her homework in 3 minutes, she may be a whiz — or she may be rushing through it. Parents can say, "Okay, no matter how much homework you say you have, you have to sit and do homework for 30 minutes every night. If you really run out of things to do, you can read a book or practice your math facts." In most cases, this set period of time really reduces rushing, because your child will know that no matter what, they won't be able to get up and play Xbox after 3 minutes.

## FRUSTRATED FRANK

Sometimes, homework upsets our children. We'll call these children "Frustrated Frank." Executive function deficits, learning disabilities, or difficult subjects can make children cry or lash out during homework time. When Frustrated Frank gets upset, his amygdala (the emotion center of the brain) is on fire, and it overrides his prefrontal cortex — making him less able to focus on homework or reason his way through problems.

When Frank gets frustrated, the best strategy is to **disengage**. Trying to reason with a child during a meltdown usually doesn't work; they're too upset to listen to logic, and being told to "calm down" can be invalidating. If your child gets upset, say something like, "I can tell this is difficult for you. Come and get me when you're ready to start again." Your child will calm down on his own terms, and start again when he's ready.

If disengaging doesn't work, another strategy is to **name the feeling**. This is a way of practicing empathy that helps kids feel like they're being heard. Say something like, "I can tell you're frustrated. You know what? I completely understand why you're angry." Or, "You're right, Ms. Smith gave you a lot of homework tonight. I can see why you're feeling upset about this."

**If your child can't fully express her anger, use these strategies to defuse meltdowns and help manage strong emotions: <http://additu.de/156>**

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When it comes to helping Frank move forward after a setback, parents have three options:

1. **Do the work for them (NOT GOOD!)**
2. **Refuse help entirely (NOT GOOD!)**
3. **Have them show you how to do the work (BEST CHOICE!)**

Do option three by asking your child to search for similar examples in her textbook or notes, or talk through how she can proceed on the problem. Essentially, by asking your child to work through the problem on her own — but in your presence — it gives her the independent skills to solve her own problems, without cutting her off completely.

## WHEN SHOULD HOMEWORK BE COMPLETED?

After working with more than 8,000 students, I've found that most children do best **after a 30-minute break**, regardless of when they get home. Though every day may be slightly different, parents and children can still benefit by following the same routine.

Perhaps on Monday your child gets off the bus at 3:30. Allow him to unwind before starting his homework at 4 pm. On Tuesday he has soccer practice and doesn't get home until 5. Again, offer a 30-minute break and then have him dive into homework.

**Take note:** This strategy tends to work best for younger kids. High school students like to push the envelope and choose to start later and later. If this is the case with your child, don't stress about it too much — he'll be on his own soon, and should figure out independently what strategies work best for him. If you can get your high schooler to start homework before dinner, consider that a win!

## WHERE SHOULD HOMEWORK BE COMPLETED?

Research shows that, contrary to popular belief, kids should choose among multiple places to do homework. When designing a homework space, it's important to understand your child's needs and homework style. Here are a few examples:

**Example:** Sarah — aka “The Starbucks Kid” — is someone who needs some action happening around her in order to concentrate. Imagine her as an adult in a busy coffee shop, happily typing away on her computer while music plays and people talk around her. If your child is like Sarah, consider having her set up at the kitchen table while you prepare dinner. The action around her — and her proximity to you — should help her keep focused on her work, without worrying what she's missing in the other room.

**Example:** Will, on the other hand, is a “Peace and Quiet Kid.” He can't fo-

**For tips on creating a safe sensory place for your child to unwind, check out <http://additude/sensory>**

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cus on his work if there's any noise or movement going on around him — he gets distracted and wants to join in the fun. Set him up to do homework in a separate room (ideally not his own bedroom, which has too many potential distractions. Make sure the chair is supportive and the desk is large enough. Also, remove potential distractions until after homework is completed (particularly electronic devices).

**Example:** Jonah is a “Happy Medium Kid.” Jonah can't concentrate at either the kitchen table or in a completely quiet room on his own. The kitchen table is too busy — but total silence doesn't work for him either. This kind of child will want to hear a little bit of what's going on, but still have some separation from the action. A far corner of the living room or a guest room right off the kitchen is usually a good place for these children.

## HOW DO WE GET THIS DONE?

### Snap a Picture

The first step is getting homework assignments written down each day. One strategy that works for my clients is to **take a photograph of the board each day**. Your child can do it when he's entering class or when he's leaving, depending on when the homework is written on the board. Building the habit of snapping a quick photo every day will save your child from writing things down, and when he gets home, all the information he needs will be in one place.

