

Some Thoughts for Teachers on Helping Teenagers Develop Task Initiation

I have long believed that this may be the last and hardest executive skill to reach full maturation. That's been both my personal and my clinical experience and I finally found a research article on the subject of procrastination that was consistent with this. It presented a developmental trajectory for this bad habit (which is the opposite of task initiation) that stated that *procrastination increases until the mid to late-20's and decreases gradually after that*. Another study, which surveyed college students, found that 87 percent reported that procrastination was a problem for them and 48 percent felt that it affected their grades. So, if your students struggle to begin tasks in a timely fashion, they are not alone. And if your students believe that once they finish school, they won't have to worry about their difficulty starting unpleasant or unappealing tasks, they are sadly mistaken. One of the reasons I tell parents that assigning chores to kids is a good thing because it teaches them, from a young age, that just about every day of their lives they are going to have to do something they don't want to do, so they might as well start practicing when they're young!

Here are some ideas for helping students improve this critical skill:

- Have them practice with brief, easy tasks. If they really struggle with this skill, separate task initiation from other executive skills that may also be hard (e.g., sustained attention, planning) or from academic asks that may be hard for them (e.g., writing). Tell them that the *only* purpose of the homework assignment is to practice task initiation, so they should select a task that is not one that they would choose to do for pleasure but that is not particularly aversive (e.g., putting their name at the top of homework assignments or opening up their math book to the homework assignment page). If students protest that this is not going to help them actually get their homework done, you can tell them they should feel free to do their other homework (although my guess is that this will be hard for them if they haven't been doing it up until now), but that the purpose of this homework assignment is simply to practice task initiation. Tell them that task initiation is like any other muscle—it needs to be strengthened, and it usually works best if you strengthen it gradually (e.g., you wouldn't go from doing one push-up per day to 50 without working your way towards that goal).
- Ask them to track their practice. The purpose of this is to help them build consistency over time. You could use a form like the one shown below (a complete version of this form is in the Appendix at the end of this paper). If kids are having trouble coming up with a very easy first task, then just having them complete this form may be that first step. They could complete the first four columns in school under your supervision and all they have to do when they get home is to check off the last column—but only if they checked it off at the appropriate time and place! The reason we ask students to name *where* they will work is because research on mental rehearsal shows that visually picturing yourself engaged in a specific task at some point in the future increases the likelihood that you'll actually perform the task.

Task Initiation Practice

Student: _____

Date	What will I do?	When will I start?	Where will I work?	Did It!

- One of the best ways to help students build task initiation is to have them make a plan with a start time—and then document whether they started the plan when they said they were going to. As a teacher, you have no control over whether your students do their homework. But if you ask them every day to make a homework plan (the Study Plan in the Appendix to this paper is one you might use) before they leave school, you’re at least helping them build the first step toward task initiation. Check back with them every day to see if they followed their plan. Reinforce them initially for any small step toward following their plan (even *thinking* about doing the work but deciding not to is better than not even thinking about doing the work!).

If they consistently make plans they don’t follow, then see if they can make a more realistic plan. For example, if they plan to do their math homework and they never do, see if you can get them to make a plan to do 2 items of their math homework.

When you check back with them and they report they didn’t follow their plan, don’t share with them your annoyance, irritation, or disappointment with them, because your emotion will add an overlay that is likely to make it harder for them to initiate the next plan. In the beginning, you may not even want to dissect with them why they’re not following their plan. You might say, “OK, clean slate. Let’s make a plan for tonight and see how that goes.” Or you might say (maybe after 2 or 3 or 10 days of not following through), “So it looks like we might have made this first step too hard. Can we cut back the plan to make it more do-able?”

- Identify the obstacles that get in the way of task initiation and then see if you and the student can find a strategy for overcoming the obstacle. This is a conversation you might have with an individual student or it could be a whole class activity. Below are some obstacles that interfere with task initiation for many students. The strategy column is left blank because strategies that are student-generated work way better than any I might suggest. If you’re doing this exercise with an individual student, your knowledge of the student should help give you ideas of strategies you can suggest the student try. When teachers are offering students suggestions, we always advise that they give kids several options to choose from. That way kids are involved in selecting the best idea—and if you give multiple suggestions it would make it more likely that those ideas would spark another idea that students think might work for them if they don’t like your suggestions.

Obstacle	Strategy
I don't understand the assignment.	
I can't think of how to start the assignment.	
I could probably do the assignment but it will take a lot of work and just the thought of that hurts my brain.	
The task is way too boring for me even to contemplate doing it.	
This assignment is pointless. I would get nothing out of doing it.	
The conditions for working aren't perfect—when they are, I'll get started.	
I have way too many things to do and don't know how to prioritize my time.	
It's going to take way too long and I don't want to commit that amount of time.	
There are other things I'd rather be doing that are more fun or more important to me.	
Wait, what assignment? When I leave school at the end of the day I put school behind me (i.e., the cues that remind me to do schoolwork are missing).	
The assignment isn't going to affect my grade so why bother (this is particularly an issue when schools use standards-based or outcome-based grading, and when the practice to help students meet the standard doesn't count toward the grade).	
Perfectionism—I'm not going to start because I know I won't be able to do work that meets my (impossibly) high standard.	
I'm stressed out about other things (either internal or external) and can't focus because of these preoccupations. I'll do better if I wait until my life calms down.	
I'm too tired. I don't have the energy to do this now.	
I don't want to do this because if I accomplish this, I'm scared of what comes next.	

