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SHORT CUTS

If You Can Click a Mouse You Can Help on Homework

By ALINA TUGEND

IT'S time to face the inevitable — the school year is starting.

Try as I might, I can no longer avoid the frequent mailings containing lists of school supplies, class schedules, teacher assignments, requests for parent volunteers and dozens of other papers I don't have the heart to go through yet.

And this is just the beginning. Talk to me in a few weeks, when homework kicks in.

Up until now, with both our sons in elementary school, homework had been relatively frustration-free. Oh, we've had some tears and shouting — and there was the time I found an assignment with an expletive scrawled on it in a backpack — but for the most part things have gone smoothly.

Now, however, the 10-year-old, Ben, is entering middle school, and our friends with older children regale us with the horrors of homework, showing the glee of a seasoned soldier telling a raw recruit about the terrors of battle. How each teacher piles on hours of the stuff. How there's barely time for after-school activities. How they can't even figure out what the questions are in math, let alone what the answers are.

Some students seem to sail through and some stumble through on their own. For others, expensive tutors are the answer.

But one option I don't hear much about, although they seem to be proliferating, are online homework help sites.

So I hesitantly went to [Google](#) and plunged in. My first experience into the world of homework help sites left me bewildered and frustrated. How to choose among them? The Discovery Channel offers [Cosmeo.com](#), while AOL has [StudyBuddy.com](#). Then there is [HomeworkSpot.com](#) along with Ask for Kids ([www.askforkids.com](#)). Also, [NationalGeographic.com/homework](#), [SparkNotes.com](#), [FigureThis.org](#) and [GrowingStars.com](#).

By now, I needed [www.massage.fast](#).

"There's a lot of players getting into the mix, but it's a young industry and there's not a lot of clearinghouses or evaluations," said Don Knezek, chief executive of the International Society for Technology in Education, a nonprofit organization.

This is what I did sort out: there are two main differences in online help sites — those that allow a student to interact with a tutor through instant messaging and those that provide resources and techniques to help a student figure out answers to questions.

[Tutor.com](#) and [Brainfuse.com](#) are two of the major sites that give students online access to tutors; they have been around for about eight years and work primarily through libraries and schools.

For example, Tutor.com is available in 1,500 libraries in 40 states as well as some schools and boys and girls clubs. It's free to children — libraries pay for the service.

Outside a library, a student uses a library card as a password to log onto a computer. The student then goes to the Web

page, selects the grade and subject that he or she needs help with, and connects with instant-messaging-type software to a tutor — usually a retired or current teacher, graduate student or other professional —to ask a specific question.

The tutor uses an online classroom that includes a whiteboard to diagram and draw problems.

“The idea is to help figure it out, not give the answer,” said George Cigale, chief executive and founder of Tutor.com. About 50 percent of the questions, he said, involve math.

Maureen Nimmo, director for the Lawrence Public Library in Massachusetts, brought in Tutor.com this spring with money from the library and the local school department.

“It’s been a very good resource for our community,” she said. “It’s gotten thousands of hits.” The library is in a district that is 70 percent Hispanic, she said, and it’s an “uphill battle trying to get enough mentoring.”

The program is available in Spanish and English for math and science, and the usual session is about 20 minutes, but students can go on as often as they want, she said.

Brainfuse.com also offers online tutor help, primarily to schools through the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. If a school has failed to make adequate progress under the law for two or more years, the school can choose from a state-approved tutoring company, with Brainfuse among them, said Francesco Lecciso, director for the company.

Brainfuse now has contracts with school districts in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and other smaller districts, as well as the Queens public library system.

“There’s clearly times students need a face-to-face tutor, but sometimes he needs anonymity,” Mr. Lecciso said. “Online, a student might be more willing to ask the same question eight times in a row, or to admit he doesn’t know how to do long division even though he’s in 7th grade.”

This autumn, both Brainfuse.com and Tutor.com will also sell their services to individuals. Both will offer a free trial. As of Sept. 13, Tutor.com will offer services at \$30 an hour, while Brainfuse.com has not yet decided what it will charge for an hourly and unlimited plan, Mr. Lecciso said.

Tutoring sites have also been outsourced: for example, GrowingStars.com, which charges about \$25 an hour, hires tutors from India.

A more low-tech approach has been around for the last 25 years: Dial-A-Teacher (1-888-986-2345) has fielded millions of calls nationally and even internationally. The phone line is financed by the Rochester Teachers Association and open September to May, from 3:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Last year, it answered 15,000 calls.

“We’re the 11th-poorest district in the country and we’re the kids’ connection to learning,” Mark Powers, the director of the program, said. “They have no reference books, no computers. We have every resource book here you can imagine.”

Other homework sites help students find answers and ways of solving problems through searches. For example, AOL started its StudyBuddy.com last month. It’s a free homework site for grades K-12 — with content broken down by grade — and available to all Internet users.

StudyBuddy is different from other homework sites, said June Herold, vice president and general manager at AOL’s Education and Consumer Services, because it searches only for “homework-approved Web sites” — that is, sites that will be accepted by teachers, Ms. Herold said.

“Teachers said students have to learn what a credible source is,” she said. “For example, they can’t use Wikipedia.”

As part of StudyBuddy, AOL also offers the Writing Wizard, in which a child can enter an essay, and within 20 seconds, receive a critique like, “you’re not supporting this thesis, or your organization is off,” Ms. Herold said.

There are many I’ve left out and some I would never stumble across on my own. For example, Daniel McVeigh, a graduate student in computing education and cognitive science at Teachers College at [Columbia University](#), has checked out numerous sites that help teach math.

The best one he’s found is the National Library of Virtual Manipulatives, part of Utah State University ([nlvm.usu.edu](#)).

“It’s extremely effective, particularly in helping students in all grades understand fractions,” he said. “It was developed by math teachers for math students.”

With such an array of sites, how can any parent or student possibly assess what is most effective?

Some say the online homework-help sites are not solving a problem but contributing to one.

Sara Bennett, co-author of “The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It” (Crown, 2006), argues that there is serious doubt about whether homework has any real benefit.

“These Web sites are simply enabling a homework system without looking at what’s not working,” Ms. Bennett said. “In a way, I feel like we’re setting our kids up for an awful lot of cheating.”

Mr. Knezek said that with such a new industry, the best thing for parents was to keep their ears and eyes open.

“Use other parents as consultants,” he said. “Talk to teachers. Always participate with your children.” Don’t sign them onto a Web site and then disappear.

“You wouldn’t do that with a baby sitter or a coach or a music teacher,” he said. “Keep spot-checking.”

And while I know I sometimes have more difficulty navigating the Web than my children, he said that shouldn’t deter parents.

“My approach is, ‘show me,’ ” Mr. Knezek said. “Sit in while your child is using the site. In any new industry, there’s going to be people who overpromise. I’d be aware of that.”

I have to admit, the hours I spent searching the homework sites resulted in a bit of shouting and a few expletives of my own. Of course, that’s because my children kept interrupting. Isn’t it time they went back to school already?

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