

Tips to Make Homework Time Engaging

Podcast Transcript

Hello, and welcome to the You for Youth, or Y4Y, “Tips to Make Homework Time Engaging” podcast. I’m Tania Lazar, training specialist for the You for Youth project. Today we are going to explore some tips on how to make homework more than just getting school-day assignments done. We can also use homework time to develop important academic and other skills youth need to succeed in life — such as independent learning, responsibility and leadership. In this podcast, we will focus on making homework time engaging while supporting academics and 21st century skills.

Before we begin, let me read a short disclaimer: This presentation was produced under U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-ESE-14-D-0008 with Synergy Enterprises, Inc. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, methodology, technique or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

A little background about my time in afterschool and out-of-school time: I’ve been have been a part of this amazing field for 13 years. I’ve coordinated an afterschool program and overseen 33 programs in New Jersey as a Program Officer for a nonprofit intermediary. My experience in 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs includes program design and administration, on-site coaching, program evaluation and curriculum development.

Homework time is one area that I have seen arise over and over again in out-of-school time programs. Perhaps your program is trying to make the most of homework time and transform it into a meaningful part of your program. In this podcast, I hope to offer you some ideas and resources that will help you do so.

Okay, okay, since this is a podcast I can’t hear you groaning but I know that some of you are. Homework is often seen as boring and torturous, by students and staff alike. To set a positive tone and build the culture of your program to respect homework as a meaningful program component, you need to change the team’s mind-set to look at homework not as a chore and an obligation, but rather as something that spurs student learning and development and helps staff build relationships with participants. If staff can take that position and have a visibly positive approach to homework, then the youth in your program will also start to adopt that stance.

Now, let’s go through some specific tips you can use to improve homework time, in ways that your students will notice and appreciate.

- **Tip 1: Set up your physical space** so that it works well for students with different types of assignments and various learning styles. Make the space inviting by adding an area with a small rug, pillows, bean bag and folding chairs. Create different zones were students can

work in their chosen noise environment — in silence or with background music. Have a resource area with age-appropriate books, magazines and materials such as calculators, pencils, rulers, scissors, markers and small electronic devices.

- **Tip 2: Add youth voice and choice** to affect how students perceive homeworktime. Allow them to listen to headphones while studying (if it's helpful to them), let them decide which assignment to start with, and have them help in selecting reference materials to buy.
- **Tip 3: Be strategic in grouping students.** Depending on what makes sense for the assignments students have, you can have them work individually, one-on-one or in small groups with a tutor, in peer pairs, or in cross-age groupings. Change around groupings often and be flexible.
- **Tip 4: Don't give answers away.** Instead of telling students the answer, help them find it. This builds self-sufficiency and confidence for students. Try an "ask three before me" policy, which directs students to consult three other sources before you, whether it's a peer or some kind of resource.

When you are helping students, provide them with the appropriate level of intervention. If they're really struggling, you can start with an "I do, you watch" approach. Moving up the spectrum of increasing independence, you can try "I do, you help," followed by "you do, I help" and "you do, I watch."

- **Tip 5: Make sure all program staff know how to use the resources** students may need to consult, such as textbooks, websites and print materials. This goes along with tip 4 about working with students to find the answers. Some useful and reliable resources could be online manipulatives to help with math, government department websites, and the multitude of resources available at local libraries, both physically and on their computers. Accessing resources effectively is another 21st century skill you can help students build.
- **Tip 6: Revamp the image of homework time** by adding in some fun activities for the extra time when they finish their assignments early. These activities should still incorporate academic and 21st century skills, and should feel relevant and useful to students. Think brief, think self-directed...but do not fall back on boring worksheets! Try some activities related to college and career readiness, or reinforcing skills while getting students up and moving or socializing with peers. Arts and crafts, projects, challenging minute mysteries or head scratchers, and games like Odds and Evens, which can be found on Y4Y in the Tools section under Aligning With the School Day, can all work well. You can establish activity centers (or stations) that students can use independently upon completing their homework.
- **Tip 7: One final tip: Communicate** with the school-day teachers and the students' families. Contact the teachers to find out what students are doing in class and how their homework fits in, and keep them up-to-date on how students are doing with homework. Do the same for family members, who may not have time to pay much attention to homework or may not feel comfortable with the subject matter their students are learning. Treat

homework communication as one element of building both a strong school-afterschool connection and solid family engagement. Communication can be as simple as e-mails, phone calls or quick face-to-face chats. Some programs use specially designed documents that are set up to go back and forth about the student's homework assignments and progress. You can try this approach by using and customizing the samples on Y4Y. They can be found in the Tools section, under Aligning With the School Day. Look for Homework Log, Homework Contract, Homework Sharing Tool, and Homework Communication. Whatever you choose to do, make sure to hold everyone, including the student, accountable for their role.

Check out the resources in the Teach section of the Y4Y portal, under Aligning With the School Day. The "Effective Homework Time Training-to-Go" and "Effective Homework Time Training Plan" are ready-to-use materials to help you and your team think through some of the ideas I've discussed today.

Thank you for joining me today. I hope I've helped you get on your way to a homework time that is no longer dreaded, but instead is one that fully supports students and also helps your program achieve its goals.

If you have any questions regarding homework time, please visit the Y4Y online discussion board. Post your questions, and one of our team members will be sure to respond to you. You may also hear some great ideas from the Y4Y community of practitioners and leaders in the field. You can contact me directly at y4y@seiservices.com. This is Tania Lazar, training specialist at Y4Y. Have a great day!