

Homework haven

Tips for setting up the perfect spot for your child to do take-home assignments

By René A. Guzman
STAFF WRITER

A couple of years ago, Simón Salas tackled one of his most important homework assignments: Make the ideal homework environment for his teen son, Daniel. Salas and his wife, Anita, redid Daniel's bedroom to make the grade. They pulled up the carpet and put down wood laminate, repainted the room a quiet shade of blue and added new blinds to adjust for light. And Daniel helped in the desk shopping, from clicking it at Amazon.com to assembling it at home. "It was a

fun thing to do together. . . . We made the study space fit the child," said Simón Salas, COO of Academica SouthWest, a professional services company that works primarily with public charter schools. Students of all ages need a quality space to take on their take-home coursework. And while there's nothing wrong with the kitchen table, even that go-to staple should serve as a quality desk away from school. When it comes to homework "kids really need to have that structure and they need to know exactly what is expected of them," said Rafael Scarnati, director at Learning Foundations, a diagnostic and learning center in San Antonio. And that homework space, when structured with some smarts and heart, can do wonders for your beloved pupil. Here's how to set it up.

Eliminate distractions. Wherever your child does homework, choose a clean, quiet and uncluttered spot. Turn off the TV and the smartphone. And make sure the area is well-lit, preferably with as much natural light as possible.

Have supplies handy. Jeanette Guerrero is lead family specialist for the North East Independent School District. She advises parents to create a homework box with pencils, pens and other necessary supplies. That way no one has to scramble for items at the last minute. Another must-have: a print dictio-

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Slideshow: For more ideas on how to set up a quiet, comfortable and age-appropriate homework spot.

There's an app for pregnancy

By Salvador Rodriguez
LOS ANGELES TIMES

When it comes to getting pregnant, the size of your data does matter. That's the premise behind Glow, an app for the iPhone and iPad that couples can use to figure out the best time to try to get pregnant. The app predicts a woman's chances of conception on a particular day based on a personal survey the user takes each day. Among those behind the free app is PayPal co-founder Max Levchin, who announced the app earlier this year saying he wanted to make a difference in the health industry with the use of data analytics. According to the company, some of Glow's co-founders have had fertility challenges of their own or have seen friends



A phone app from Glow Inc. compiles data to help women track fertility.

struggle with conception. The company wanted to apply big data toward fertility as well as make it easier for couples to have access to fertility treatments.

"Our emerging ability to Fertility continues on D8

'Nerds' play the hands they were dealt

By Melissa Harris
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Josh Dillon's sister nicknamed them "the nerd herd." That was back when Dillon and seven high school friends would lug their computers and monitors to their parents' basements, wire them together and play games until the wee hours. Now in their mid-20s, the group has created the top-selling toy or game on Amazon. Called Cards Against Humanity — "a party game for horrible people" — the edgy card game and its three expansion packs occupied Nos. 1, 3, 4 and 5 on Amazon's best-seller toy list as of last week. "This game has corrupted my children," one mom told two of the co-creators at the company's booth at Gen Con, a large gaming convention in Indianapolis. Then she bought all three expansion packs. "We hoped it was a good idea, and we thought it was funny," said Max Temkin, a



Eli Halpern (from left), co-founder Max Temkin, Dave Pinsof and Eliot Weinstein of Cards Against Humanity LLC.

co-creator who has become something of the public face of Cards Against Humanity. "But it's our weird nerd humor that we were, like, made fun of for our whole lives. So how are we supposed to know?" Here's how it works. One player, the judge, picks up a black card: "In the new Disney Channel Original Movie, Han-

nah Montana struggles with (blank) for the first time." Players then submit the funniest card in their hand that completes the sentence. Some combinations end up absurd, others are obscene. One answer: "Horrible laser hair removal accidents." Or option B: "Poor people." (Of- Cards continues on D3

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nary.

"It's really easy to go to the computer and look at spell-check," Guerrero said. "But we really want (students) to have those dictionary skills."

Pick a homework time and stick to it. Scarnati says there is no one-size-fits-all homework time, so coordinate one that works best with your schedule and your child's. Then make sure your children consistently do their homework at that time.

Guerrero suggests a homework time before extracurricular activities, if possible, so a child isn't too tired to concentrate. And if your kid doesn't have homework, Scarnati says, he or she should still engage in brainy activity during that learning-dedicated time, even if it's just reading a book or doing a puzzle. Again, consistency.

About that kitchen table . . .

Yes, the kitchen table works fine as a homework spot — provided your child uses it when there's little to no foot traffic around it or casseroles on it. Besides, it may be more comfortable for younger kids. Speaking of which . . .

Keep elementary-age children close. Take it from Lisa Branch, owner and director of the LearningRx San Antonio Northwest Brain Training Center: "We shouldn't send elementary-age children to their room to do their homework."

Branch works with students of all ages, some with learning disabilities and others who strive to hone their cognitive skills. She says elementary-age kids especially need assurance from a parent in person during homework time.

'Tweens and teens are fine on their own. As for high school and junior high students, Branch says they're independent and self-reliant enough to do homework in their bedroom or another room dedicated for study. By then they should know the homework drill anyway.

Get a basic desk. Need to buy a homework desk? Whether you hit a store or a yard sale, look for something simple and size-appropriate. You want



Ryan McVay / Getty Images

Need a homework desk? Whether you hit a store or a yard sale, look for something simple and size-appropriate.



Andersen Ross / Getty Images

The kitchen table works fine as a homework spot — provided your child uses it when there's little traffic around it and no food on it.

your young one to concentrate on the schoolwork at hand, not the desk it sits on. Branch says your teen or child should be able to comfortably fit their elbows atop the desk and sit with their legs underneath it.

