

## **Encourage Your Child to Be Responsible and to Work Independently**

Taking responsibility and working independently are important qualities for school success. Here are some suggestions for helping your child to develop these qualities:

- Establish rules. Every home needs reasonable rules that children know and can depend on. Have your child help you to set rules, then make sure that you enforce the rules consistently.
- Make it clear to your child that he has to take responsibility for what he does, both at home and at school. For example, don't automatically defend your child if his teacher tells you that he is often late to class or is disruptive when he is in class. Ask for his side of the story. If a charge is true, let him take the consequences.
- Work with your child to develop a reasonable, consistent schedule of jobs to do around the house. List them on a calendar. Younger children can help set the table or put away their toys and clothes. Older children can help prepare meals and clean up afterwards.
- Show your child how to break a job down into small steps, then to do the job one step at a time. This works for everything—getting dressed, cleaning a room or doing a big homework assignment.
- Make your child responsible for getting ready to go to school each morning—getting up on time, making sure that he has everything he needs for the school day and so forth. If necessary, make a checklist to help him remember what he has to do.
- Monitor what your child does after school, in the evenings and on weekends. If you can't be there when your child gets home, give her the responsibility of checking in with you by phone to discuss her plans.

## Activity:

### Time Flies

*For children ages 9 to 11*

"I don't have time to do that!" Sound familiar? Planning time is one of the most useful things that your child can learn. Knowing how long something will take can save time and prevent temper tantrums.

#### What You Need

Paper and pencil

Clock

Calendar

#### What to Do

- Together with your child, write down estimates of how long it takes each of you to do certain tasks (such as getting ready for school or work in the morning; ironing a blouse; making toast). Use a clock to time at least one of these tasks. Then take turns timing each other. (Be realistic—it's not a race.)
- Talk with your child what part of a job can be done ahead of time, such as deciding at bedtime what to wear to school the next day.
- Talk about at least two places that you and your child go where you must be on time. What do you do to make sure you are on time?

Being on time or **not** being on time affects other people. It is important for children to understand their responsibility for being on time—it's not just for grown-ups.

## Homework Made Easy *Activity:*

*For children ages 9 to 11*

A homework chart can show your child exactly what he needs to do and when he needs to do it.

### What You Need

Poster board or large sheet of sturdy paper  
 Marker, pen or pencil  
 Clock

### What to Do

- Help your child to create a homework chart like the following out of a large piece of sturdy paper:

Subject	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
Language Arts					
Social Science					
Math					
Science					

Depending on how many subjects your child has, he may be able to put three or four weeks on each piece of paper.

- Help him to attach a colored marker or pen to the chart so that it is always handy.
- After school each day, have your child put a check mark in each box in which there is a homework assignment. Circle the check when you have seen that the homework is completed.
- Tell your child to try to figure out how long it will take him to complete each homework assignment so that he will be able to schedule his time.

Children need to know that their family members think homework is important. If they know their families care, children have a good reason to complete assignments and to turn them in on time.

# Divide and Conquer *Activity*

*For children ages 9 to 11*

Just about anything is easier to do if it's divided into smaller pieces. As your child's assignments get longer and more complicated, she needs to acquire more organizing and planning skills.

## What You Need

Homework assignments

Chores

Paper

Pencil

## What to Do

- Have your child choose a big homework assignment to talk about, such as a geography project. Sit with her and help her to make a list of what she needs to complete the job. For example:

### Reference materials (books, maps)

Ask: Can you complete the assignment by just using your textbook? If not, do you need to go to the library? If so, can you check out books or will you have to allow time to stay there and use reference books? Can you use computer Web sites? Do you have the addresses for approved sites? Does your teacher have them?

### Taking notes

Do you have a notebook? Pencils?

