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Teaching Task Initiation

Task initiation is the ability to begin projects or activities without procrastinating, in an efficient or timely manner. Using this skill can involve immediately beginning a task when it is assigned or deciding when a task will be done and beginning promptly at that predetermined time. We can all identify with the urge to put off tasks we like least, but because of their context dependence teens tend to opt frequently for activities that bring more immediate satisfaction, particularly those involving peers. (Imagine your teen’s response to a Saturday morning call from a friend who wants to go snowboarding or to the mall when the teen had planned to start a big history project or clean out the garage as promised.) To make matters worse, teens tend to overestimate the time available to complete a nonpreferred task and underestimate the time the task will take. (Suddenly your teen is “absolutely sure” the history project or garage cleaning will take only a few hours to finish and that there will be “plenty of time” to fit that in *after* snowboarding or shopping.) Teens with task initiation weaknesses won’t just indulge themselves sometimes; more often than not they will opt for the interesting or fun activity as a way both to gain some immediate pleasure and to avoid or escape the nonpreferred task. The result? In the preceding example, sloppy, scattershot research on the history project or a garage that will remain a mess “until next weekend, when I *promise* I’ll have time.”

How Task Initiation Develops

When our children are fairly young, such as in preschool, we introduce them to the notion of work and chores at a relatively simple level. We direct them

to clean up an area, put away toys, and the like, and we introduce the notion of “grandma’s law,” that the thing that is less preferred (for example, vegetables) comes before the thing that is more preferred (for example, ice cream). Most preschools reinforce these efforts by having designated cleanup routines in which all the students participate. A little later we start to put morning and bedtime routines in place and cue the children to start and finish them, which introduces the idea that activities are supposed to begin and end in a particular time frame. School gives them day-in-and-day-out experience with the importance of task initiation, and this, along with chores, continues to cement the importance of the skill.

Enter adolescence and a host of new interests—social media, video games, television shows, parties, driving—that feed context-dependent behavior. These interests and the increased freedom to pursue them serve as a direct impediment to task initiation. If we expect our teens to successfully manage the demands of school and to achieve their longer-term goals, they must be able to resist the urge to opt for the immediate “fun” activity and instead initiate work on a task that is less preferred but ultimately contributes to achieving the long-term goal. Find out how well your teen starts tasks with the questionnaire on the facing page. Feel free to photocopy it if you want to use the form more than once, such as for another teen.

Teaching Task Initiation in Everyday Situations

- *Whenever possible, use a goal that your teen has set as a way to work on task initiation.* A built-in incentive like driving or earning money will make your teen more likely to initiate a task because he has a higher stake in achieving the goal. Nonetheless, there are teens who still struggle with task initiation. If the goal is further off into the future or if the number of tasks involved in achieving the goal is large, beginning will still be a problem. However, because there is a built-in incentive, teens may be more willing to work with you on the steps to accomplish a goal.

- *If a task does not lead to a desired goal or that goal is not powerful, consider offering an external incentive.* Offer parts of the incentive along the way as the teen achieves certain benchmarks.

- *If a task seems overwhelming to your teen, encourage her to work with a teacher or perhaps to meet with you and a teacher to help break the task into more*

How Well Does Your Teen Initiate Nonpreferred Tasks?

For each item in the chart, first decide whether the statement to the left or right of *BUT* describes your teen better. Then rate the degree to which that statement applies to your teen. The number of items for which you chose the right-hand statement is an indicator of how much improvement your teen may need in the skill overall. Your ratings indicate possible targets for skill building: Where you chose “pretty much” or “very much” for a left-hand statement, your teen is demonstrating good use of the skill in that particular domain. “Pretty much” or “very much” for right-hand statements indicates areas that may need the most work.

Just a little	Pretty much	Very much				Just a little	Pretty much	Very much
			Some kids get started on homework right away.	BUT	Other kids put off homework as long as possible.			
			Some kids are good at making themselves set aside fun stuff to do homework or chores.	BUT	Other kids have a hard time pulling themselves away from fun things (video games, Facebook) to do work.			
			Some kids make a point of getting a quick start on long-term assignments.	BUT	Other kids wait until the last minute to start these assignments.			
			Some kids, if they decide they want something, start making plans right away for getting it.	BUT	Other kids spend a lot of time thinking about something they want, but never actually get started on the work needed.			
			Some kids are “go to” people when anybody wants something done.	BUT	Other kids aren’t likely to be asked by others to do things because they can’t be relied on to follow through.			

