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# The Activity Setting of Homework: An Analysis of Three Cases and Implications for Occupational Therapy

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An important goal of occupational therapy is to foster clients' participation in daily life. The daily lives of children occur mainly within their homes and schools. Homework is an occupation whose performance affects children's participation in both home and school. A qualitative study of parental self-reports of the strategies they use to foster their children's successful engagement in homework was conducted.

In this paper, we examine three cases from this study using the activity setting concept from the *ecocultural theory of family accommodation*. The three cases were chosen based on their diversity: ethnic and religious background, socioeconomic status, presence of a stay-at-home mother, and presence of children with special needs.

The analysis of these cases illustrates that strategies used by parents to foster their children's engagement in homework reflect their values and priorities, their expectations of their children, and their perceptions of their children's strengths and limitations. The concept of activity setting can be useful for occupational therapists to analyze family situations when they are developing home treatment programs.

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**H**omework, by definition, is a home-based occupation and one that is of interest to occupational therapists. Interventions of school-based occupational therapists often directly relate to children's homework performance (e.g., fine-motor and organizational skills). At the same time, pediatric occupational therapists may assign home treatment programs to children they treat. Although home treatment programs are not identical to homework, they share basic similarities in that they are both activities assigned by professionals to be performed at home. Therefore, understanding the nature and impact of homework on families may inform pediatric occupational therapy practitioners of lessons and skills they can carry over to the management of home treatment programs.

We begin this paper discussing similarities between homework and home treatment programs. Then, we present current knowledge on homework and a review of the ecocultural theory of family accommodations, our theoretical grounding. Finally, we apply this theory to three cases drawn from our ongoing research on homework in families who have children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and families with typically developing children. In our discussion, we return to home treatment programs, and suggest some guidelines that occupational therapists may use when designing home interventions.

*Homework*, "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours" (Cooper, 1989a, p. 7), is believed to increase the chance that students will spend more time engaged with academic content (Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, & Jayanthi, 2001). The purposes of homework are to enhance students' academic achievements; help them practice self-discipline; develop their study habits and skills such as perseverance, initiative, organizational ability, and responsibility; and also encourage parental involvement in their children's school life (Cooper, 1989b; Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Farrow, Tymms, & Henderson, 1999). Although homework assignments usually test

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material covered in class, their purpose is also to practice skills that will be essential for a child's future. Typically, homework is not tailored to individual students, however it is not uncommon for teachers to individualize it for children with special needs (Polloway, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi, & Cumblad, 1994).

*Home treatment programs* are tasks that are to be completed at home and are assigned to a child by a therapist. These tasks are based on the child's special needs and ideally should be tailored to cater to his or her specific strengths and limitations. Often these task assignments must be completed with parental supervision or assistance. The purpose of home treatment programs is to increase the opportunities for children with special needs to practice skills they learned in therapy, and to integrate these skills into their daily lives.

Both homework assignments and home treatment programs emanate from general considerations: curriculum and diagnosis-prognosis, respectively. In both cases, the final assignment may be adapted based on the child's actual progress and unique considerations. The purposes of both include development of skills that will promote and enhance sustainable participation in other areas of daily life. With both homework and home treatment programs, parents are expected to participate, though the nature of their participation depends on the specific tasks prescribed, and the strengths and limitations of their children. The main difference between homework and home treatment programs is that homework is considered an ordinary aspect of raising school-age children; parents take it for granted that they need to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burrow, 1995). Home treatment programs are considered an "additional" activity that has to be integrated into the family's life.