### Finished project

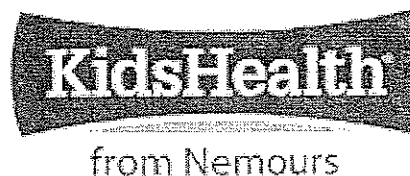
Can you do this assignment on a computer? Will you need to staple the pages together? Do you need a report folder or cover? Do you need to draw pictures or make charts? Can you use computer graphics?

- Help your child to decide the order in which the parts of the job need to be done. Have her number them. To help her estimate how long each part of the assignment will take, tell her to work backward from the date the assignment is due. Have her figure out how much time she'll need to complete each part. Have her write down start and finish dates next to each part.
- Have her put the assignment dates on a calendar or her homework chart.
- Together, think about a household job, such as cleaning out a closet or mowing the yard. Help your child to divide it up into smaller parts.
- Talk with your child about how you divide work at your job or at home.

Learning to see assignments or big jobs in small pieces can make them less overwhelming for a child.

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## Help Your Child Get Organized

Most kids generate a little chaos and disorganization. Yours might flit from one thing to the next — forgetting books at school, leaving towels on the floor, and failing to finish projects once started.

You'd like them to be more organized and to stay focused on tasks, such as homework. Is it possible?

Yes! A few kids seem naturally organized, but for the rest, organization is a skill learned over time. With help and some practice, kids can develop an effective approach to getting stuff done.

And you're the perfect person to teach your child, even if you don't feel all that organized yourself!

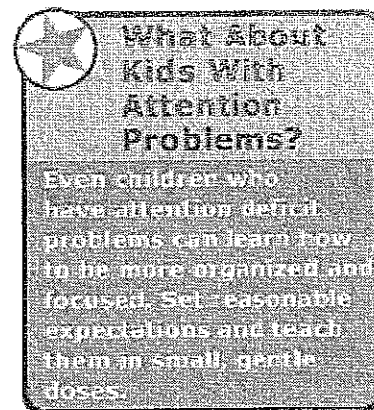
### Easy as 1-2-3

For kids, all tasks can be broken down into a 1-2-3 process.

1. **Getting organized** means a kid gets where he or she needs to be and gathers the supplies needed to complete the task.
2. **Staying focused** means sticking with the task and learning to say "no" to distractions.
3. **Getting it done** means finishing up, checking your work, and putting on the finishing touches, like remembering to put a homework paper in the right folder and putting the folder inside the backpack so it's ready for the next day.

Once kids know these steps — and how to apply them — they can start tackling tasks more independently. That means homework, chores, and other tasks will get done with increasing consistency and efficiency. Of course, kids will still need parental help and guidance, but you probably won't have to nag as much.

Not only is it practical to teach these skills, but knowing how to get stuff done will help your child feel more competent and effective. Kids feel self-confident and proud when they're able to accomplish their tasks and responsibilities. They're also sure to be pleased when they find they have some extra free time to do what they'd like to do.



## From Teeth Brushing to Book Reports

To get started, introduce the 1-2-3 method and help your child practice it in daily life. Even something as simple as brushing teeth requires this approach, so you might use this example when introducing the concept:

1. **Getting organized:** Go to the bathroom and get out your toothbrush and toothpaste. Turn on the water.
2. **Staying focused:** Dentists say to brush for 3 minutes, so that means keep brushing, even if you hear a really good song on the radio or you remember that you wanted to call your friend. Concentrate and remember what the dentist told you about brushing away from your gums.
3. **Getting it done:** If you do steps 1 and 2, step 3 almost takes care of itself. Hurray, your 3 minutes are up and your teeth are clean! Getting it done means finishing up and putting on the finishing touches. With teeth brushing, that would be stuff like turning off the water, putting away the toothbrush and paste, and making sure there's no toothpaste foam on your face!

With a more complex task, like completing a book report, the steps would become more involved, but the basic elements remain the same.