From *Smart but Scattered Teens*. Copyright 2013 by The Guilford Press.

manageable parts, with specific deadlines for each part. Teens are more likely to initiate tasks when the task doesn't appear to require large amounts of sustained effort. If your teen is open to working with you or a teacher, have her make a specific plan for when or how the task will get done. This provides more ownership and control over the process and can have a significant effect on a teen's ability to get started without excessive complaining or multiple reminders. Again, the emphasis here is on setting small steps.

- *Let your teen decide on deadlines and on cuing systems that would work best for him to trigger task initiation.*

Managing a High School Assignment

Three months ago Lakisha was assigned a 10-page paper. For a sophomore in high school, this is a tall order. Lakisha is especially worried because in the past she has had problems completing long-term assignments. Writing isn't difficult for Lakisha, and she actually has a talent for putting together papers that read well. Lakisha's problem is that she can never seem to get started on a task. When she sits down at her computer a month before the paper is due, she sits in the chair while looking at the cursor and has difficulty imagining how she will come up with enough information to fill 10 pages. Soon Lakisha is browsing the Internet, hoping that searching for research material will inspire her. Before long, the research websites have given way to Facebook and Youtube. Lakisha gets off the computer 2 hours later, well aware that she has squandered her time but at a loss for how to overcome the problem.

With 3 weeks left until the due date, Lakisha still cannot seem to get started. She thinks about going to her teacher and requesting a change in her topic. Maybe the reason she can't get started is that she is not interested in the subject matter. But Lakisha decides not to go see the teacher, because if she did she would be admitting that she still has not started her project. She considers asking her parents for help, but she does not see how they could assist, and besides, she wants them to see her as a grownup. So Lakisha sits on the problem and spends the next week thinking about how it might get solved.

Now, with 2 weeks left, Lakisha is getting pretty worried and starts to subconsciously doubt her ability to finish by the due date, but instead of confronting her problem, she pays even less attention to it, hoping that something will come along that will get her out of her predicament. The pages of her project

stay blank, but once or twice she does sit down and attempt to write. She is quickly discouraged, however, loses focus, and quits.

Fast-forward to 2 days before the paper is due. Lakisha comes home from school and finally cracks. She breaks down and tells her parents about the paper—that she has not even started it, never mind finished. Having seen this problem before, they indicate that they understand and tell her that they will do what they can to help her finish. That night, her father sits at the dining room table while Lakisha sits at her laptop. This helps keep Lakisha in the chair and off the Internet, and after struggling for 2 hours, she completes the opening paragraph. Using her father as a sounding board and editorial assistant, she outlines the remainder of the paper section by section and is able to complete four pages that night. She follows the same routine the second night, and while the paper ultimately totals only eight pages, she is satisfied that she has covered the topic in a reasonably thorough manner. When she gets the paper back with a C+ a week later, she is frustrated because she feels that she has put a lot of work into the project. In her comments, Lakisha's teacher recognizes flashes of creativity in the writing, but she notes that the disorganization and grammatical errors detract from what could be a much stronger paper. She does offer to let Lakisha edit the paper with the chance of increasing her mark by as much as a full letter grade. Lakisha initially refuses, but when her teacher offers to meet with her and talk about the changes, she decides to complete the edits and raises her grade to a B+.

Lakisha and her parents are happy with the outcome, but her parents are concerned that the larger problem remains.

“Lakisha, your mother and I are happy that this turned out as well as it did, but we haven't addressed the real issue of your getting started on things like papers in a timely fashion. Not every teacher is likely to be as willing to let you reedit or resubmit papers.”

Lakisha acknowledges her parents' concerns, but she is not sure how to address the problem, and they also are at a loss. Sitting with her to minimize distractions does not seem like an effective solution.

“I know what the issue is,” Lakisha offers. “I have trouble getting started, but it doesn't seem like a big deal at first because I figure I have plenty of time. Then the closer it gets, the bigger the project seems, and I have trouble starting at that point because I feel overwhelmed.”

Her mother offers, “When we've got a big job to do at my office, we break the task down into smaller components and set short-term deadlines for completion of these smaller pieces. Your teacher knows the issue and seems willing

It is hard to break things up into small chunks with things like writing that require some momentum.

—Tasha, age 17

Lakisha liked the idea, feeling that it would decrease some of the stress she feels when a big project is hanging over her head. She talked with her teacher about it, and they were able to work out timelines for her next project. Lakisha also found that, as part of doing this, she

Fixing procrastination takes time and a lot of effort. Having been that kid all my life, I can say that doing exactly what was played out is key.

—Matthew, age 18

to help. Maybe when she assigns a project, she would be willing to work with you on breaking it into a series of short-term objectives with specific dates, and you can set these up in your assignment book.”

