

What is the Value of Homework? Research and Reality

By Michelle Higgins - 1st May 2012 Page 1 of 3

Raise the topic of homework with parents of school age children and watch the sparks fly. Parent opinion on homework ranges from those who'd like to see it eliminated altogether to those who set extra work for their children to make up for what they see as an overly relaxed approach.

Teachers are caught in the middle – not to mention kids - and even education experts are unable to present a united front about the value of homework.

What is the Value of Homework in the Primary School Years?

If parents were to trawl through the research, they'd find little or no evidence of a connection between homework and academic gains in the primary school years. However, supporters of homework claim that homework promotes:

- good work habits,
- a sense of responsibility,
- a connection between school and home, and
- an outlook that learning happens everywhere.

Opponents argue that there is no evidence to show homework produces these benefits; their opinion is that rather than teaching responsibility, homework merely rewards compliance. Dr. Denise Pope, Senior Lecturer in Education at Stanford University and co-founder of the Challenge Success program, says "Kids who come out of 'no homework' elementary schools do just as well with responsibility in high school."

Research has shown that in the primary years, in-class study has superior educational value, and a study published in the Journal of Educational Psychology indicated that there is "a negative association between the increasing amount of homework set in early childhood and students' attitudes to schooling." And there is evidence that primary school children benefit more from time spent on traditional childhood activities such as time with family and reading books. A large study by the University of Michigan in 2001 found that for children aged three to twelve, "family meals are the single strongest predictor of better achievement scores and fewer behavioural problems" and reading for pleasure was found to be the most beneficial educational at-home activity for primary school children. To add to concerns about the intrusion of homework, a 2006 study of American school children by Scholastic/Yankelovich found that reading for fun declined sharply after age eight due to the time demands of too much homework.

Homework for children in the primary school grades is viewed by some as doing more harm than good because:

- it can reduce the number of positive interactions parents have with children, putting the parent in the role of enforcer or “homework cop”,
- rather than creating a positive link between home and school, homework can create a negative experience of learning,
- it robs children of much needed unstructured time, free play and family time, and
- it contributes to problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle, leading to a decline in the time children spend playing sports.

Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, authors of *The Case Against Homework*, believe that homework has a detrimental impact on the whole family, saying that:

“One unrecognized side effect of homework is that it isolates siblings from one another. A sixth-grader who is stuck at her desk doesn’t have time to play with a younger sibling. This means that their play relationship is severed earlier than it might have been. And because the parent needs to help each sibling with homework, reading a nightly story to them together becomes difficult.”

How Much is Too Much Homework?

Education experts in the United States agree that homework in the primary school years should not exceed ten minutes per night per grade level. In the UK, the Office for Standards in Education recommends a maximum of twelve minutes per night in Years 1 and 2, eighteen minutes in Years 3 and 4, and thirty minutes in Years 5 and 6. In Australia, homework policy is set at a state level and generally leaves room for discretion for individual schools. For example, Victoria recommends that homework not exceed thirty minutes per day in Years 1 to 4 and thirty to forty five minutes per day in Years 5 and 6 (with no homework on weekends or during school holidays).

Finland – a top performing nation in education on international academic testing - assigns minimal homework with high school students doing no more than half an hour per night. And Japan began instituting no homework policies in its primary schools in the 1990s to allow children more time with family and their own interests. In recent years, a range of Australian voices have questioned the benefits of homework, including child psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg, who advocates that no homework be assigned until students are in Year 10.

Harris Cooper, Professor of Education and Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University, recommends that homework in the primary years “should be brief, should involve materials commonly found in the home, and should not be too demanding.” This approach prevents homework from becoming a source of stress for parents and children, especially for those who are already stretched to the limit in terms of time and/or money. And Dr. Denise Pope recommends that primary schools assigning homework should focus on free reading and play-based activities,

ensuring that any homework is “engaging, meaningful and able to be done independently by the student”. Above all, Dr Pope believes homework activities in the primary school years should never be at the expense of “playtime, downtime, and family time” all elements required for a healthy and happy childhood.

What is the Value of Homework in the High School Years?

Research may not demonstrate educational value of homework in the early years, but there is compelling evidence of academic benefits of homework during high school, particularly in the senior grades.

Parents trying to encourage homework habits in older children might consider research indicating that:

- in the early years of high school, there is no academic edge to be gained by completing more than one hour of homework per night, and
- in the senior years, students who do between seven and twelve hours of homework per week (or between one and two hours per night) receive the greatest academic benefit.

Time spent on homework also affects student well-being. In a study of 496 high school students, Drs Pope and Dr. Mollie Galloway, Director of Research and Assessment for the Graduate School of Education and Counselling at Lewis and Clark College, found that students who did more than three and a half hours of homework per night were more likely to report the following problems than those doing less homework:

- exhaustion and weight gain,
- stress-related physical symptoms (including headaches and ulcers) and poor mental health, and
- dropping of activities they enjoyed because of the amount of time needed to complete schoolwork.