Here's how you might walk your child through the steps:

### 1. Getting Organized

Explain that this step is all about **getting ready**. It's about figuring out what kids need to do and gathering any necessary items. For instance: "So you have a book report to write. What do you need to do to get started?" Help your child make a list of things like: Choose a book. Make sure the book is OK with the teacher. Write down the book and the author's name. Check the book out of the library. Mark the due date on a calendar.

Then help your child think of the supplies needed: The book, some note cards, a pen for taking notes, the teacher's list of questions to answer, and a report cover. Have your child gather the supplies where the work will take place.

As the project progresses, show your child how to use the list to check off what's already done and get ready for what's next. Demonstrate how to add to the list, too. Coach your child to think, "OK, I did these things. Now, what's next? Oh yeah, start reading the book" and to add things to the list like finish the book, read over my teacher's directions, start writing the report.

### 2. Staying Focused

Explain that this part is about **doing it** and sticking with the job. Tell kids this means doing what you're supposed to do, following what's on the list, and sticking with it.

It also means focusing when there's something else your child would rather be doing — the hardest part of all! Help kids learn how to handle and resist these inevitable temptations. While working on the report, a competing idea might pop into your child's head: "I feel like shooting some hoops now." Teach kids to challenge that impulse by asking themselves "Is that what I'm supposed to be doing?"

Explain that a tiny break to stretch a little and then get right back to the task at hand is OK. Then kids can make a plan to shoot hoops after the work is done. Let them know that staying focused is tough sometimes, but it gets easier with practice.

### 3. Getting it Done

Explain that this is the part when kids will be **finishing up** the job. Talk about things like copying work neatly and asking a parent to read it over to help find any mistakes.

Coach your child to take those important final steps: putting his or her name on the report, placing it in a report cover, putting the report in the correct school folder, and putting the folder in the backpack so it's ready to be turned in.

### How to Start

Here are some tips on how to begin teaching the 1-2-3 process:

#### Introduce the Idea

Start the conversation by using the examples above and show your child the kids' article Organize, Focus, Get It Done. Read it together and ask for reactions. Will it be easy or hard? Is he or she already doing some of it? Is there something he or she would like to get better at?

#### Get Buy-In

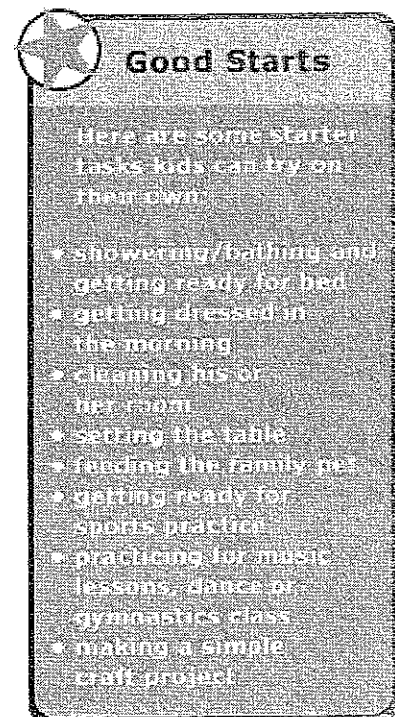
Brainstorm about what might be easier or better if your child was more organized and focused. Maybe homework would get done faster, there would be more play time, and there would be less nagging about chores. Then there's the added bonus of your child feeling proud and you being proud, too.

#### Set Expectations

Be clear, in a kind way, that you expect your kids to work on these skills and that you'll be there to help along the way.

#### Make a Plan

Decide on one thing to focus on first. You can come up with three things and let your child choose one. Or if homework or a particular chore has been a problem, that's the natural place to begin.



### **Get Comfortable in Your Role**

For the best results, you'll want to be a low-key coach. You can ask questions that will help kids get on track and stay there. But use these questions to prompt their thought process about what needs to be done. Praise progress, but don't go overboard. The self-satisfaction kids will feel will be a more powerful motivator. Also, be sure to ask your child's opinion of how things are going so far.