It's a relief to have a way to overcome procrastination. I would like to see this plan used for all classes Lakisha takes.

—Lorie, age 16

could create outlines for these shorter objectives, which gave her a starting point for getting information down on paper, a strength of hers.

Q & A

Our teen seems to display similar problems. She can't seem to find a starting point, and the larger the assignment, the more trouble she has. How can we help her? And if this situation occurs, how can we encourage her to come to us before the eleventh hour?

Often teens with executive skills weaknesses cannot focus on a portion of the project; instead they view it as one big task, and as such it intimidates them and leads them to delay starting. This is why breaking up a large assignment into smaller component pieces right at the beginning helped Lakisha. First she found the prospect of the whole paper daunting, and so she put off starting. But ending up left with only 2 days to write 10 pages was even more overwhelming. Writing one page a week for 10 weeks is

I always feel like I do better under pressure, but I really don't. Organizing in the way presented at the end of Lakisha's story is a great way to free all of the stress and do a good job.

—Teo, age 15

something a teen like Lakisha could approach with less apprehension and more confidence.

If you think your teen is struggling to start on a paper, invite her to complete an introduction and an outline with you or with her teacher. Tell her not to think about finishing the entire piece, but to focus on writing down, in general terms, the areas and arguments she hopes to address in the body of the work. If you can get her to commit ideas to paper, she at least has a rough outline and a direction laid out.

Lakisha wasn't struggling with the process of writing itself, and maybe your daughter isn't either. But some teens who struggle with task initiation may be dealing with feelings of inadequacy about writing or about their intelligence. Don't forget, your teen may have a history of episodes like the one above. These may weigh on her mind and cause a sort of paralysis when it comes to starting a major assignment. Your teen may look back and feel that due to this difficulty with task initiation, she will not be able to commit to an idea and produce a piece of work that is representative of her true talent. In this case, your teen first needs reassurance from you and from her teacher that a good effort is all that is required. The second thing she needs is concrete evidence that she has or can find the information she needs. As a parent, you may be comfortable eliciting information from your teen about a particular subject. However, if you are not, then encouraging your teen to talk with the teacher is the better avenue to pursue. Some teens will be uncomfortable about this, feeling that they cannot explain or articulate the issue. Helping them formulate what they want to say and perhaps even working out a kind of mini-script will make it easier for them to approach a teacher, particularly if they have not done this at all or often in the past. A teen who worries about no effort or piece of work being good enough needs to start with the notion that something is better than nothing and that getting something done is better than being perfect. If everyone had to do everything to perfection, nothing would get done. Don't let your teen use fear as an escape route; not everything that she produces is the final verdict on whether her work has scholarly merit. For someone with even modest ability and task initiation problems, getting words on a blank page is the most important starting point.

We want our son to start looking for his first job. But for almost 2 months now, we've been going back and forth with him over this issue. We complain, and he says he's working on it. If we push harder, he might come home with an application or two. Our teen isn't lazy; he expresses a desire to have a job. He just can't seem to "get in gear."

This is a typical scenario for the teen with a task initiation issue. Applying for a job might seem simple to us, but to a teen it might represent a much more daunting or at least complex process: looking for available jobs, thinking about which ones might appeal to him, filling out applications, returning calls, setting up and attending interviews, making follow-up calls, and so forth. Even if a teen wasn't nervous about getting his first job (which most are), the list above can make finding employment look difficult enough for a teen to avoid it. Some ideas for finding jobs and task initiation in general include:

- *When the ball is rolling, keep it going.* Starting and stopping tasks can be the enemy of task initiation. Get your teen to spend a few hours filling out multiple applications and dropping them all off in succession. Offer to go with him. The job is done faster that way, and he won't feel like the process has been dragged out for days. It might seem self-evident, but often the best solution to task initiation problems really is to get your teen over that first hurdle and then keep him going for as long as he will tolerate.

- *Limited looking.* Suggest that your teen narrow down his job preferences before he starts looking for work. We aren't suggesting that teens have the right to be picky about jobs, but narrowing the scope of their search will keep them from getting overwhelmed. Get your teen to come up with three or four ideal job types and look into them. This is also important because of the chronological relationship between task initiation and goal-directed persistence; first you need to get a job, then you need to keep it. Getting work that you find agreeable makes all the difference in the world.

- *Stay positive.* Maintaining a generally positive attitude about your teen going through the job process is helpful. We aren't saying you need to be a cheerleader, but avoiding negative job clichés and extolling the benefits of working can't hurt your teen's willingness to start looking.