Typically, when homework and home treatment programs are assigned to a particular child, the child's success and well-being are the main (if not the only) consideration. The effect of these assignments on the family is often ignored. In earlier research, we found that if an effective intervention is the ultimate goal, therapists *must* understand how homework and home treatment programs affect the family and the home. In the first author's study of 17 families with children who have attention deficit disorders, she documented the frustration of the parents of these children as they discussed homework (Segal, 1998; Segal & Frank, 1998). At times, the mothers used war terminology (e.g., battles, fights, and war) to describe their interactions with their children regarding homework assignments. From interviews with eight mothers of preschool children with cerebral palsy, the second author concluded that these

mothers were not implementing home treatment programs, and adapted treatment techniques and strategies into their mothering styles because the programs interfered with their attempts to meet their children's other needs (Hinojosa, 1990; Hinojosa & Anderson, 1991). While discussing home programs, we recognized that home treatment programs are a form of homework. These insights led us to examine the literature related to homework, and to pursue a study of parental experiences and strategies used to engage children in homework, in order to determine if these same strategies could be applied to the integration of home treatment programs into a family's daily routine.

## Homework

Parental involvement in the processes of homework preparation and child education has increased as various school-improvement efforts have sought to enhance student learning. The literature suggests that parents believe it is their role to be involved in homework preparation and schooling (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). In 2001, Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues examined 59 published homework studies (1982–1999) and discovered three core reasons parents involve themselves in their children's homework: (a) they believe they should be involved, (b) they believe involvement will have a positive effect, and (c) they feel invited to become involved. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) noted that parent modeling, reinforcement, and instruction support a child's academic success. The authors discovered that parents choose specific homework management activities based on four factors: "(a) child-rearing values and assumptions about learning, (b) understanding of the purposes and goals of homework, (c) personal knowledge of strategies appropriate for supporting child performance or learning, and (d) responses to specific information, from teachers or children, about homework tasks and processes" (p. 203). Finally, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) concluded that parents varied in terms of the extent and type of involvement they had with homework. In some families, parents only establish supervisory and time management (e.g., a set time to begin homework or homework correction); in others, parents are actively involved in providing instruction and teaching.

Although research supports the belief that parental involvement in their children's homework has a positive effect (Sawyer, Nelson, Jayanthi, Bursuck, & Epstein, 1996), other researchers have expressed concerns about the possible negative influences of parental involvement on children's achievements and attitudes (Cooper, 1989; Levin

et al., 1997; Perkins & Milgram, 1996). Perkins and Milgram observed that homework can be a double-edged sword “having a positive influence, or [being] destructive and damaging, to achievement and attitude” (p. 197). Cooper’s summary of the homework literature listed the following potential negative effects: satiation (loss of interest, physical and emotional fatigue), denial of access to leisure-time activities, parental interference (pressure to complete assignments, confusion of instructional techniques), and cheating (copying and help beyond tutoring). Finally, Levin and her colleagues reported “correlations between self-reported tensions by both mother and child. Maternal reports of child’s tension indicate that both sides reciprocally suffer in this interaction: mothers who grow tense when helping their child, increase tension in the child and vice versa” (p. 224).

The child’s (and the parents’) abilities, skills, and limitations also influence each homework situation. Although all students face the challenge of completing homework, it seems to be especially problematic for children with disabilities (Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton, 1993). Children with disabilities have to complete homework despite challenges that their disabilities may present. The current trend of including children with disabilities in regular education is likely to increase their homework assignments (Bryan, Nelson, & Mathur, 1995). When a child with disabilities is assigned homework, his or her parents may be stressed by the added demands and expectations.

Homework is a complex family activity or occupation whose goal is to foster children’s academic success. Parental involvement in their children’s homework, however, may cause either positive or negative effects on the children’s attitudes towards homework and achievement as well as on the nature of parent–child relationships. A systematic analysis of homework situations or the activity setting of homework may illuminate the complexity of such situations.

## Ecocultural Theory

Family routines are commonly defined as the mechanisms for the organization and coordination of activities toward the achievement of the instrumental goals in a timely manner (Schuck & Bucy, 1997). Using this definition, family routines give order to daily life. This mechanistic view of daily routines is challenged by the ecocultural theory of family accommodations in its assertion that family daily routines are embedded in the family’s economic, social, and cultural environments (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989).

