



Maximizing the Homework Minimizer

by Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

My son, Ryan, hates homework. He does well in school despite his many efforts to avoid work and find short-cuts. His teachers report that he is smart and capable of greater achievement. He is 9 years old and in fourth grade. As the work gets more demanding, we are afraid that he is going to sink. Do you have any advice?

Dear Parent:

First, is your son truly “sinking”? There is not one kind of student who is successful. There are many students who work like your son does and do remarkably well. As economists of sorts, they are reluctant to put out extra effort. Minimizers are very bright, bored easily and make extra effort only when they deem it necessary to maintain their “good enough” grades.

Minimizers retain information quite efficiently, resulting in a kind of overconfidence. Finding the motivation to work harder could take years, perhaps as late as college, before these students learn they can no longer rely upon their shortcut habits.

The frustration parents face with minimizers

is realizing that they do indeed manage their academics without experiencing forewarned failure. Because it is difficult to create incentive for working harder, the challenge then becomes how to motivate your child to work when there is no tangible evidence that working harder really matters...yet. It is understandable to be concerned about a minimizer who rushes his work and does not appear engaged. Known as “underachievers,” such minimizers abound in the world of education. In fact, the mental health diagnostic world is still trying to distinguish between motivational versus attentional disorders, and there is often much overlap.

Minimizers often have no clue how to “elaborate” or “work harder.” That blank look of denial may speak to fear, or it may be truly blank,

meaning there is no ignition to turn on the engine, there is no gear to shift into drive. If you keep pushing, your child may either shut down or begin to fight in order to avoid engaging his homework.

Ask yourself if there is anyone in your family tree whom Ryan resembles. Find out how they managed in school and when they began to work. More than likely they reserved mental effort and energy until sufficiently motivated, inspired or no longer able to take shortcuts.

The task of maximizing the student who minimizes is daunting. It is like military academic training. With time and energy, a parent may manage to sit with a young child to work through assignments, hour by hour and day by day, building the skills of planning, paying attention and checking work.

The goal is to develop a kind of attention and diligence that is not natural for the minimizer. Often, a more viable alternative is to rely on a tutoring service or structured homework club. There is also a choice to let the chips fall, simply opting out and trusting that the student will learn from his own mistakes, in time. There is not an absolute "correct" way.

The minimizer has to learn by feeling the consequence. Lecturing and scolding is futile. It helps to be a no-nonsense parent who has no difficulty tying the consequence of no privileges to completion of homework. This requires a calm and patient "back to the drawing board" approach. Further, this no-nonsense approach must be coupled with skills of encouragement and having faith in your child – an ability to accentuate the positive in order to inspire competency.

Consistent structure is key. Set up a regular work time, and be certain to connect cooperation and effort to the outcome of privilege, such as time for recreation. Setting up a behavioral chart that involves earning points for rewards is most likely to work when devised and monitored by a professional who understands behavioral management systems, such as a tutor or coach who is a behaviorist by training.

Remember that we are raising our children to manage themselves in the real world. Much of homework is boring. There is a lot of drudgery to deal with in being a responsible adult, so do not feel obliged to make everything entertaining for your children.

We can teach our children to simply cope

with what is "boring." We can also teach them the power of attitude in managing responsibilities, such as chores and homework. For now, while Ryan is young and responsive to encouragement, here are some ideas for maximizing the minimizer....

• For many students, "work before play" helps to motivate. For minimizers, this notion can result in rushed work or undue distraction. Simply create the "homework time," and respond with "We'll see," when your child inquires about what he gets to do

after homework. Repeatedly redirect him to homework without a lot of discussion.

• Set up your system for homework in a manner that maximizes you son's ability to concentrate and remain focused. You will need to observe what works best. Does Ryan work best spread out over the dining room table or at his desk? Is he more likely to do his work right after school or after he plays for a while?

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- Keep it simple and consistent in order to avoid let's-make-a-deal negotiations. Homework is simply a part of your son's responsibility. There is reward in the mastery of the homework. There is also a natural flow to events that leads to freedom.