### Apps

If your child is older and doesn't like to use a planner, there are several apps he can use to help him keep track of homework and get it done. A few of my favorites are **iStudiez Pro**, **iHomework**, and **myTutor**.

### Tutors

Some parents choose to use a tutor to help their child with homework. If you really feel like your relationship with your child is being damaged by the constant homework fights, this may be the best option for your family.

What should you look for in a tutor? In my mind, the two most important factors are finding someone who is **kind and patient**, and who has an **understanding of ADHD**. The tutor should be empathetic with your child, and should be able to understand that any homework-related negative behavior isn't willful — it's the result of his attention problems or her executive function deficits.

**ANN DOLIN, M.ED.**, has over 20 years of teaching, tutoring, and consulting experience. In 1998 she founded Educational Connections, a tutoring company that has grown to employ 200 tutors and has worked with over 8,000 students in the Washington, D.C. area.

To find an ADHD-friendly tutor near you, start at [directory.additudemag.com](http://directory.additudemag.com)

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If you've watched your child struggle in school, you know how important it is to get him the help he needs. Unfortunately, when it comes to accommodations, most parents aren't sure where to even start. In this comprehensive step-by-step guide, we outline how to pursue an evaluation, which plan is best for your child's needs, and how to secure accommodations that work, suggested by educators and parents who've been there.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/iep-504-ebook>

### **Video Games and the ADHD Brain**

**Setting limits on screen time, easing transitions, choosing smart games, and keeping your child safe online.**

For children with ADHD, the instant gratification of video games can easily become addictive, leaving parents struggling to balance their child's passion for gaming with safety and normal development outside of the virtual world. In this expert guide, we outline how parents can pick brain-boosting video games, how to enforce reasonable limits, and what steps to take if your child takes his Minecraft obsession a little too far.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/minecraft>

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What is a good ADHD diet? Is sugar the enemy? What about gluten? Dairy? In this comprehensive special report, we detail the connection between the food your child eats and the severity of his hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity, covering topics from artificial dyes and flavors to the right amount of protein.

>> Learn More About This Special Report: <http://additu.de/nutrition>

**To purchase these or other ADDitude Special Reports, go to [www.adhdreports.com](http://www.adhdreports.com)**

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Use these proven accommodations to help your child overcome academic challenges..

### **Does Your Child Have a Learning Disability?**

Use this self-test to find out if your child's problems at school may be due to LD.

### **10 Solutions for Disorganization at School**

Use these tips to get lockers, backpacks, and desks under control.

### **Letter to Your Child's Teacher**

Sample letters to craft the perfect back-to-school introduction.

### **20 Secrets to a Smarter Summer**

Don't let your child get in a summer slump.

### **18 Writing Tricks for ADHD Students**

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**Find these and many more free ADHD resources online at:**  
<http://additu.de/freedownloads>

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You know your child has a right to accommodations at school, but understanding exactly what those accommodations are? That's another story. In this expert webinar, Matt Cohen, Esq., interprets the "legal speak" and explains what evaluations, testing, and accommodations your child is entitled to by law.

### How Stress Impacts Learning and Behavior

>> <http://additu.de/stress>

In today's high-pressure school environment, kids with ADHD or LD can become overwhelmed by stress. In this audio and slide presentation, hosted by Jerome J. Schultz, Ph.D., find out how school stress impacts your child's brain — and what you can do about it. Get the tools you need to help your child manage academic stress so their brain has room to grow and learn!

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When special needs children are also gifted, it takes the help of a strong advocate to put them on the path to success. In this presentation, hosted by Diane M. Kennedy and Rebecca Banks-Cull, learn how to navigate the complicated 2E maze of ADHD, learning disabilities, and giftedness to pave the way for your child's bright future.

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The self-proclaimed "imperfect" mother-daughter duo Gina and Katie Gallagher host an extra special audio and slide presentation about raising children with special needs. Not only will you hear from the mom who's been there, done that, and written the book on special needs, but you'll also hear, first-hand, what it's like to grow up, and succeed, with special needs.

### Emotions in ADHD Teens

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Dealing with an emotionally volatile teen? It could be her ADHD. Thomas E. Brown, Ph.D., offers strategies for maintaining emotional control, as well as advice for teaching teens to find emotional balance.

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