Scarnati encourages parents to involve their child in the desk-buying. If you're shopping secondhand, he recommends having your child help paint or touch up the desk for that extra sense of ownership.

Get the right chair, too. "A child-appropriate chair is a really important thing," Branch said. She recommends a desk chair just high enough so your child's feet touch the floor, or at least a chair with a rail they can put their feet on to keep still and focused.

Choose soothing colors. Avoid distracting reds or yellows in a homework area. Look for calming blues, dark green, beige or white.

Offer easy computer access. Scarnati notes that middle and high school students usually need a computer for their studies. Make sure that laptop or desktop sits at arm's reach, again free from distractions. Branch advises parents to occasionally check on their teen to make sure they're actually doing homework, not instant messaging or updating their Facebook status.

Use a timer. Branch suggests a timer for homework time, especially for kids who have trouble focusing or cringe at certain

subjects. Have them work steadily for 15 minutes, then take a 5- or 10-minute break and get back to work.

"That can increase focus," Branch said. "Also parents can use that to stretch that (homework) time."

Maintain a good attitude. Guerrero stresses connecting positive emotions with homework. Never use it as a punishment for kids.

"Homework is just a reinforcement of what they've learned during the day," Guerrero said.

Most important, get involved in your child's homework. We don't mean do it for them. But you'd be amazed how much you can help with just a simple show of support.

"The biggest thing is that the child has a comfortable sitting area with a supportive parent next to them or nearby," Branch said. "And that's for every age."

rguzman@express-news.net
Twitter: @reneguz

CARDS

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fensive, but that's by design.)

The judge selects a favorite response, and the player who supplied it wins the round. The contest repeats itself with a new judge and a new black card until "someone flips the table over in frustration," the creators say.

"My daughter brought this game home from college and it is the most tasteless and disturbing game I've ever seen," a fan from Houston wrote on the company's Facebook page. "We played for hours and laughed until we peed ourselves. . . . Make more cards!"

That's what they're doing. A UK edition and carrying case are set to launch this year. Temkin will reveal little about other upcoming projects and declined to disclose revenue figures other than to say the co-creators have sold hundreds of thousands of decks. They also are working on a new comedy game for release in 2014.

Meanwhile, at Gen Con, the Cards team is holding a contest to find an undiscovered board game to support. They received more than 500 entries in their Tabletop Deathmatch competition. The group will promote and fund the first printing of the winning game in return for bragging rights and more industry experience.

Cards Against Humanity "certainly isn't the type of thing we ever expected from this particular group of boys," said Karen Dillon, Josh's mom. "I don't know if Josh told you what he's doing for a living."

Cards Against Humanity's website gives viewers an understanding of the top-selling game on Amazon.com

Yes. He's working on his Ph.D. in astrophysics at MIT.

"Well that didn't surprise us," Karen said. "He's been on that path since he was 4. This was totally . . ."

She was at a loss for words. In addition to Dillon and Temkin, the other co-creators are Eli Halpern, David Munk and Eliot Weinstein of Chicago; Daniel Dranove, who recently moved from Hawaii to Sweden; and Ben Hantoot and David Pinsof of Los Angeles. Those who do more work on the game get higher salaries, but profits are split evenly. No one lives with their parents anymore, and some have quit their jobs or stopped looking for one.

Temkin said he was the only one of the eight who didn't overachieve in high school. (Dillon, Weinstein and Hantoot finished one, two and three in their class.)

Yet it was Temkin who

had the crucial business experience. He had already helped turn a game into a worldwide phenomenon.

During his freshman year at Baltimore's Goucher College, Temkin befriended Chris Weed and Brad Sappington, creators of Humans vs. Zombies, or HvZ, an elaborate version of tag played with Nerf guns and sock grenades. Temkin participated in the first HvZ match and built the game's website.

The HvZ creators give away the rights to organize the game for free un-

der a creative commons license, meaning anyone can play the game for free but not profit from it.

It's the same business model the Cards team is using; fans are allowed to download a home version for free.

By the end of Spring Break 2009, Temkin and Hantoot, the most experienced Web designers of the eight, had posted PDFs of the Cards Against Humanity deck online for free download. (It's still available there for free.) The most important thing they did was post a field where

fans could enter their email addresses if they wanted updates on the game. More than 1,600 people did so.

Temkin had organized a Kickstarter fundraising campaign for Humans vs. Zombies, so he took the lead on the Cards Against Humanity campaign, which launched in December 2010. Early on, Temkin shot an email to their database of fans announcing the Kickstarter. It began: "Dear horrible friends."

The campaign closed in January 2011 with \$15,570, exceeding the

goal by nearly 300 percent.

Moving forward after the Kickstarter campaign, the co-creators wanted to retain control and be able to refresh the deck regularly. So they decided to sell directly to consumers for \$25 on Amazon. The decision was savvy. Selling direct is potentially more profitable than sharing revenue with retailers, and it avoids the potential headache of putting a taste-challenged game on toy store shelves.

Cards Against Humanity hit No. 1 in its category the day it launched on Amazon in 2010, Hantoot said.

And then they ran out. A black market formed on eBay and Craigslist. Periodic shortages didn't cease until March, when the Cards team added a second production facility in Texas.

Even the pope of nerd-dom — Wil Wheaton of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" — stopped by the Cards booth to buy the most recent expansion pack.

Although it was the first day of a four-day convention, they had sold out of that item. Wheaton accepted two Temkin-designed Werewolf card packs instead.

"Oh, dude, thank you!" Wheaton gushed to Temkin as he opened one.

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