Ecocultural theory was developed from the findings of a longitudinal qualitative and quantitative study of families

with children with developmental delays (Gallimore et al., 1989). Based on their data analysis, the researchers concluded that families construct daily routines that sustain coherent and productive daily activities (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990). These daily routines reflect a family’s *ecocultural niche*—the set of particular ecocultural forces that affect it and reflects its material ecology (e.g., income, public health conditions, housing) and cultural features (e.g., beliefs and goals relating to the good and moral life, the origins and causes of handicaps, and the couple’s relationship).

Parents face the task of creating and sustaining a daily routine that serves the collective and individual needs and aspirations of all family members (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Kaufman, 1993). Families must respond in various ways to conflicts and problem circumstances to create and sustain daily routines. “Family accommodation refers to proactive, social construction actions of families to adapt, exploit, counterbalance, and react to many competing forces” (Gallimore et al., 1989, p. 218). Example of such forces are growing income needs, changing health, and marital role expectations. Even though most people have little direct control over their broader economic and social ecology, this accommodation process gives parents a way to influence how these forces affect their children (Bernheimer et al., 1993; Gallimore et al., 1989).

The process of accommodation is reflected in each of the activity settings of the family’s daily routines (Gallimore et al., 1989). Activity settings consist of: (1) who is present (parents, child, siblings); (2) their values and goals; (3) what tasks are being performed; (4) why are they being performed; and (5) what scripts govern interactions (Gallimore et al., p. 217). (“Scripts” refer to the nature of the interactions between adults and children in a family, including behavioral norms and rules, and consequences for breaking them.) Activity setting provides opportunities for children to learn and develop through modeling, joint participation, and other forms of mediated social learning that are embedded in goal-directed interactions (Bernheimer et al., 1993).

Successful accommodations result in sustainable activity settings and daily routines that promote the performance of desired activities. Therefore, examining parental reports of activity settings and analyzing them for their components may reveal potential accommodations (Gallimore et al., 1989). As mentioned earlier, we focus on homework because of its importance to pediatric occupational therapists as a child occupation as well as because of its similarities to home treatment programs. Our purpose is to illustrate how activity settings may be used to understand what hinders and promotes family involvement in children’s occupations.

## Methods

This paper draws on data from an ongoing exploratory qualitative study where parents of children with and without disabilities are interviewed about the strategies they use to engage their children in completing their homework. In this study, data are being collected through intensive interviews (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979) using an interview guide that includes exploratory questions. The recorded dialogue of each interview is transcribed verbatim noting significant nonverbal behaviors. A field log, containing the researcher's notes on his or her observations, communications with participants, experiences, methodological concerns, and personal reflections, is being maintained.

Data analysis, using qualitative techniques such as inductive analysis of data, triangulation of methods of analyses, independent observer analysis, and peer support and review (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Ely, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), has provided support for the appropriateness of ecocultural theory in guiding future investigations. Three cases from this study have been selected and analyzed for the components of activity setting. The cases were selected based on their diversity: ethnic and religious background, socioeconomic status, the presence of a stay-at-home mother, the presence of children with special needs, and the gender of the parent supervising the children's homework.

The purpose of this analysis is to illustrate the use of the activity setting concept for analyzing occupations and to discuss its potential usefulness for occupational therapy.

## Cases

In this section, we present the cases using quotes and in-depth descriptions and analyses. At the end of each case, we use the five components of the activity setting to organize the data gathered. Finally, we discuss how specific families adapt themselves to respond to their children's homework.

