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Study Table Plan

The Study Table Plan is proposed as a way to get children and adolescents to routinely assume the responsibility for doing their assigned homework. In general, I promote using time-outs exclusively for all discipline matters with children and adolescents. In practice, time-outs have not proven to be particularly effective in addressing chronic problems with homework compliance. The Study Table Plan was developed as an add-on to the Time-outs for Teens program. It seems to work well both with students who passively procrastinate and dawdle over their homework and with those who are more defiantly rebellious.

Verifying homework completion: This plan is most effective when parents can enlist the cooperation of each of the student's teacher(s). The child should have an **assignment notebook** in which he writes down the assignments from each class every day. The teacher(s) are asked to sign off on each assignment listing verifying that what was recorded as the assignment actually is the assignment for that day. It is unreasonable to expect the teacher to actually write out the assignments for the child but most will comply with a request on the part of the parent that they sign the entry when the student takes the responsibility each day to ask the teacher to do so.

If the child can come home and demonstrate that all of the daily assignments are completed then there is no enforced study table routine for that day. A detailed review of the assignment notebook listings for the day and a cursory inspection of the student's work is all that is necessary to verify that the written assignments were satisfactorily completed. For reading assignments a few minutes spent quizzing the student on the reading material is well worthwhile, especially when the Study Table Plan is first introduced.

Where to put him for study table: With motivated responsible students for whom no Study Table Plan is necessary a desk in their bedroom works very well. For students that are having problems with self-discipline regarding their studies more oversight is necessary. Because of the need for monitoring, a child's room usually makes for a poor choice of study table spots. Most commonly a dining room or kitchen table make the best choice of study table locations. Ideally one wants a well-lighted surface for the student to work at which can conveniently be monitored by a parent but is free from obvious distracting or entertaining influences of nearby televisions, radios or others' conversations.

The best solution often comes from setting up a card table each evening on a temporary basis in a suitable location rather than limiting the choices to where existing furniture is permanently located. The parent needs to be able to monitor his or her activities sufficiently to assure that he or she either is at least going through the motions of studying or is doing nothing at all.

Rules of engagement: If the child has not completed all of his daily assignments by a specified time (e.g., 7:30 pm) then at that time he has to go to the designated study spot. The child is given the option to complete his daily assignments, demonstrate what he has accomplished and then go on about his business, **OR** sit there, if he chooses, without studying for the next two hours. In any event parental oversight will guard against non-study preoccupations such as television, phone calls, snacks, comic books, bathroom trips, etc.

If the review of his written work or his recollection of the reading assignment suggests that his efforts were clearly substandard, then he should be sent to the study table until he can demonstrate that he has satisfactorily completed the work or for the duration of the two hours, whichever comes first.

If the child neglects to bring home his assignment notebook, fails to get it signed by his teacher(s) or “forgets” to bring home the necessary textbooks, he sits at the study table for the entire two hours.

Control: Whether or not a child studies is an example of something that a parent can't directly control. Consequently no more than minimal efforts should be made to encourage, persuade or cajole the child into doing the work while at the study table. There is nothing in this plan which compels the child to do his homework. The rules are simply set up so that the child is likely to realize within a reasonable amount of time that it is to his advantage to do his homework. The parent's job is simply to establish and enforce the rules.

Implementing the Study Table Plan presumes that the parent can give the child the limited choice of sitting at the study table until the homework is done or for two hours, whichever comes first, and can make that stick. If the child becomes overtly defiant and refuses to comply with these limits then doing homework should not be at the top of the list of concerns about what to control. At this level of rebelliousness the Time-outs for Teens plan should be used to develop better self-control and compliance on the part of the child prior to tackling academic motivational problems.

Adjusting the length of time: The time limit for study table of two hours is a decision requiring some judgment. The target range is intended to be about two to three times as long as it would routinely take to complete the assignments if the child diligently applied himself to the task. Initially it might be best to aim for as short a study table time as can reasonably be expected to motivate the child to get productive. Although adjustments in the length of the study table time may be necessary, be prepared to set a rule and let it operate for at least a week before considering adjustments. The length of the study table time should not be adjusted on a daily basis based on the amount of homework that is assigned. Establishing a simple rule avoids the complications involved in opening up the matter for negotiation.

Circumventing rebelliousness: It is possible in the short term that the child will elect to passively sit there at the study table for two hours or more rather than to apply himself and complete his assignments. Generally after the novelty of being resolutely defiant wears off, even the most oppositional child will begin acting reasonably in his own best interest to reclaim free time in the evening. Regardless of whether a particular child is overtly rebellious or merely passively oppositional (i.e., passive-aggressive) the most effective stance for a parent to take is to set up the rules and then enforce them in as calm and dispassionate a manner as possible. It should appear to the child that the parent is perfectly content regardless of whether the child stays on-task while at study table or simply stays at the study table wasting time. Therefore, particularly with actively rebellious teenagers, avoid giving reminders, lectures, explanations or expressions of exasperation.