A separate study conducted in 2006-2008 of 3,645 California high school students (Years 9 to 12) found that lack of sleep was a serious issue, with few students getting close to the nine and a quarter hours sleep recommended by experts: “On average, the respondents reported getting 6.8 hours of sleep each weeknight. Over one-third reported six or fewer hours of sleep each night. Two-thirds indicated that homework or schoolwork often or always kept them from sleeping”. Dr. Pope recommends that parents put a high priority on sleep for their teens, requiring that they achieve a minimum number of hours to protect both their physical and emotional well-being.

Homework that Works – Quality over Quantity

Pope and Galloway found that it is not only the quantity of homework that impacts students' wellbeing:

“When students perceive homework as more useful for their learning and preparation for tests and projects, they report fewer academic worries, fewer stress-related physical symptoms, and more positive mental health ... Schools should consider homework policies that strive to eliminate ‘busy work’ and that are explicit about the purposes of homework sent home each night.”

A student in the 2006-2008 study explained: “I’m stressed because I have so many pointless, mundane assignments that take up large amounts of time, without actually [resulting in] learning anything in class. I don’t mind working if I’m actually learning something.”

Parents do not have control over the quantity or quality of homework sent home, especially in the high school years. But parents may be able to help motivate their teen by encouraging them to identify the purpose or relevance of a homework assignment; and supporting them to prioritise homework assignments they perceive as useful and engaging, rather than ‘busywork’.

How do parents know if their children’s homework is contributing to their academic progress or turning them off learning? Education experts have identified a range of approaches that can be considered ‘best practice’ when it comes to homework:

- Students are given variety and degree of choice in assignments – this is empowering, engaging and reduces the tendency for students to compare their work to their peers.
- Homework is designed to ‘spark’ students’ creative thinking, talents, community involvement and problem solving, by encouraging students to work together.
- Concepts that have already been mastered are reinforced by intermittent learning - this technique works best when homework problems are spread out over a period of time rather than completed in one sitting.
- Teachers involve parents in appropriate ways (sounding boards) without requiring them to act as teachers or to police students’ homework completion.
- Homework is set at an appropriate level of difficulty, is able to be completed independently with relatively high success rates, but remains challenging enough to be interesting.
- Differentiating homework tasks ensures that teachers meet the needs of individual students.

Does Your Child Receive Feedback on Homework?

Providing feedback to students is thought to be essential if it is to have value; research indicates that "homework that is reviewed, commented upon, and discussed in class, is three times more effective at improving students' academic achievement." However, when grades are attached to nightly homework there is a tendency for parents to fix their child's mistake and 'edit' their work and there is an incentive for older students to cheat:

"Having students do homework out of fear of negative consequences turns a situation ideal for building intrinsic motivation ... into one that implies that the teacher believes students need rewards or punishment in order to complete assignment ... The major purpose should be to identify individual students' learning problems." says Bennet and Kalish. And using homework as a punishment is not recommended. Those authors explain that common punitive practices (like keeping students in at recess for incomplete homework) "communicate to students that schoolwork is boring and aversive." A more positive approach is for parents and teachers to work together if they become aware that a student is experiencing problems completing homework.

Homework for Children with Special Needs and Learning Disabilities

Homework is often stressful for children with a learning disability who may have been struggling and compensating all day long. In the view of Bension O'Reilly, co-author of the Australian Autism Handbook:

"For kids with special needs, just getting through the school day is going to be harder for them: the girl with cerebral palsy will be exerting lots of energy just to stay upright in her wheel chair, the boy with autism will have to control his emotions and attend to what the teacher is saying, the girl with learning disabilities will be using all her cognitive resources just to answer a few simple maths questions and make it to the end of a basic school reader. In theory homework could reinforce the lessons they learned earlier that day, but I wonder how often you'd be looking at the law of diminishing returns. After a day at school these kids would be too exhausted to take anything in."

O'Reilly also points out that children with special needs often have to spend considerable time outside of school hours participating in various types of therapy. Making teachers aware of these activities is essential so that together with parents, they can decide how much (if any) homework to assign. Engaging with enjoyable extra-curricular activities may provide a sense of accomplishment that is largely missing from a child's school experience, and may be of greater benefit than spending time on homework. For example, one study found that for children with ADHD there was "significant improvement in executive function after eight weeks of 40 minutes of vigorous activity after school each day."

Parents may not understand the latest methodologies for completing long division or learning to read, but most do understand their individual child and the impact homework has on their attitude to school and learning, and their physical and emotional well-being. Putting this understanding at the centre of any homework debate is key to creating approaches to homework that promote happy, healthy and engaged children at school.

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