### *Rob, Father of Typically Developing Children*

Rob, who has two daughters—Leticia and Marie, 6 and 9 years of age, respectively—and a 4-year-old son, was interviewed once. Married for more than 10 years, he and his wife are of African-American West Indian descent. Rob and his wife are both upper-middle class professionals, living in a New York City suburb that is racially mixed and has a reputation for good schools. All three children attend a public elementary school. When describing his children, Rob highlighted each child's unique personality and their shared love of music. Rob stated that, as parents, he and his wife

provide their children with a safe environment that fosters an appreciation of their cultural heritage. Family daily routines are highly scheduled and the parents closely monitor their children's activities. Family activities are structured around homework, related learning activities, and the daughters' extracurricular activities. Rob described a typical weekday afternoon schedule:

*When they get home, they go straight to do homework. They get settled, put away their stuff, and go straight to their homework. . . . Sometimes they get to have their afternoon snack with their homework, but they head straight to their homework. There is no gap! After they are finished with their homework, then their homework gets reviewed.*

On days when there are many extracurricular activities:

*All homework has to be done and . . . checked. [If] homework still needs to get done [and it is too late at night] . . . they will wake up early, we'll wake them up in the morning to start, get their homework going and check them.*

In these excerpts, Rob relates the importance of doing homework by describing how the afternoons are scheduled to facilitate the completion of homework and how—when the schedule does not work out—the children do their homework in the morning.

In addition to completing homework, Rob indicates in his narrative that the *correct* completion of homework is just as important. Rob describes what he looks out for in his daughter's homework and how he addresses issues regarding their performance:

*We explain to them when they are wrong. Sometimes, there were issues. At times, their homework was written sloppy or not done neat enough. So, it had to be redone. . . . Regarding issues of understanding, we work through them. We get a sheet of paper, and I explain the steps where they went wrong and we go back and fix it.*

From Rob's account, there are two issues that may occur with his daughters' homework: the neatness of the work and issues of understanding. Sloppy work is not tolerated; the homework needs to be copied again. When one of the daughters makes a mistake in the homework, Rob invests time to explain the error before fixing it. Rob uses the homework to make sure that his daughters understand all aspects of their academics. These foci indicate two values that are important to Rob: learning and doing a good job (in terms of both content and form).

Rob also facilitates the completion of homework by adapting the nature of help he gives his daughters depending upon their skill level:

*My 9-year-old, she wants to do her homework and she can do her homework on her own. If she has questions, she'll ask me. But, it will still get reviewed by me. My 6-year-old reads the instructions to me, her homework, so we want to make sure . . . she uses the proper words and understands what they mean. So*

*she reads the instructions, then she's on her own, and then she comes back and checks back each sheet.*

In terms of the activity setting, Rob and his daughters are the *individuals* participating in doing homework. The *value* that Rob reveals in his narrative is his belief in the importance of academic success and learning. The *goals* of Rob's participation in this activity are to make sure that his daughters understand the material taught in school, and learn to read and follow instructions, and that they do a neat job (i.e., attention to details).

In terms of the *tasks* that are being performed, his daughters are doing the tasks that were assigned at school and, if needed, corrections assigned by Rob. Rob's *tasks* consist of scheduling time for homework, tutoring (i.e., ensuring they understand instructions, and that they understand and learn from their mistakes), and checking homework for correctness and neatness. The reason Rob performs these tasks is to ensure that homework goals are met. The *interaction* Rob describes is one of cooperation. The daughters seem to follow the structure and directions that their father gives them.

### *Eileen and Robert, Parents of Two Typically Developing Children*

Eileen and Robert have two children: 14-year-old Jane and 9-year-old Harry. Each parent was interviewed twice separately. Eileen is a nurse who works nights. Robert owns a hardware store. The family lives in a suburb of New York City and the children commute to attend a private Catholic school. Each parent talked about their children in terms of their idiosyncratic personalities. Because Eileen is the parent most involved with the children's homework, we use quotes from her interviews. When asked about homework, she began by describing each child's distinctive approach to organizing his or her time to do homework. About Harry, she said:

*He usually initiates the start of the homework. He'll usually plan what he's going to do. He'll say, "I'm going to start with my math because I have a lot of it." Or, "I am going to do...my language arts because I know I can get that done before I have to go out" or whatever. He's, like, getting into the habit. So, his habit is to just come home and get it done.*