### **Start Thinking in Questions**

Though you might not realize it, every time you take on a task, you ask yourself questions and then answer them with thoughts and actions. If you want to unload groceries from the car, you ask yourself:

- Q: Did I get them all out of the trunk?  
A: No. I'll go get the rest.
- Q: Did I close the trunk?  
A: Yes.
- Q: Where's the milk and ice cream? I need to put them away first.  
A: Done. Now, what's next?

Encourage kids to start seeing tasks as a series of questions and answers. Suggest that they ask these questions out loud and then answer them. These questions are the ones you hope will eventually live inside a child's head. And with practice, they'll learn to ask them without being prompted.

Work together to come up with questions that need to be asked so the chosen task can be completed. You might even jot them down on index cards. Start by asking the questions and having your child answer. Later, transfer responsibility for the questions from you to your child.

### **Things to Remember**

It will take time to teach kids how to break down tasks into steps. It also will take time for them to learn how to apply these skills to what needs to be done. Sometimes, it will seem simpler just to do it for them. It certainly would take less time.

But the trouble is that kids don't learn how to be independent and successful if their parents swoop in every time a situation is challenging or complex.

Here's why it's worth your time and effort:

- Kids learn new skills that they'll need — how to pour a bowl of cereal, tie shoes, match clothes, complete a homework assignment.
- They'll develop a sense of independence. Kids who dress themselves at age 4 feel like big kids. It's a good feeling that will deepen over time as they learn to do even more without help. From these good feelings, kids begin to form a belief about themselves — "I can do it."



- Your firm but kind expectations that your kids **should** start tackling certain jobs on their own send a strong message. You reinforce their independence and encourage them to accept a certain level of responsibility. Kids learn that others will set expectations and that they can meet them.
- This kind of teaching can be a very loving gesture. You're taking the time to show your kids how to do something — with interest, patience, love, kindness, and their best interests at heart. This will make kids feel cared for and loved. Think of it as filling up a child's toolbox with crucial life tools.

Reviewed by: D'Arcy Lyness, PhD

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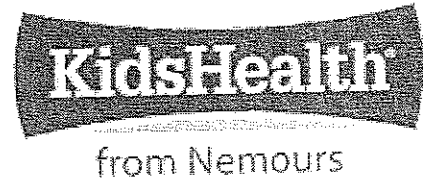


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## Helping Your Teen With Homework

During the middle- and high-school years, homework gets more intense and grades start to matter more.

At the same time, teens face a lot of other big changes. They're adjusting to the physical and emotional effects of puberty, while busy social lives and sports commitments gain importance, and many also take part-time jobs.

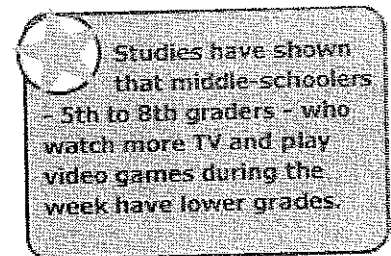
Parents can play a crucial role in helping teens handle these challenges and succeed in school by lending a little help, support, and guidance, and by knowing what problems demand their involvement and which ones require them to hang back.

### Setting Up Shop

Make sure your teen has a quiet, well-lit, distraction-free place to study. The space should be stocked with paper, pencils, a calculator, dictionary, thesaurus, and any other necessary supplies. It should be away from distractions like TVs, ringing phones, and video games.

Your teen may prefer to retreat to a private space to work rather than study surrounded by parents and siblings. Grant that independence, but check in from time to time to make sure that your teen hasn't gotten distracted.

If your teen needs a computer for assignments, try to set it up in a common space, not in a bedroom, to discourage playing video games, chatting with or emailing friends, or surfing the Internet for fun during study time. Also consider parental controls, available through your Internet service provider (ISP), and software that blocks and filters any inappropriate material.



