

Down With Homework!

By Alfie Kohn

From *Scholastic*

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/down-homework>

After spending most of the day in school, students are 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 of us ever stop to think about it. It's worth asking not only whether there are good reasons to support the nearly universal practice of assigning homework, but why it's so often taken for granted—even by vast numbers of teachers and parents who are troubled by its impact on children.

The mystery deepens once you discover that widespread assumptions about the benefits of homework—higher achievement and the promotion of such virtues as self-discipline and responsibility—are not substantiated by the available evidence.

The Status Quo

Taking homework for granted would be understandable if most teachers decided from time to time that a certain lesson really needed to continue after school was over and, therefore, assigned students to read, write, figure out, or do something at home on those afternoons.

That scenario, however, bears no relation to what happens in most American schools. 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.” This commitment to the idea of homework in the abstract is accepted by the overwhelming majority of schools—public and private, elementary and secondary. And it really doesn’t make sense, in part because of what the research shows:

- There is no evidence to demonstrate that homework benefits students below high school age. Even if you regard standardized test results as a useful measure (which I don’t), more homework isn’t correlated with higher scores for children in elementary school. The only effect that does show up is less positive attitudes on the part of kids who get more assignments.
- In high school, some studies do find a relationship between homework and test scores, but it tends to be small. More important, there’s no reason to think that higher achievement is caused by the homework.
- No study has ever confirmed the widely accepted assumption that homework yields nonacademic benefits—self-discipline, independence, perseverance, or better time-management skills—for students of any age. The idea that homework builds character or improves study skills is basically a myth.

Overtime in First Grade

In short, there's no reason to think that most students would be at a disadvantage if homework were reduced or even eliminated. Yet the most striking trend in the past two decades has been the tendency to pile more and more assignments on younger and younger children. (Remember, that's the age at which the benefits are most questionable, if not absent!)

Even school districts that had an unofficial custom not so long ago of waiting until the third grade before giving homework have abandoned that restraint. A long-term national survey discovered that the proportion of six- to eight-year-old children who reported having homework on a given day had climbed from 34 percent in 1981 to 64 percent in 2002, and the weekly time they spent studying at home more than doubled.

In fact, homework is even "becoming a routine part of the kindergarten experience," according to a 2004 report.

The Negative Effects

It's hard to deny that an awful lot of homework is exceptionally trying for an awful lot of children. Some are better able than others to handle the pressure of keeping up with a continuous flow of work, getting it all done on time, and turning out products that will meet with approval. Likewise, some assignments are less unpleasant than others. But in general, as one parent put it, homework simultaneously "overwhelms struggling kids and removes joy for high achievers." Even reading for pleasure loses its appeal when children are told how much, or for how long, they must do it.

Even as they accept homework as inevitable, parents consistently report that it intrudes on family life. Many mothers and fathers spend every evening serving as homework monitors, a position for which they never applied. One professor of education, Gary Natriello at Columbia University, believed in the value of homework until his "own children started bringing home assignments in elementary school." Even "the routine tasks sometimes carry directions that are difficult for two parents with advanced graduate degrees to understand," he discovered.

What's bad for parents is generally worse for kids. "School for [my son] is work," one mother writes, "and by the end of a seven-hour workday, he's exhausted. But like a worker on a double shift, he has to keep going" once he gets home. Exhaustion is just part of the problem, though. The psychological costs can be substantial for a child who not only is confused by a worksheet on long vowels or subtraction but also finds it hard to accept the whole idea of sitting still after school to do more schoolwork.

Furthermore, every unpleasant adjective that could be attached to homework—time-consuming, disruptive, stressful, demoralizing—applies with greater force in the case of kids for whom academic

learning doesn't come easily. Curt Dudley-Marling, a former elementary school teacher who is now a professor at Boston College, interviewed some two dozen families that included at least one struggling learner. In describing his findings, he talked about how "the demands of homework disrupted...family relationships" and led to daily stress and conflict.

The "nearly intolerable burden" imposed by homework was partly a result of how defeated such children felt, he added—how they invested hours without much to show for it; how parents felt frustrated when they pushed the child but also when they didn't push, when they helped with the homework but also when they refrained from helping. "You end up ruining the relationship that you have with your kid," one father told him.

And don't forget: The idea that it is all worth it because homework helps children learn better simply isn't true. There's little pro to weigh against the significant cons.

Play Time Matters

On top of causing stress, more homework means kids have less time for other activities. There's less opportunity for the kind of learning that doesn't involve traditional skills. There's less chance to read for pleasure, make friends, play games, get some exercise, get some rest, or just be a child.

Decades ago, the American Educational Research Association released this statement: "Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time that should be devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents." It is the rare school that respects the value of those activities—to the point of making sure that its policies are informed by that respect. But some courageous teachers and innovative schools are taking up the challenge.

A New Approach

There is no traditional homework at the Bellwether School in Williston, Vermont, except when the children ask for it or "are so excited about a project that they continue to work on it at home," says Marta Beede, the school's top administrator. "We encourage children to read at home—books they have selected." She and her colleagues figure that kids "work really hard when they're at school. To then say that they're going to have to work more when they get home doesn't seem to honor how much energy they were expending during the day."

Teachers ought to be able to exercise their judgment in determining how they want to deal with homework, taking account of the needs and preferences of the specific children in their classrooms, rather than having to conform to a fixed policy that has been imposed on them.

High school teacher Leslie Frothingham watched her own two children struggle with enormous

quantities of homework in middle school. The value of it never seemed clear to her. “What other ‘job’ is there where you work all day, come home, have dinner, then work all night,” she asks, “unless you’re some type A attorney? It’s not a good way to live one’s life. You miss out on self-reflection, community.” Thus, when she became a teacher, she chose to have a no-homework policy.

And if her advanced chemistry students are thriving academically without homework, which they are, surely we can rethink our policies in the younger grades