Harry's homework is an important occupation that he feels he must complete regardless of his extracurricular activities. He begins his homework as soon as he gets home and has a snack. Additionally, Harry prioritizes which part of his homework to begin with and makes sure that he can complete as much as possible before he leaves for his other activities. Eileen does not check Harry's homework for accuracy. Eileen's only supervisory activities with Harry relate to tests and long-term projects:

*But I always ask him if he has any tests. Does he have a project? Does he have anything that he needs from the library—like for the next day or another day—that week. But, I don't really look at his homework to see if it's done.*

Jane, 5 years older than Harry, does not begin homework at a fixed time. Eileen helps Jane organize herself and her time so that homework is not delayed until it has to be done late at night:

*I'll usually start with a reminder that's it time to get started, because she'll typically want to put it off—maybe wait and be up too late at night. So, I do more prodding there. But, once I remind her, then she, she gets right into it—after a little break. She needs a little break after school—so that's why she goes on the telephone, on the computer—but then she'll get down to it. . . . You know, I try to help her pace herself a little bit. If she is doing something, like a practice tomorrow, I try to find out. If there is anything due the next day—I try to organize her.*

Both Harry and Jane are good students with their own unique approach to homework. Eileen gets involved with the actual performance of homework only when the children ask for help. Both children sometimes need help with their math homework.

*With math, Harry needs help sometimes, and I do try to help him. But sometimes we get into a big conflict—so I have a math tutor that comes two or three times a month. She usually comes on the big homework nights, which are Monday nights. . . . Occasionally, I help Jane with math. I usually can help her. You know, once or twice I've asked the tutor to come and help Jane for math. Something I just really don't know, but for the most part she'll solve a problem. I'll show her how to do it and then she'll be able to follow through. . . . So she doesn't have any big problems with homework.*

Eileen stated that the only actual difficulty with homework is with Harry over math. Eileen does not explain math the same way Harry's teacher does, and this upsets Harry. The solution is a tutor. Jane, on the other hand, does not get upset by the way Eileen explains math problems and the tutor is engaged only if Eileen does not know the math.

In terms of activity settings, the *individuals* who participate in homework are Harry, Jane, Eileen, and the math tutor. During another part of the interview, Eileen said that she and her husband decided to leave their children in the Catholic school after they moved away from the immediate neighborhood because they liked the academic demands, discipline, high expectations of the children's moral character, and religious values of that school. The *value* revealed in the activity setting of homework is thus the importance of academic performance and success. Additionally, the nature of Eileen's supervision may indicate that she values self-directed and responsible behavior. Eileen's *goal* in supervising her children's homework is to facilitate their independent performance of homework. In terms of the *interactions*

around homework, Eileen managed to maintain a gentle and pleasant interaction style. Her children did not need a lot of imposed structure; they seemed to have internalized it with varying degrees of success. Hiring the math tutor on a regular basis supported achieving the goal of completing homework and also enabled Eileen to maintain her own style of interactions with her children during homework.

### *Judy and Mark, Parents of Children With Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder*

Judy, Mark, and their three children (11-year-old Joe, 9-year-old Michael, and 7-year-old Heather) live in a middle-class neighborhood with small houses and well-kept lawns. Judy was interviewed once by herself and again with Mark. Judy is a stay-at-home mother and Mark is an auditor. Their two sons, Joe and Michael, both have a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Both parents discussed the daily challenges they face raising two boys with ADHD, including relating to the children's different personalities and dealing with the manifestations of ADHD. Both boys take medication for their hyperactivity as well as mood stabilizers.