Find out which sites teachers are recommending and bookmark them for easy access. Teach your teen how to look for reliable sources of information and double-check any that look questionable.

### A Parent's Supporting Role

When it comes to homework, be there to offer support and guidance, answer questions, help interpret assignment instructions, and review the completed work. But resist the urge to provide the right answers or complete assignments.

It can be difficult to see your kids stressed out over homework, especially when there's a test or important deadline looming. But you can help by teaching them the problem-solving skills they need to get through their assignments and offering encouragement as they do.

More tips to help make homework easier for your teen:

- **Plan ahead.** Regularly sit down with your teen to go over class loads and make sure they're balanced. If your teen has a particularly big workload from classes, you may want to see if you can shuffle the daily schedule so that there's a study hall during the day or limit after-school activities. Teachers or guidance counselors might have some perspective on which classes are going to require more or less work.
- **Establish a routine.** Send the message that schoolwork is a top priority with ground rules like setting a regular time and place each day for homework to be done. And make it clear that there's no TV, phone calls, video game-playing, etc., until homework is done and checked.
- **Instill organization skills.** No one is born with great organizational skills — they're learned and practiced over time. Most kids first encounter multiple teachers and classrooms in middle school, when organization becomes a key to succeeding. Give your teen a calendar or personal planner to help get organized.
- **Apply school to the "real world."** Talk about how what teens learn now applies outside the classroom, such as the importance of meeting deadlines — as they'll also have to do in the workplace — or how topics in history class relate to what's happening in today's news.

### Homework Problems

Especially in the later grades, homework can really start to add up and become harder to manage. These strategies can help:

- **Be there.** You don't have to hover at homework time, but be around in case you're needed. If your son is frazzled by geometry problems he's been trying to solve for hours, for instance, suggest he take a break, maybe by shooting some hoops with you. A fresh mind may be all he needed, but when it's time to return to homework, ask how you can help.
- **Be in touch with school.** Maintain contact with guidance counselors and teachers throughout the school year to stay informed, especially if your teen is struggling. They'll keep you apprised of what's going on at school and how to help your teen. They can guide you to tutoring options, offer perspective on course load, and provide guidance on any issues, such as dyslexia, ADHD, or vision or hearing difficulties. You can also be kept in the loop about tests, quizzes, and projects.
- **Don't forget the study skills.** Help your teen develop good study skills — both in class and on homework. No one is born knowing how to study and often those skills aren't stressed in the classroom. When you're helping your teen study for a test, for instance, suggest such strategies as using flashcards to memorize facts or taking notes and underlining while reading.

- **Encourage students to reach out.** Most teachers are available for extra help before or after school, and also might be able to recommend other resources. Encourage your teen to ask for help, if needed, but remember that in school kids are rewarded for knowing the right answers, and no one likes to stand out by saying that they don't have them. Praise your teen's hard work and effort, and ask the guidance counselor or teachers for resources for support if you need them.

Don't wait for report cards to find out that there are problems at school. The sooner you intervene, the sooner you can help your teen get back on track.

### Learning for Life

Make sure your teen knows that you're available if there's a snag, but that it's important to work independently. Encourage effort and determination — not just good grades. Doing so is crucial to motivating kids to succeed in school and in life.

With a little support from parents, homework can be a positive experience for teens and foster lifelong skills they'll need to succeed in school and beyond.

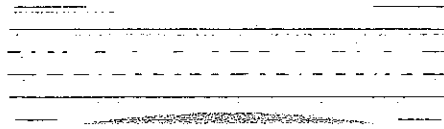
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## Staying Focused on Schoolwork

Learning how to focus and get something done is about more than just good grades — it's the foundation for success in life. Mastering the skills of getting organized, staying focused, and seeing work through to the end will help in just about everything you do.

You probably know the basics by now, but here's a helpful refresher.

