

Rethinking Homework

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By Alfie Kohn

[For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here – including a comprehensive list of citations to relevant research and a discussion of successful efforts to effect change– please see the book *The Homework Myth*.]

After spending most of the day in school, children are typically given additional assignments to be completed at home. This is a rather curious fact when you stop to think about it, but not as curious as the fact that few people ever stop to think about it.

It becomes even more curious, for that matter, in light of three other facts:

- 1. The negative effects of homework are well known.** They include children's frustration and exhaustion, lack of time for other activities, and possible loss of interest in learning. Many parents lament the impact of homework on their relationship with their children; they may also resent having to play the role of enforcer and worry that they will be criticized either for not being involved enough with the homework or for becoming too involved.
- 2. The positive effects of homework are largely mythical.** In preparation for a book on the topic, I've spent a lot of time sifting through the research. The results are nothing short of stunning. For starters, there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework in elementary or middle school. For younger students, in fact, there isn't even a correlation between whether children do homework (or how much they do) and any meaningful measure of achievement. At the high school level, the correlation is weak and tends to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are applied. Meanwhile, no study has ever substantiated the belief that homework builds character or teaches good study habits.
- 3. More homework is being piled on children despite the absence of its value.** Over the last quarter-century the burden has increased most for the youngest children, for whom the evidence of positive effects isn't just dubious; it's nonexistent.

It's not as though most teachers decide now and then that a certain lesson really ought to continue after school is over because meaningful learning is so likely to result from such an assignment that it warrants the intrusion on family time. Homework in most schools isn't limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important. Rather, the point of departure seems to be: "We've decided ahead of time that children will have to do something every night (or several times a week). Later on we'll figure out what to make them do." I've heard from countless people across the country about the frustration they feel over homework. Parents who watch a torrent of busywork spill out of their children's backpacks wish they could help teachers understand how the cons overwhelmingly outweigh the pros. And teachers who have long harbored doubts about the value of homework feel pressured by those parents who mistakenly believe that a lack of afterschool assignments reflects an insufficient commitment to academic achievement. Such parents seem to reason that as long as their kids have lots of stuff to do every night, never mind what it is, then learning must be taking place.

What parents and teachers need is support from administrators who are willing to challenge the conventional wisdom. They need principals who question the slogans that pass for arguments: that homework creates a link between school and family (as if there weren't more constructive ways to make that connection!), or that it "reinforces" what students were taught in class (a word that denotes the repetition of rote behaviors, not the development of understanding), or that it teaches children self-discipline and responsibility (a claim for which absolutely no evidence exists).

Above all, principals need to help their faculties see that the most important criterion for judging decisions about homework (or other policies, for that matter) is the impact they're likely to have on students' attitudes about what they're doing. "Most of what homework is doing is driving kids away from learning," says education professor Harvey Daniels. Let's face it: Most children dread homework, or at best see it as something to be gotten through. Thus, even if it did provide other benefits, they would have to be weighed against its likely effect on kids' love of learning.

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So what's a thoughtful principal to do?

- 1. Educate yourself and share what you've learned with teachers, parents, and central office administrators.** Make sure you know what the research really says – that there is no reason to believe that children would be at any disadvantage in terms of their academic learning or life skills if they had much less homework, or even none at all. Whatever decisions are made should be based on fact rather than folk wisdom.
- 2. Rethink standardized "homework policies."** Requiring teachers to give a certain number of minutes of homework every day, or to make assignments on the same schedule every week (for example, x minutes of math on Tuesdays and Thursdays) is a frank admission that homework isn't justified by a given lesson, much less is it a response to what specific kids need at a specific time. Such policies sacrifice thoughtful instruction in order to achieve predictability, and they manage to do a disservice not only to students but, when imposed from above, to teachers as well.
- 3. Reduce the amount – but don't stop there.** Many parents are understandably upset with how much time their children have to spend on homework. At a minimum, make sure that teachers aren't exceeding district guidelines and that they aren't chronically underestimating how long it takes students to complete the assignments. (As one mother told me, "It's cheating to say this is 20 minutes of homework if only your fastest kid can complete it in that time.") Then work on reducing the amount of homework irrespective of such guidelines and expectations so that families, not schools, decide how they will spend most of their evenings.

Quantity, however, is not the only issue that needs to be addressed. Some assignments, frankly, aren't worth even five minutes of a student's time. Too many first graders are forced to clip words from magazines that begin with a given letter of the alphabet. Too many fifth graders have to color in an endless list of factor pairs on graph paper. Too many eighth graders spend their evenings inching their way through dull, overstuffed, committee-written textbooks, one chapter at a time. Teachers should be invited to reflect on whether any given example of homework will help students think deeply about questions that matter. What philosophy of teaching, what theory of learning, lies behind each assignment? Does it seem to assume that children are meaning makers – or empty vessels? Is learning regarded as a process that's mostly active or passive? Is it about wrestling with ideas or mindlessly following directions?

4. Change the default. Ultimately, it's not enough just to have less homework or even better homework. We should change the fundamental expectation in our schools so that students are asked to take schoolwork home only when there's a reasonable likelihood that a particular assignment will be beneficial to most of them. When that's not true, they should be free to spend their after-school hours as they choose. The bottom line: No homework except on those occasions when it's truly necessary. This, of course, is a reversal of the current default state, which amounts to an endorsement of homework for its own sake, regardless of the content, a view that simply can't be justified.

