Rethinking Homework
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(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. Homework is one of the few activities that include children's 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 for not enforcing it enough or for not being involved enough. Yet, if homework is not working at all, it's not being done at home.

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 when children do homework and their level of achievement. In some cases, the correlation is weak, and in others it tends to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are available. Meanwhile, no study has ever substantiated the belief that homework builds character or teaches good habits.

3. More homework isn’t always more beneficial. In the 20th century the burden of homework has increased steadily and at every level. Then, 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 the homework they’re assigning is overdone; it’s essentially meaningless. So, it's 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 at the end of a school day, when they’re about to put their kids to bed and the last thing that 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 assignments often 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 is beneficial, or that it teaches children self-discipline and responsibility (a claim for which absolutely no evidence exists). Administrators 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. They 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 ask students 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 picking their way through dull, overstudied content. One parent wrote, ‘If I were in school at that time, teachers should be invited to reflect on whether any given homework assignment is likely to result in students deeply thinking about questions that matter.” What philosophy of teaching, what theory of learning, lies behind such 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 instructions?

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 homework home only when a there’s a reasonable likelihood that it will be beneficial to most of them. When that’s not true, they should be free to ask their teachers to consider other assignments that may better suit their needs. Such a default should be based on fact rather than folk wisdom.

5. Rethink traditional “homework policies.” Requiring teachers to give a certain amount of homework every day, or to make assignments on the same schedule every week (for example, a minute or half an hour on Monday and Thursday) 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.

6. 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 assigning more homework because their students are not properly understanding what they are learning. For example, one student told me, “It's cheating to spend their after-school hours as they choose. The bottom line is that homework isn’t consistent with those occasions when it truly is necessary. Of course, there 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.

7. 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 of homework more useful than others? How do students affect their desire to learn? When are the other effects affect their desire to learn? When are they? Why? And how do they make the homework meaningful?

8. 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 how 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 be learning. They should be asked how they think it’s going to be beneficial to them most of the time. Then, if not true, they should be free to ask their teachers to consider other assignments that may better suit their needs. Such a default should be based on fact rather than folk wisdom.

9. 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 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.

10. The homework is beneficial – or simply take the existence of 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

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Saccomato, Kay; "And You Run and You Run to Catch Up with the Sun, but the Sinking." Language Arts 83 (1996): 352-57.