Although Joe has some difficulties completing his homework, Michael poses the main challenge for his parents. As Mark said, "Some days, he's OK, and some days, he's just a terror." On days when Michael is a "terror," he will do "anything and everything not to do the homework," Mark said. "You literally have to chase him around the house to have him sit down to do the homework." Judy concurred, adding that "then someone has to be like within two feet of him." Once Mark or Judy manage to make Michael sit down, other issues come up. For example, "He doesn't write everything down and...he'll forget the book he was supposed to do the homework in, or forget the homework assignment or whatever it is." Even when the homework has been brought home and is clear, there are issues relating to Michael's handwriting. For example, there are difficulties completing the weekly homework assignment of finding the definitions of 20 words and using them in sentences. Mark reports:

*[Michael will] sit down and just get the definition out of the dictionary. And then he starts, "Well, I don't know what to write." . . . It's got to the point where we don't even ask him to write it out...just go on the computer and type it on the computer. He doesn't even want to do that. So, more often than not, one of us is sitting with him at the computer and saying, "OK, what are the words?" . . . I mean, we'll type the word out and say, "OK, give me a sentence." Some days, he's cooperative and he'll think of a sentence. Maybe not an appropriate sentence; then I'll suggest, "What about this one?" "Oh. OK." Then, I'll type it out and go on, and go on.*

When Michael does not want to do homework, the experience is quite different according to Mark:

*I sat down with him and he wouldn't do it. It was a struggle. It was torture for me. I kept telling him, "Look, you have to get this done by eight o'clock." I forget what time it was, maybe six thirty. We finally got to sit at the computer and I said, "Let's do this." I could see it would take a long time. I said, "Well, you have got until 8:00 and whatever you have done, that's it. You can go to school and explain to your teacher why it's incomplete." I said, "That's it—8:00 is your cutoff time and you're going to go to sleep." He's...grumping and moaning and did one word. It will take 20 minutes to do the next word. He's looking in the book and he's just got a mind frame . . . We didn't really get much done. I said, "That's it, over and done...I had to drag him, I literally had to pick him up and take him upstairs and put him in bed.... The very next day, he has a new assignment. Whether it was the same assignment or it might have been a different assignment, we had to do sentences again. He had 20 words. . . . We did [it in], I think, like 10 minutes. . . . He just sat there with me and I typed it out.*

In terms of *individuals* involved in the activity setting, Mark and Judy are always present when the children do their homework. It is hard to interpret or find the specific *values* they attach to doing homework except through the interpretation of their behaviors in the cultural context. That is, their values regarding homework relate to fulfilling school expectations, and academic success. The actual *tasks* being performed depend on whether it is a good day for Michael. On a good day, when given a spelling assignment, Michael looks up the definitions, comes up with the sentences, and his father or mother types them into the computer for him. On difficult days, just getting Michael to sit down and attend is a major task for his parents.

Similarly, the interaction between Michael and his parents fluctuates with changes in Michael's behavior and ability to attend. On good days, the interaction consists of Mark giving Michael feedback about the content of the assignment. On difficult days, the nature of the interaction is confrontational. At this point, Mark and Judy enforce doing homework by threatening Michael with negative consequences at school and by physically handling their son. In other words, the accommodations that Mark and Judy have done to the activity setting of homework do not seem to be effective in constructing a sustainable productive homework situation with Michael.

Although further investigation of the situation is needed to draw conclusions on other possible accommodations that might be effective, it seems that the components of the activity settings may be used to explore possible avenues of change. For example, rethinking the goals of homework for Michael and his parents, developing new homework strategies to change the nature of parent-child interactions,

identifying the tasks that Michael has to perform, or finding an alternative to constant parental presence during homework (e.g., have Michael do homework during an after-school homework program).

## Discussion

The cases presented above are based on self-reported parental experiences of doing homework with their children. Activity setting, as defined in ecocultural theory, was used as a framework to analyze homework activities in the context of the families' lives. When comparing the cases according to the elements that make up the activity settings, we can see similarities and differences across families.

Among the similarities across the families are the values and goals embedded in homework. The *values* of learning, academic success, and development of good work habits, are all culturally relevant goals (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). The three families valued their children's academic achievement and adjusted their lifestyles to ensure that their children could complete homework. For the two families with typically developing children, this was an easy process guided by the individual child's abilities, personality, and needs. The parents of the children with ADHD also attempted to construct routines but failed because of their children's inconsistent behavior.