5. Ask the kids. Find out what students think of homework and solicit their suggestions – perhaps by distributing anonymous questionnaires. Many adults simply assume that homework is useful for promoting learning without even inquiring into the experience of the learners themselves! Do students find that homework really is useful? Why or why not? Are certain kinds better than others? How does homework affect their desire to learn? What are its other effects on their lives, and on their families?

6. Suggest that teachers assign only what they design. In most cases, students should be asked to do only what teachers are willing to create themselves, as opposed to prefabricated worksheets or generic exercises photocopied from textbooks. Also, it rarely makes sense to give the same assignment to all students in a class because it's unlikely to be beneficial for most of them. Those who already understand the concept will be wasting their time, and those who don't understand will become increasingly frustrated. There is no perfect assignment that will stimulate every student because one size simply doesn't fit all. On those days when homework really seems necessary, teachers should create several assignments fitted to different interests and capabilities. But it's better to give no homework to anyone than the same homework to everyone.

7. Use homework as an opportunity to involve students in decision-making. One way to judge the quality of a classroom is by the extent to which students participate in making choices about their learning. The best teachers know that children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. Students should have something to say about what they're going to learn and the circumstances under which they'll learn it, as well as how (and when) their learning will be evaluated, how the room will be set up, how conflicts will be resolved, and a lot more.

What is true of education in general is true of homework in particular. At least two investigators have found that the most impressive teachers (as defined by various criteria) tend to involve students in decisions about assignments rather than simply telling them what they'll have to do at home. A reasonable first question for a parent to ask upon seeing a homework assignment is "How much say did the kids have in determining how this had to be done, and on what schedule, and whether it really needed to be completed at home in the first place?"

A discussion about whether homework might be useful (and why) can be valuable in its own right. If opinions are varied, the question of what to do when everyone doesn't agree – take a vote? keep talking until we reach consensus? look for a compromise? – develops social skills as well as intellectual growth. And that growth occurs precisely because the teacher asked rather than told. Teachers who consult with their students on a regular basis would shake their heads vigorously were you to suggest that kids will always say no to homework – or to anything else that requires effort. It's just not true, they'll tell you. When students are treated with respect, when the assignments are worth doing, most kids relish a challenge. If, on the other hand, students groan about, or try to avoid, homework, it's generally because they get too much of it, or because it's assigned thoughtlessly and continuously, or simply because they had nothing to say about it. The benefits of even high-quality assignments are limited if students feel "done to" instead of "worked with."

8. Help teachers move away from grading. Your faculty may need your support, encouragement, and practical suggestions to help them abandon a model in which assignments are checked off or graded, where the point is to enforce compliance, and toward a model in which students explain and explore with one another what they've done – what they liked and disliked about the book they read, what they're struggling with, what new questions they came up with. As the eminent educator Martin Haberman observed, homework in the best classrooms "is not checked – it is shared." If students conclude that there's no point in spending time on assignments that aren't going to be collected or somehow recorded, that's not an argument for setting up bribes and threats and a climate of distrust; it's an indictment of the homework itself.

9. Experiment. Ask teachers who are reluctant to rethink their long-standing reliance on traditional homework to see what happens if, during a given week or curriculum unit, they tried assigning none. Surely anyone who believes that homework is beneficial should be willing to test that assumption by investigating the consequences of its absence. What are the effects of a moratorium on students' achievement, on their interest in learning, on their moods and the resulting climate of the classroom? Likewise, the school as a whole can try out a new policy, such as the change in default that I've proposed, on a tentative basis before committing to it permanently.

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Principals deal with an endless series of crises; they're called upon to resolve complaints, soothe wounded egos, negotiate solutions, try to keep everyone happy, and generally make the trains (or, rather, buses) run on time. In such a position there is a strong temptation to avoid new initiatives that call the status quo into question. Considerable gumption is required to take on an issue like homework, particularly during an era when phrases like "raising the bar" and "higher standards" are used to rationalize practices that range from foolish to inappropriate to hair-raising. But of course a principal's ultimate obligation is to do what's right by the children, to protect them from harmful mandates and practices that persist not because they're valuable but merely because they're traditional.

For anyone willing to shake things up in order to do what makes sense, beginning a conversation about homework is a very good place to start.

RESOURCES

We are awash in articles and books that claim homework is beneficial – or simply take the existence or value of homework for granted and merely offer suggestions for how it ought to be assigned, or what techniques parents should use to make children complete it. Here are some resources that question the conventional assumptions about the subject in an effort to stimulate meaningful thinking and conversation.

- Barber, Bill. "Homework Does Not Belong on the Agenda for Educational Reform." *Educational Leadership*, May 1986: 55-57.
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- Buell, John. *Closing the Book on Homework: Enhancing Public Education and Freeing Family Time*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).
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- Hinchey, Patricia. "Rethinking Homework." *MASCD [Missouri Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development] Fall Journal*, December 1995: 13-17.
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- Vatterott, Cathy. "There's Something Wrong With Homework." *Principal*, January-February 2003: 64.
- Waldman, Ayelet. "Homework Hell." *Salon.com*. October 22, 2005.

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