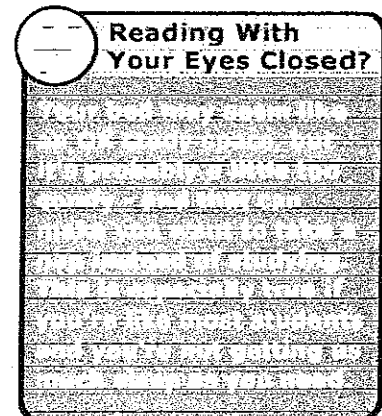
### Get Organized

Organization is the first step. It makes everything else a little easier.

Keep your assignments and class information together in binders, notebooks, or folders that are organized by subject. You might want to set up a file drawer at home to keep track of research, returned assignments, and other things you want to hold on to.

If you find yourself stuffing loose papers in your bag or grabbing different notebooks for the same class just because they're close at hand, it's time to stop and regroup. Take an evening to get things organized again.

Maybe you can't carry different spiral-bounds for every class. One solution is to carry a binder that has separate sections. Another idea is to take notes in one notebook and at the end of each day rewrite them in a separate binder. This takes more time, but it is a great study skill because it allows you to read, write, and hopefully summarize all that was important during the schoolday. The more you review material, the more likely you are to remember it.



Whatever you choose, your system has to work for you. If it doesn't, change it until you find what does. It's a great way to learn about yourself and what works for your unique needs.

### Plan Ahead

Most likely, you're on your own when it comes to progress and work on assignments. It can feel great to be your own boss, especially if you're a good one. Don't leave things until the last minute, though — you'll only end up working twice as hard to do half as well. Nerves and anxiety make it hard to stay focused and do a good job.

**Set deadlines.** At the beginning of each semester, make a calendar of due dates. Be sure you know what the main assignments are (if the teacher doesn't mention them at the start of the semester, ask) and what format they will take (a report, presentation, group project, etc.). Set clear goals.

Keep these questions in mind when organizing your calendar: What's the final product? When do certain components need to be completed? Answering these allows you to prioritize assignments by due dates, level of difficulty, and completion time.

Include nonacademic commitments on your calendar, such as team practices, drama rehearsals, etc. This will help you see when things might hit crunch time later in the semester.

Give yourself mini-deadlines for the stages of each project — planning, research, drafting, revising, and creating a final product.

**Enforce deadlines.** Decide how you'll enforce your deadlines. For example, will you reward yourself for meeting them? Ask your friends or parents to check in with you about your mini-deadlines so that you don't put them off. (Watch out if you ask parents to help, though. When they do, remember that they're not nagging you — you asked them to check in!)

If you have difficulty meeting deadlines but are making an attempt to improve your study skills and organization, talk with your teacher. He or she can help you to create reasonable short-term goals for a particular project or test.

**Oh, no! That's due in 2 days!** If something slips by and you find yourself surprised by a due date or stuck with very little turnaround time, try not to freak out. Do a breathing exercise to feel calm and focused. Then outline an approach to tackling the work. You can make an hourly or daily calendar of deadlines if that helps you structure your time.

If you're a perfectionist, it helps to remember that everyone can lose track of something once in a while. If this happens a lot, though, you need to get more organized.

### Set Your Space

You need a good workspace — someplace clean and orderly and quiet enough to focus. (If you can, avoid trying to study in places that are the center of activity, like the kitchen.) It helps to have a specific place that's set aside for homework so that when you sit down, your mind knows you're there to work and can help you focus more quickly.

Your bedroom, a study, or any other room where you can get away from noise and distractions is an ideal place to focus. It's best to study at a desk or table where you can spread your work out. You'll also need a chair that's comfortable: It should support your lower back and allow you to keep both feet on the floor in front of you. To make studying less of a strain on your eyes, be sure you have enough light.

Finally, make sure the room you're in is comfortable. This sounds basic, but if you're too hot, too cold, or distracted by your pet hamster spinning on his wheel, you won't be able to concentrate as effectively.