People who procrastinate for any of the reasons listed above tend to view those obstacles as insurmountable. I remember a teacher telling a story in a workshop I attended a few years ago about a student with learning challenges in her class who never did his homework. She worked hard to come up with an assignment that might be appealing enough to the child that he would be tempted to do it. She finally found something and before he left, he told the teacher that he would do the homework. It was the first time he'd made that commitment, so the teacher was optimistic that he would actually do the work. The next day as the school day started, she asked him if he'd done the homework. He admitted he hadn't. "When I got home, I just didn't feel like doing the homework," he told her. At that point she turned to the class and asked, "How many of you didn't feel like doing your homework last night?" A good portion of the class raised their hands. She then asked, "How many of you did it anyway?" Most of those same students raised their hands again. The teacher commented that it was an eye-opener for that first student who

said he didn't feel like doing it. He'd just assumed that kids who did homework felt differently about the work than he did!

One of the articles I read on procrastination (Syrois and Pychyl, 2013) addressed the issue of negative mood and the effect it has on procrastination. The title of the article says it all:

Procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation: Consequences for future self. The point of the article is that when we procrastinate we assume that some "future self" will be better able to initiate the aversive task. The authors state: "We believe that tomorrow will be different. We believe that we will be different tomorrow; but in doing so, we prioritize our current mood over the consequences of our inaction for our future self." In other words, our future self will have to pay the price for our current inaction—and the assumption that our future self is going to feel better about doing the task than our present self does may be asking a lot of our future self! This may be a concept worth sharing with kids, but the main point is that whatever the obstacle to task initiation, the best approach is to find a strategy to overcome the obstacle *right here and right now* rather than assuming that we'll be in a better mood or more energized to do the aversive task at some point in the future.

- Have a conversation with students about the kinds of things they *don't* procrastinate on. This should include both the things they do for fun as well as the homework assignments that they tend not to put off. What conditions or tasks do they find are conducive to getting things done? Can they take any of those and apply it to the task they're procrastinating on? A student might report, for instance, that they don't procrastinate on homework assignments they know they can do quickly. Could the break a longer assignment down into shorter pieces that are equivalent in length to the short assignments they do pretty easily?
- Consider the idea of "structured procrastination." If you're going to procrastinate on a BIG task, can you do other, less aversive tasks while you're procrastinating on the big task? This was an idea developed by a guy named John Perry. He was a Stanford University professor who eventually expanded on the idea in a book he titled, *The art of procrastination: A guide to effective dawdling, lollygagging and postponing*. The essence of his argument is that if you're putting off some huge, aversive task, then rather than doing "nothing" as a way of avoiding the task, you structure your time so that you are doing less aversive things. In his essay, which can be found at his website (<http://www.structuredprocrastination.com>), he states, "the procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely and important tasks, as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important." He concludes, not without some self-congratulation, that structured procrastination is "an amazing strategy I have discovered that converts procrastinators into effective human beings, respected and admired for all that they can accomplish and the good use they make of time." The blog post is fairly short. You may want to have your students read the post and then talk about the merits of his argument in a class discussion.
- Ask your students if they might consider delaying a preferred activity until after they've finished (or made a start on) the task they're procrastinating on. Maybe their favorite thing to do after school is to stop by Starbucks and order a grande salted caramel mocha frappachino on their way home from school. Would they be willing to do that one small homework assignment first and use the drink as a reward? This can work if the aversive task is not so burdensome or time consuming that the student can't stand the idea of it. If you can't get the student to delay the drink until the work is done, could you get them to agree to do the work *while they're enjoying the drink*?
- Finally, check out Tim Urban's work. He writes a very entertaining blog called "Wait but Why?" in which he addresses all sorts of conundrums and things he puzzles about (like could it be

possible that there is no other life in the universe apart from life on earth?). My favorite column is one he called *Why Procrastinators Procrastinate?* He asserts that both procrastinators and non-procrastinators have in their brains a Rational Decision-Maker that is making good choices. Unfortunately, standing right behind the Rational Decision-Maker in the procrastinator's brain is the Instant Gratification Monkey, who pulls the Rational Decision-Maker off course by suggesting an array of fun but pointless ways of spending time instead of doing the assigned task. So the procrastinator ends up in "the dark playground" where he stays until the Panic Monster arrives to scare off the Instant Gratification Monkey. The blog post is accompanied by some very entertaining drawings, which your students might enjoy. You can find this blog post here: <http://waitbutwhy.com/2013/10/why-procrastinators-procrastinate.html> And if you or your students like this, you may also enjoy Tim Urban's TED talk on the same topic, available here: https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_urban_inside_the_mind_of_a_master_procrastinator

- He spends a good portion of the talk describing how he procrastinated in preparing the talk. Very entertaining!

If you have other suggestions for working with teenagers to help them overcome procrastination, please email me (dawson.peg@gmail.com), and I'll revise this paper.

Appendix
Two Forms for Encouraging Task Initiation

Task Initiation Practice

Student: _____

Date	What will I do?	When will I start?	Where will I work?	Did It!

Success rate: _____ %