The *goals* of the parents' involvement in homework were congruent with their values and they made an effort to ensure that homework was done correctly and in a timely manner. Except for one occasion in relation to math homework, parents and children were the only *individuals* involved in homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

The main differences between the cases were in the *tasks* and nature of the parent-child *interactions* (scripts). The tasks parents are involved in varied from Eileen's querying Harry about long-term projects to Mark's actually typing his son's homework for him. These variations can be attributed to the children's differing abilities and needs that vary according to their ages. For example, typically, an older child needs less supervision and direct help. The nature of parental involvement is also influenced by the child's personality. For example, with Jane, who is an older child and perceived by her mother to be somewhat disorganized, her mother is involved in organizing and completing Jane's homework. On the other hand, Jane's younger brother, Harry, is a highly organized child who independently structures his homework routines; his mother is not involved in helping him organize and complete his homework. Children with special needs, such as the symptoms of ADHD in the case of Michael and his parents, Mark and Judy, may require that the parents be more involved and

even do some of the homework tasks themselves. Interestingly, the homework literature for parents of children with ADHD focuses on providing parents with strategies on how to get the homework done and to develop their children's work habits (Cooper, 1989b, 2001). In general, Mark and Judy's approach to homework is consistent with typical adaptations parents make to get their children to complete homework. The quality of homework completion may be closely monitored by parents as they believe that teachers and other professionals will judge them based on the quality of their child's homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

The nature of parent-child interactions in the context of homework is partially influenced by the child's behavior and cooperation. The actual interaction around homework for a child with disabilities is related to the issues surrounding homework tasks rather than the content of the homework itself. For example, the parents of a child with ADHD may have to deal with getting the child to attend or focus on the task itself, regardless of the content. When the child refuses or is unable to attend, then a confrontation may develop. When a parent assists a typically developing child, the focus of the interaction is usually related to the content of the homework. For example, parents may help get a library book, check and correct homework, or engage in problem solving (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

In this study, the nature of the parent-child interactions varied within and between families depending on the type of homework tasks and the degree of children's involvement in the homework. When children could not do a task and parents could not help them do the tasks, parent-child interactions tended to become confrontational. In the example of Eileen and her son Harry, math homework was the only task that produced negative interactions. The problem was that Eileen was unable to present math material in the same format as the classroom teacher. Harry, when interacting with his mother, focused on how she presented material differently from the teacher rather than on the math problems themselves. Once Eileen realized that her teaching style was not acceptable to Harry, she hired a math tutor. This resolved the situation and prevented negative interactions with Harry. In the case of Mark and Judy, their son Michael's cooperation with his parents regarding homework completion varied depending on his mood. Sometimes he readily engaged, and at other times, he refused to participate. Michael's inconsistent behavior makes the construction of a sustainable homework routine impossible. This lack of a sustainable routine leads to parent-child interactions that are focused on the routine itself rather than the homework content. Additionally, the homework may not be fully accomplished in the way it was

intended to be accomplished: by the child himself. In the case selected for this paper, it seems that the parents of the child with ADHD were unable to establish a sustainable homework routine.

Activity setting analyzes the setting differently from the traditional occupational therapy focus on activities or occupation. In addition to the activities or tasks, ecocultural theory focuses on the values, goals, and interactions around the tasks being performed. This focus facilitates understanding the meaning of activities to particular families and the adaptation of their performance to construct and sustain the families' ecocultural niche. The fact that all families included homework in their daily routine indicates that this is an important aspect of their ecocultural niche. The fact that the tasks that parents and children performed in relation to homework differed within and among families indicates that homework is an activity that can be analyzed and adapted to different situations.

### *Homework As a Valued Activity*

The data from this study suggest that parents and children must value an activity in order to fully participate in it, especially if there are challenges involved in the performance and completion of the activity. The values that parents and children have for an activity are influenced by the family life situation, culture, and the participants' skills. When therapists suggest treatment programs to be conducted at home, it is critical that they consider parental values, individual attributes and abilities, culture, context, developmental status, and the socioeconomic status of the family in question. When activities are not valued, parents and children may not participate.

