

# How to Help a Teen Out of a Homework Hole

The more students fall behind in the pandemic, the less likely they are to feel that they can catch up.



By Lisa Damour

Published Feb. 26, 2021 Updated March 2, 2021, 10:12 a.m. ET

Pandemic school is taking its toll on students, especially teens. A recent study, conducted by NBC News and Challenge Success, a nonprofit affiliated with the Stanford Graduate School of Education, found that 50 percent more kids in high school report feeling disengaged from school this year than last. In December, Education Week reported that schools were seeing “dramatic increases in the number of failing or near-failing grades” on report cards.

A major symptom of school disengagement is not turning in homework, a problem that can easily snowball. The further students fall behind, the more overwhelmed they often become and the less likely they are to feel that they can catch up.

The good news is that finding out about missing homework is a first step to helping kids get back on track. You just need to keep a few considerations in mind.

## Empathy will get you further than anger

At this point in the pandemic, finding out that your child has let schoolwork slide may trigger an angry response. Everyone is worn down by the demands of pandemic life and many parents are already operating on their last nerve. Getting mad, however, is likely to cause kids to adopt a defensive or minimizing stance. Instead, try to be compassionate. What students who have fallen behind need most are problem-solving partners who want to understand what they are going through.

If you’re having trouble summoning your empathy, bear in mind that there are many good reasons a student could fall off pace this year. For instance, Ned Johnson, a professional tutor and co-author of the book “The Self-Driven Child,” noted that most teens have very little experience managing email, which is now a main source of information for those in remote or hybrid arrangements. “We know how overwhelmed we as adults are by email. Imagine not being comfortable with it, and then suddenly getting everything — from Zoom links to assignments — that way.”

Some students learning remotely may also have unreliable broadband service; others may miss key information because their attention is split between the teacher on the screen and distractions at home.

“Many adults are having the exact same issues,” said Ellen Braaten, a psychologist and the executive director of the Learning and Emotional Assessment Program at Massachusetts General Hospital. “They are really productive when they can physically be at work, but may find themselves less attentive in the unstructured environment of working from home.”

Even teens who are attending school in person and using familiar systems for tracking assignments may be having a hard time managing their work now. The mental skills that help us stay organized — commonly called executive functioning — are being undermined by psychological stress, which is unusually high among today’s teens.

## Work together to diagnose the problem

Finding out that your child is in academic trouble can tempt you to jump to solutions. It's best, however, to properly diagnose the problem before trying to address it. Liz Katz, assistant head for school partnership at One Schoolhouse, an online supplemental school, suggested looking into the reasons students fall behind at school. Some don't know what they're supposed to be doing, others know and aren't doing it, and still others "are doing their best and just can't meet expectations."

As you talk with a teenager about where things have gone off the rails, be kind, curious and collaborative. "This isn't about you being in trouble or getting off the hook," you might say. "It's simply about figuring out what's going wrong so we can solve the right problem."

Students who are struggling to keep track of what's expected of them may need to reach out to their teachers, either for clarification about specific assignments or for general guidance on where and when they should be looking for information about homework. As a parent or caregiver, you can coach them on how to approach their instructors. Start by pointing out that teachers are almost always eager to lend support to students who seek it. You can also offer to give feedback on a draft email to an instructor explaining where the student got lost and what they have already tried.

"For many students, the ability to ask for help is not fully formed," said Ms. Katz, "or it can feel like an admission that they've done something wrong. Normalizing and praising self-advocacy is so important."

For students who know what they're supposed to do but aren't doing it, other approaches make sense. They may be having a hard time sustaining motivation and need support on that front, or they may be swamped with commitments, such as caring for younger siblings, that make it impossible to complete their schoolwork. Here, parents and students will want to work together to make a realistic plan for addressing the biggest priorities in light of these circumstances. This might mean coming to an agreement about where the teen's energies should be directed or exploring what additional support might be put in place.

In some cases, academic problems may be linked to issues with mental health. If there's a question of whether a student is suffering from depression or anxiety; using drugs; or exhibiting any other significant emotional or behavioral concern, check in with the school counselor or family doctor for a proper assessment. Treatment should always take precedence over schoolwork. "If you're depressed," Dr. Braaten said, "no amount of executive function coaching is going to help, because that's not the issue."

Some students have subtle learning or attention disorders that became an issue only when school went online. Under regular conditions, said Mr. Johnson, instructors can notice when a student is tuning out and bring back his or her attention in a gentle way. Unfortunately, "Teachers really can't do that effectively on Zoom." If this is a concern, parents should consider checking in with teachers or their school's learning support staff to get their read on the problem and advice for how to move forward.

## Step back to see the big picture

"We all need to be easier on ourselves," Dr. Braaten said, "and to sort through what students really need to do and what they don't." Well-meaning parents might hope to motivate students by emphasizing the importance of high grades, but that can make it harder for kids to recover from a substantial setback.

As students start to work their way back, give some thought to how comprehensive their turnaround needs to be. Do they really need to get equally high grades in every class? Could they instead direct their energy toward getting square with the courses they care about most? Could they work with their teachers to agree upon trimmed-down assignments for partial credit? According to Mr. Johnson, "Lowering expectations, *for now*, can actually help kids to get back on track."

Dr. Braaten also noted that much of what students gain from school is not about content, but about learning how to solve problems. Engaging teens in constructive conversations to figure out how they fell behind can be an important lesson unto itself. “Having a 16-year-old who understands, ‘When I’m stressed, this is how I react,’” says Dr. Braaten, “may put us further ahead in the long run.”

In any school year, students learn a great deal beyond academic content. This year, more than most, might be one where students gain a deep understanding of how they respond when feeling overwhelmed and how to ask for help or rebound from setbacks — lessons that they will draw on long after the pandemic is gone.

Lisa Damour is a psychologist and the author of the New York Times best sellers “Untangled” and “Under Pressure.” Dr. Damour also co-hosts the podcast “Ask Lisa: The Psychology of Parenting.” @LDamour • Facebook