Laziness: Some children and adolescents have a remarkable degree of tolerance for *sitting and doing nothing*. To the extent that your child is genuinely passive rather than passive-aggressive you may have to exercise more patience in letting the plan do the work. Consider increasing the length of the study table session by thirty minutes each week and see if that helps (see Adjustments). You will have found the effective zone for the Study Table time when the child starts doing the homework at least occasionally. Don't keep the child there longer than about thirty minutes before bedtime.

Tutoring: Some homework assignments require a certain amount of parental involvement. For example, practicing spelling words when this is approached as a *practice test*, requires that a parent read the list of words in order to see if the child has learned the correct spelling. In contrast to the approach which may

appear obviously desirable for motivated self-disciplined students, working with less diligent students requires minimizing the direct involvement on the part of the parents. This is a crucial consideration with passive, passive-aggressive and rebellious children.

These concerns are more frequently seen with adolescents. A complication of trying to *help* your child with homework is that children and adolescents can get preoccupied with seeing how much of the homework they can get you to do. A responsible and well-meaning parent can readily be suckered into playing a game in which a passive child routinely gets further practice at evasive maneuvers. The critical point is to keep in focus who is responsible for what and hold the child responsible for everything about the homework that he or she can be responsible for.

When parental assistance is required this should be highly structured and limited to brief comments in response to specific requests on the part of the child. Try to avoid rambling dialogues. For example, with practice spelling tests, after the child has studied the words on his own the parent should read the words while the child writes them down. After the test is completed feedback from the parent should be limited to, "Good. You got them all right." or "You missed one/some. Go back and study some more and we'll try this again in a little while." There is no reason to point out to the child which ones are wrong or what the mistakes were. Figuring that out is the child's job. The same approach applies well in checking other homework that involves simple, easily checked objective answers such as most math and grammar exercises.

Jobs and other competing involvements: Weighing the priority of various competing claims on our time is a complicated task and one which has profound implications for shaping our lives. None of us do this flawlessly. Parents' judgment in this regard is certainly better grounded than that of children and adolescents, however, and sometimes parents have to make such choices for their offspring.

As a general rule, I would suggest that implementing the Study Table Plan around the constraints of job or sports practice schedules might be worth trying on a short-term trial basis. If the child knows that the fallback plan will involve curtailing extra-curricular activities, then he may buckle down and solve the problem in short order without the necessity of more drastic measures. It is good for adolescents to experience part-time jobs and/or extra-curricular commitments. These are areas, like academics, where they can experiment with handling more responsibility as well as to develop socially.

When the problem of academic underachievement is caught early, before a student has compromised his long-term educational options, then getting him back to performing up to his potential should be a high priority. Teenagers often see keeping their jobs so that they can keep their automobiles as a necessity. However, their eventual capacity for supporting themselves and their own families has more to do with the credentials established through education than with their minimum wage part-time jobs. Even for students who are not college bound, the essential skills of self-discipline are better instilled in school than in the unskilled labor market. It is only with teenager who has already squandered his prospects for a high school diploma and vocational training that maintaining a minimum wage job should become a chief objective.

Deactivating the Study Table Plan: When the Study Table Plan is implemented the terms under which it can be deactivated should be clearly defined in quantitative terms. "Until your grades are better." is not specific enough. The goal should be stated in terms of a particular grade point average or, for example, "No grades lower than a C." The standard has to be set with the student's individual capabilities in mind. For example, "No grades lower than a B, except math, which has to be no lower than a C." might be a reasonable standard for a student who has long been recognized as numerically challenged. For more talented students "Nothing lower than a B+." might be an appropriate standard.

Students who routinely get nearly straight A's are both smart enough and experienced enough at study skills to accurately predict how much effort will be necessary to maintain a particular grade point average. Less

successful students can almost always be counted on to underestimate how much work it will take to meet any clearly defined standard and they will have more difficulty keeping themselves motivated to make the extra effort. So, set a clear and reasonable standard and stick to the Study Table Plan until that standard is met. In most cases the consideration of whether to continue the Study Table Plan can be made when the next report card comes out. As soon as the student shows that his study habits are adequate to meet the standard he can be allowed to manage his study time on his own terms without parental oversight. If his grades drop below the standard once again, the Study Table Plan gets reactivated.

Conferring with the school: A conference with his teachers or school counselor might be necessary to assure that a reasonable standard regarding his grades is adopted. It may also help determine whether there are factors other than effort, which stand between him and acceptable grades. In the vast majority of cases effort, or self-discipline, is the crucial missing element. Even in cases where learning disabilities or emotional problems contribute to academic under-performance attention to the self-discipline factor will most certainly warrant attention as well.