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The Homework Trap: How to Save the Sanity of Parents, Students and Teachers

Kenneth Goldberg Ph.D.

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The Homework Trap is a concept developed by Dr. Kenneth Goldberg to explain why certain children, regardless of how bright they are, are unable to complete their homework assignments. These children are typically misperceived to have emotional or behavioral problems when, in fact, they have under the radar learning problems which are preventing them from getting their assignments done. These learning problems are not severe enough to require special education, nor are they mild enough to be ignored. Parents and teachers alike think and say to these children “you could do so well, if you just tried harder.” The Homework Trap offers a new model for thinking about persistent homework problems. It considers homework noncompliance from the child’s point of view. Rather than focusing on what the child should do, or assuming that consequences can change behaviors, it looks to see why, in the face of penalties, the child will do anything but get his assignments done. The Homework Trap applies concepts from behavioral, developmental, and organizational psychology to explain, in simple, easy-to-understand terms, why parent-teacher efforts often make matters worse. Then, it provides practical solutions for rectifying the problem which are simple, yet radical at the same time. The methods are simple, because they require very few steps. They are radical, because they call for a conceptual change from parents and teachers alike. The Homework Trap enables parents of homework-trapped children to not feel ashamed. Typically, parents of homework-trapped children experience great pressure to make their children comply. Recommendations flow from the school to the parents with the covert message that the parents are not adequately managing their homes. While usually good advice, those recommendations may not fit in with the norms of those parents’ home. The Homework Trap allows the parents to take charge of the situation on their or their child’s behalf. The Homework Trap also gives parents a tangible tool, the book itself, to bring to the school and advocate for their child. The book is short, straightforward, and very much to the point. The concepts found in The Homework Trap are unique. They are written by a psychologist, not an educator, and one whose work is not limited to children alone. In that sense, The Homework Trap understands that problems with homework noncompliance accumulate over the years, with long term implications for adult life. The book moves our thinking from how to get this or that assignment done, to considering the best interests of that child, in a lifelong process.

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