- Avoid the "If...then" threats that provoke opposition. Calmly stating, "Homework comes first, and then your time is all yours," is very different from using your power to threaten a loss by stating, "If you don't do your homework, you can't watch TV."

- Set up realistic expectations for extracurricular activities. When homework must be done in order to move onto sports activities, avoid too much drama or reactivity, which can lead to poor concentration or acting out of anger.

- Avoidance is understandable when an assignment is overwhelming. When your child comes home with a long-term project, help him break it down into smaller parts. To manage big reading assignments, use sticky tabs to indicate how many pages to read daily.

- In addition to going over the assignment for clarification, it is always helpful to brainstorm ideas in order to jumpstart your child's ability to engage in the assignment.

- Teach your child to successfully estimate timeline goals. For example, take out a 5x7 index card and have him list assignments in order of most difficult to least difficult. In this manner, he learns to tackle what he perceives to be the hardest.

- In order to reduce anxiety about completing assignments, have your child predict the amount of time he believes the assignment will take, and then show him the actual amount of time he took to complete the assignment. In this manner, he begins to see his own mental roadblocks.

- Encourage independence with homework, at all costs. Our job as parents is to set up homework expectations, shape confidence and be available. Unless your child has a learning disability and greater needs for support, do not sit with him and do the homework with him.

- Shape a positive outcome. Every time your child is working independently, or making an effort, there is opportunity to reinforce

behavior. This does not require a lot of praise and pressure. Simply comment on the goal, i.e., "You are concentrating and being quite productive," or "Looks like you can engage in this homework today."

- Minimizers like to get to the end-goal and be done. Offer a concrete model of the expected

outcome for the assignment, as expected by the teacher. For example, tell and show your child "two paragraphs." If the expectation is unclear from the assignment, encourage your son to call a homework buddy or talk with his teacher.

- The nature and frequency of break time is

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Mercedes R350

Base Price: \$48,000

Fuel Economy: 16/21 MPG

Recommended by: Kristin Varela

The style-conscious R350 blends characteristics of minivans, wagons and SUVs, according to Varela. It's easy to get in and out of, thanks to wide-opening doors and a low step-in height. And it's easy for the whole family to find comfortable places to sit, with sliding second-row captain's chairs and full-size seating in the third row (the "way back" is not just for little kids anymore!). The reinforced

and shatter-proof panoramic roof extends from the front of the car to the third row, giving everyone a sense of the wide-open row.



2007 Audi Q7

Base price: \$49,900

Fuel economy: 14/19 MPG

Recommended by: Lauren Fix

Fix calls the Q7 "a very impressive seven-passenger luxury SUV with the Audi performance, safety, design and versatility." She likes the high seating, spacious interior, off-road capability and, of course, the "flexibility that you expect from an Audi."

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dependent on your child's ability to get back to work.

- If parents want time for extracurriculars and family time, and if homework is too demanding, attend PTA meetings and speak up about philosophy of homework and whether homework is reinforcing what your children are learning. Teachers may be grateful for the feedback regarding how to pace the work or what lessons need to be modified.

When working to maximize your minimizer, if you find that your child's work is now yours, please take a step back. When your son's minimizing ways are exhausting you, please know that not all students are born to be driven and diligent in our linear left-brain educational system. We need to value our artists, craftspeople, etc. There are also many late bloomers who cannot manage the pace and pressure put upon them.

Many parents get stuck in oppositional deadlocks that are futile. We can only encourage so much before doing damage. There is a fine line between setting up the expectations for doing homework and enabling our children to depend on us to do all the worry and work.

Know your child and let him develop at his own pace. Have faith and strive for balance. As your son, Ryan, matures and you have done your best to maximize his minimizing ways, it will become his turn to moderate his efforts and choose what works for him.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her "Parenting With Confidence" Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month. For more information, visit her website, www.kayabrams.com.



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