**Have resources handy.** What do you need in your work area in order to avoid interruptions? Books, supplies, notes, research sources? Keep these in one place so you don't have to go off in search of printer paper, a stapler, or a book you know you just saw around here somewhere.



**Don't think about playing that video game when you're done with your homework. That's going to slow you down and you might get all the wrong answers. Plan things out.**

**Dylan, 14**

Be sure you have what you need before you head to the library or elsewhere to work on projects and papers. And each night, check that you've packed everything you need for class the next day — including assignments to turn in.

### Get Focused

Think multitasking is a useful skill? Think again! A March 2005 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that nearly a third of students ages 8 to 18 don't concentrate on their homework alone. Instead, they "multitask" by talking on the phone, listening to music, watching TV, and IMing friends.

Studies show that when people do lots of things at once they tend to do a worse job on all of them than if they'd focused on just one thing at a time. So when you multitask as you study, you're less likely to absorb and retain the information you need to do well on that test.

This doesn't mean you have to study in total silence. Things like TV are bad distractions that you'll want to avoid. But listening to music can actually help some people concentrate — especially if they have to study in a noisy environment.

Just be sure that you tune in to good study music that isn't going to sidetrack you into singing the lyrics and dancing all over your room when you're supposed to be focused on the French Revolution. If you find yourself reading the same page over and over or fixing mistakes that you made as you worked, these are clues that the music isn't helping.

Chances are, you'll use the computer for papers and the Web for research while you're doing homework. This makes it hard to avoid temptations like IM and surfing. Set aside separate time just for IM and email so that when it's work time, you can shut them down and focus. (It's hard, but there's nothing like the little ding of a new message to take the focus off of what you're trying to do — especially if it's not your favorite subject!)

**Stay focused.** One way to keep your concentration is to take breaks — but make sure they're scheduled ones. Building a 15-minute break in after 45 minutes of studying can help your mind stay fresh and focused.

Get a change of scenery by leaving the room you've been working in. Exercise is a great way to clear your head and allow the mind to absorb what you've just studied. So now's the time to put on that song that makes you dance and sing! Do some stretches, walk the dog around the block, kick a ball in the backyard, or call a friend. Just make sure you get back to your studies when your 15 minutes are up.

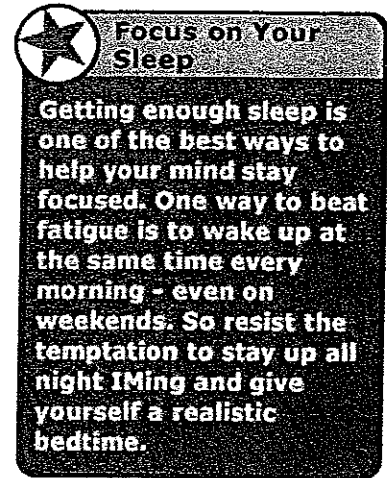
It's normal for the mind to wander occasionally. If you find yourself getting distracted and thinking about other things, pull your attention back into a study groove as soon as possible. If daydreaming and fantasizing seem to take up too much of your work time, set aside a separate time to write in your journal or write fiction. That'll give you another incentive to get your homework done.

### Get It Done!

In summary, here's a quick checklist of things that can help you focus:

- DO know your deadlines.
- DO make a calendar of stages and final due dates.

- DO include social events on this calendar for time management.
- DO understand the assignment and expectations.
- DO give yourself a quiet place to study with all the materials you need.
- DO give yourself brief breaks.
- DON'T put work off until the last minute; you'll be too frantic to focus.
- DON'T do your homework late at night or in bed.
- DON'T let yourself be bored; find the aspect of the project or paper that interests you — if you're dying of boredom, something's not right.



If you need more tips on staying focused, ask a teacher, school counselor, or a parent for help. It's their job to assist in your learning.

Reviewed by: Eric J. Gabor, JD

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