

Music During Homework

Inspiring or Distracting?



By Matt Kuykendall

“Eric! Turn off your music while you’re doing your homework.”

“What?”

“I said, turn off your music while you’re doing your homework! How can you even hear yourself think?!”

“But mom...”

If you’re the parent of a middle school or teenage child, you have undoubtedly had a similar conversation to the one above. There is no question about it: the iPod toting youth of today are obsessed with music. According to Teenage Research Unlimited, teenagers spend an average of 20 hours a week listening to music. This is twice as much as they do watching television.

But of course, if you’re a parent of a teenager, you already know this. The key is how to handle the situation above. Should kids be listening to music while doing homework?

Unfortunately, the answer to that question is ‘it depends.’ The most famous study conducted on background music and intellectual performance



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was that by Rauscher and Shaw (1995) and resulted in the famous “Mozart Effect.” The media took their results and ran with them, making such blanket statements as,

“Listen to Mozart and get smart!” The study did indeed find an IQ increase among test subjects, however the type of IQ that increased was a very specific type — visual/spatial intelligence — and was not limited to classical music. Follow up studies found that participants who played the video game “Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater”

performed better while listening to music matching their aesthetic tastes than those in the control group who played the game in a dull silence.

What researchers concluded was that enjoyable music increases brain activity in visual spatial regions, thus producing a temporary intellectual bump.

So, unless your daughter’s homework is to build a model of the Pearl Tower or some other form of visual design, the “Mozart effect” won’t do her any good. But don’t take away the iPods just yet, be-

cause multiple studies have found that music deemed “mood calming” by students increased on-task behavior. This is crucial, because half the battle of homework is getting your child to keep doing it once they’ve started.

What to do the next time you hear the thump of bass booming down the hall? If your son or daughter were reading literature, you could limit their music intake to non-lyrical music at a normal to soft volume. For homework that does not necessitate a great deal of verbal or linguistic intelligence, music with lyrics is ok, as long as it is deemed “mood calming” by your child.

To determine what is truly calming to your student necessitates a conversation. You may not find the angst of Arctic Monkeys calming, but your daughter might. In my classroom, I allow students to listen to their iPods while working, but I talk to them about the role music plays in learning and the importance of making good choices. I have not yet noticed a drop in performance in the students who listen to music while performing tasks.

Of course, if the music itself becomes a distraction, if your son insists on constantly getting up to adjust the volume, change the track or play along on his guitar, the music is no longer educationally beneficial. But if your son enjoys some Martin Garrix while balancing equations, rock on.

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