In addition to valuing an activity, the activity must also fit into existing family routines. Family routines give order to life and help organize family life (Fiese et al., 2002). In many ways, family routines are the operational application of family values. Routines ensure that families have adequate time and space to participate in valued tasks. When suggesting treatment activities, it is essential that therapists appreciate and understand family routines.

Homework is a valued activity. Family routines, as illustrated in our data, are constructed with homework completion as an important end-goal. Mark and Judy, for example, adjusted family routines to accommodate their children's needs even when that meant negative parent-child interactions. However, in their qualitative study, Hinojosa and Anderson (1991) reported that mothers of children with cerebral palsy did not carry out home treatment programs as prescribed by therapists. Instead, these mothers adapted their family routines and existing activities to meet other pressing needs of their children that they felt had higher pri-

ority. Although both Hinojosa and Anderson and the current paper cannot be used to draw definite conclusions, they can be used to indicate that fitness of home treatment programs with family values and current family activities may contribute to family adherence with therapeutic activities.

Hinojosa and Anderson (1991) found that the mothers they interviewed commonly felt that they did not have the skills to engage in home treatment programs as prescribed by therapists. Eileen, in the second case described above, said a similar thing about helping her son with his math homework. Eileen's solution was to hire a tutor to do that. Mark also described a similar situation with his son over math homework. Again, definite conclusions cannot be drawn based on these studies. However, attending to parental feelings of competence in following home treatment programs may contribute to better adherence to the therapist's recommendations.

In the cases and discussion above, the nature of the homework interactions between parents and children seems to be the main component that influences the relationship between parents and children. The nature of the interactions seems to be related to the nature of the tasks, to the children's ability to perform the tasks, and to the children's willingness to engage in these tasks. We suggest that the effect of a home treatment program would be similar for the family. First and foremost, families will engage in home treatment programs only if they can be incorporated into an activity setting that reflects the family's ecocultural niche. Parental commitment to the home treatment program begins with the value they attach to it. This value is not the importance of helping the children, but the value they ascribe to the actual activities they and their children need to engage in. For example, in Hinojosa and Anderson (1991), mothers did not engage in and did not follow up with activities that were painful or uncomfortable to their children. One of their values was to not impose physical pain on their children. This value was more important than the therapeutic goal of stretching their children's extremities.

## Summary and Recommendation

Even when their interventions are developed from a family-centered philosophy, therapists frequently concentrate on children's development of skills to the exclusion of all else. Interventions are designed focusing on skill development and performance rather than other processes or situations that influence the children's performance. When providing interventions, but especially home interventions, therapists must consider the processes or factors that surround the



accomplishment or achievement of the activity. Parents are given treatment instructions by therapists that describe outcomes; they are not always given strategies to match the activities with their specific child's behaviors or the realities of their home environments. For home treatment programs to be effective, however, they must be integrated into the family's routines. Therapists should provide parents with guidelines for adapting tasks so that they fit into the family's ecocultural niche.

This paper is based on three cases. These cases are used to illustrate the interactions among the different components of activity setting in the context of homework. Considering the nature of this study, the findings' generalization is limited to the conceptual aspect of the paper.

In spite of the tentative nature of the conclusions, therapists may explore the following issues with families when planning home treatment programs:

1. Parental values and priorities: What is important for parents in terms of their child's daily performance and its effect on the family? For example, making a mess during dinner may be considered disruptive to the family dinner. Therefore, directing parents to help their children to eat independently at other times, and other strategies to avoid the mess and its cleanup (e.g., putting old newspapers on the floor) may be needed.
2. Investing time in training parents in the skills needed to follow the home treatment program.
3. Discussing with parents their interactions with their children during home treatment program activities and suggesting ways to make these interactions positive and rewarding.

In order to strengthen these initial exploratory findings, future studies should continue to explore the relationships among the components of activity setting and the context of different activities and occupations. ▲

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