

Kids May Be Right After All: Homework Stinks

Kids May Be Right After All: Homework Stinks

By Alfie Kohn

With the start of a new school year, students once again are shifting impatiently in their seats, working their way through an endless pile of worksheets.

And that's after they come home.

A new study confirms what kids and parents already know: The "tougher standards" fad that has American education in its grip has meant more and more homework for younger and younger children. Several years ago, we learned that the proportion of 6- to 8-year-olds who reported having homework on a given day had climbed from 34% in 1981 to 58% in 1997, and that the weekly time spent studying more than doubled during the same period.

Last month, professor Sandra Hofferth at the University of Maryland released an update to that study. Now, the proportion of young children who had homework on a specific day jumped to 64%, and the amount of time they spent on it climbed by another third. Homework rates for 6- to 8-year-olds are now virtually equivalent to those for 9- to 12-year-olds. And let's not even talk about the high school workload.

What the research shows about the growing burden of homework is disconcerting. Equally important, however, is what the research *doesn't* show: namely, that homework is necessary or beneficial. We know all about the stress and exhaustion, the family conflict and loss of time for other activities. ("Our kids are missing out on their childhoods," one Mom laments.) But we reassure ourselves that it's all worth it because homework raises achievement, teaches independence and good work habits, helps them to become more successful learners.

Remarkably, however, the data to support those beliefs just don't exist:

- * There is no evidence that homework provides any benefits in elementary school. Even if you regard standardized test results as a useful measure (which I don't), homework isn't even *associated* with higher scores at this age. The only effect that does show up is more negative attitudes on the part of students who get more assignments.
- * In high school, some studies do find a correlation between homework and test scores (or grades), but it's usually fairly small and it has a tendency to disappear when more sophisticated statistical controls are applied. Moreover, there's no evidence that higher achievement is *due to* the homework even when an association does appear.
- * International comparisons offer no reassurance. In describing the results of their analysis of student performance across 50 countries, which was published last year, Pennsylvania State University researchers David Baker and Gerald Letendre said: "Not only did we fail to find any positive relationships," but "the overall correlations between national average student achievement and national averages in [amount of homework assigned] . . . are all *negative*."
- * Finally, not a single study has ever supported the claim that homework teaches good work habits or develops positive character traits such as self-discipline and independence. These assumptions could be described as urban myths except for the fact that they're still taken seriously in suburban and rural areas, too.

In short, the research provides no reason to think that students would be at any sort of disadvantage if they got much less homework – or maybe even none at all. And the accounts I've heard from teachers and schools that have abolished after-school assignments, yet whose students are succeeding brilliantly (while maintaining their enthusiasm about learning) offer evidence of a different sort.

Yet these schools are in the minority, to say the least. As a rule, homework is assigned not merely on those occasions when the teacher really believes it might help, but on a regular schedule that's been determined ahead of time. And the homework load is growing fastest for younger children, which is precisely where the supporting evidence isn't just shaky – it's nonexistent.

It's time for us to stop taking the value, and existence, of homework for granted. Rather than confining ourselves to peripheral questions – "What types of binders should kids have?" "Is x minutes enough time for this assignment?" – we should ask what really matters: Is the kind of homework our kids are getting worth doing in any amount? What evidence exists to show that daily homework is necessary for children to become better thinkers or more engaged learners? And: What if, after spending six or seven hours a day at school, we let them have their afternoons and evenings just to be kids?

Copyright © 2006 by Alfie Kohn. This article may be downloaded, reproduced, and distributed without permission as long as each copy includes this notice along with citation information (i.e., name of the periodical in which it originally appeared, date of publication, and author's name). Permission must be obtained in order to reprint this article in a published work or in order to offer it for sale in any form. Please write to the address indicated on the Contact Us page.

www.alfiekohn.org – © Alfie Kohn