IB PARENTS SURVIVAL GUIDE

What IBDP parents wish they had sooner!



A quick note for parents

I am Siân, and I have worked with IB Diploma students for many years. Over that time, I have seen the same frustrations come up again and again for families. That is exactly why I wanted to create something simple and clear for parents.

Many families notice a shift in their child's behaviour during the IB. More stress. Less confidence. More time spent working, but not always seeing the results they expect.

This is often the point where things start to feel confusing, and it becomes harder to understand what is actually going on.

You are not alone.

Some parents I speak to feel like their child is working constantly, but they are not sure if it is the right kind of work.

For others, work gets left until the last minute, things feel a bit chaotic, and it is hard to tell whether their child is stuck or just avoiding getting started.

The IBDP can feel confusing. Not because it is too complex to understand, but because no one really explains how it all fits together simply.

Students are expected to get on with it. Parents are expected to somehow keep up with the terminology and deadlines. It is not surprising that it can feel overwhelming. This guide is here to make things clearer.

It will help you see through the jargon, understand what actually matters, get a better sense of what your child is managing day to day, and offer some simple ways to start changing things.

IB Lingo Decoded

One of the first things that catches parents off guard with the IB is the language.

Students come home talking about things like IA, EE, CAS and TOK, and it can feel like they are speaking in code. At some point, many parents wonder whether this is the latest TikTok trend or if they have missed something important.

You have not.

The system is full of terms that are used all the time, but rarely explained clearly. Once you understand a few of the key terms, everything else starts to feel much clearer.

Here are some of the most common acronyms that you are likely to hear.

IA:

The **Internal Assessment.** Coursework completed during the course. This often makes up a significant part of the final grade (around 20%) and is where many students lose marks without realising.

EE:

The Extended Essay. A long, independent project completed over several months. Many students struggle because they are not sure how to start or manage it over time.

TOK:

Theory of Knowledge. A course about thinking and understanding knowledge. It often feels abstract and is one of the most confusing parts of the IB at first.

CAS:

Creativity, Activity, Service. Activities, sports, hobbies and volunteering. It does not add marks, but it must be completed to receive the Diploma.

HL:

Higher Level subjects. These go into more depth and require more time and independent work.

SL:

Standard Level subjects. These have fewer teaching hours than the Higher Level.

Signs to look for

Small things that often show up before bigger problems

Before anything really goes wrong, there are usually a few small signs that start to show up at home.

They are not always obvious at first. It might just feel like something is a bit off, or that the answers you are getting do not quite match what you are seeing.

I see the same patterns come up again and again.

Avoiding work
Putting it off, finding other things to do, or saying they will "do it later" but never quite getting started.

Getting defensive when it comes up
Becoming frustrated, shutting the conversation down, or reacting strongly when you ask about school.

Seeming a bit too relaxed
Saying everything is fine, but without being able to explain what they are actually doing or how they are keeping on track.

Changes in mood
More stress, irritability, or low motivation, especially around deadlines or when work is mentioned.

Spending a long time "working" with little to show for it
Sitting at a desk for hours, but not making clear progress. Working but not learning or not choosing the right areas to focus on.

A simple way to get a clearer picture



The timing of this conversation matters more than the question itself.

If you ask when they are already stressed, tired, or in the middle of something, you are much more likely to get short answers or frustration.

Instead, look for a calmer moment. This might be when you are in the car, cooking, or doing something else together.

You do not need to ask the same question every time. You might try something like:

- “Talk me through what you have on this week.”
- “What are you focusing on at the moment?”
- “What is the next thing you need to do?”
- “What feels clear and what feels a bit confusing right now?”
- “Which subject is taking up most of your time at the moment?”
- “Tell me a bit about your EE. What stage are you at with it?”

Then just listen.

You are not looking for the perfect answer. You are listening for a few simple things:

- Can they clearly name what they are working on?
- Do they know what the next step is?
- Do they have a sense of when they will do it?

If the answers are short, vague, change quickly, or feel a bit uncertain, that is usually a sign that they are not quite sure how to move forward yet.

What's really going on

From the outside, it can sometimes look like a problem of motivation or direction.

But in many cases, it is not.

Some students avoid work because they are not sure how to begin. Others are working regularly, but not always on the right things or in the most effective way. Both situations are very common.

The IB asks students to manage multiple subjects, long-term coursework, and independent projects, often all at the same time.

That is a big shift from what they have done before.

When everything feels clear, students usually get on with it.
When it does not, the work can start to feel overwhelming or unfocused.

At that point, students might:

- put work off completely
- stick to the easier or more familiar tasks
- spend a long time "working" without making clear progress

This is not a lack of ability.

It is usually a lack of clarity and structure.

What actually helps

What students often try	What actually helps
Spending **long periods** of time "going over" notes	Focusing on **clear goals** and knowing what they are trying to improve
Highlighting, rewriting, or copying **notes neatly**	Using methods that make them **think**, recall and apply what they know
Leaving studying until it feels **urgent**	Coming back to topics **regularly** in smaller chunks
Trying to do **everything** at once	Learning how to **prioritise**
Keeping everything in their **head**	Using a **simple system** to plan and keep track of work
Trying to make everything **perfect**	Keeping things **clear and manageable**
Doing what feels **easiest** or most **familiar**	Choosing what will actually **move learning forward**
Working in a **cluttered or distracting** space	Creating a **clear space** that makes it easier to focus

A simple way to get a clearer picture

Looking at the table above, take a moment to think about what you tend to see at home.

Without needing to be exact, ask yourself:

Which side does it feel closer to most of the time?

The "what students often try" side, or the "what actually helps" side?

Most families will recognise parts of both.

That is completely normal.

Next Steps

At this point, it can be tempting to try and change everything at once.
In reality, that rarely works.
What tends to make the biggest difference is not fixing everything, but making small, sustainable shifts in how your child approaches their studies.
If you wanted to start somewhere, you could try focusing on one or two of the following:

Create a space that makes it easier to get started
If they are open to it, help them set up a simple, organised place to work where everything they need is within reach. You would be surprised how many students are trying to work without the basics in place.

Help break up long study sessions
If they are open to it, you can gently help them structure longer study periods. This might be as simple as letting them know when they have been working for around 30 minutes, encouraging a short break, or suggesting they switch to a different task.

Shift the focus from time to purpose
Instead of asking how long they have worked, gently bring the focus back to what they were trying to get done or understand.

Build a clearer picture of what is expected
If you are unsure, it can really help to speak to a teacher or IB coordinator to understand what your child is working towards. Once you know what good work actually looks like, everything else tends to make more sense. For some families, having ongoing support to guide how students approach their work can make a big difference here.

Useful resources

If you would like to explore some of these ideas further, here are a few simple places to start:

Speak to your child's subject teachers or IB coordinator to get a clearer sense of expectations

Look at past papers and mark schemes to understand what good answers look like on the IBO website

How Aha can help

Study Reset

Two sessions to untangle the workload, identify what is getting in the way and build a realistic study system around the student's own schoolwork.

Ongoing Study Coaching

45-60 minute sessions, usually weekly or fortnightly. Students bring the real thing that is stuck, from revision and deadlines to coursework or getting started.

About Siân

An experienced IB teacher, Head of Science and certified coach, helping students build more independent ways of managing their learning.

Free resources and parent workshops

ahastudyhub.com/resources | Parent workshops

IB Parents community

Join IB Parents Support | Aha Study Hub

Contact: sian@ahastudyhub.com | ahastudyhub.com