

## **The Homework Debate**

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Every school day brings something new, but there is one status quo most parents expect: homework. The old adage that practice makes perfect seems to make sense when it comes to schoolwork. But, while hunkering down after dinner among books and worksheets might seem like a natural part of childhood, there's more research now than ever suggesting that it shouldn't be so.

Many in the education field today are looking for evidence to support the case for homework, but are coming up empty-handed. "Homework is all pain and no gain," says author Alfie Kohn. In his book *The Homework Myth*, Kohn points out that no study has ever found a correlation between homework and academic achievement in elementary school, and there is little reason to believe that homework is necessary in high school. In fact, it may even diminish interest in learning, says Kohn. If you've ever had a late night argument with your child about completing homework, you probably know first-hand that homework can be a strain on families. In an effort to reduce that stress, a growing number of schools are banning homework.

Mary Jane Cera is the academic administrator for the Kino School, a private, nonprofit K-12 school in Tucson, Arizona, which maintains a no-homework policy across all grades. The purpose of the policy is to make sure learning remains a joy for students, not a second shift of work that impedes social time and creative activity. Cera says that when new students are told there will be no homework assignments, they breathe a sigh of relief.

Many proponents of homework argue that life is filled with things we don't like to do, and that homework teaches self-discipline, time management, and other nonacademic life skills. Kohn challenges this popular notion: If kids have no choice in the matter of homework, they're not really exercising judgment, and are instead losing their sense of autonomy.

At the Kino school, Cera says children often choose to take their favorite parts of school home. "A lot of what we see kids doing is continuing to write in journals, practicing music with their friends, and taking experiments home to show their parents," she says. Anecdotal information from Kino graduates suggests that the early control over their education continues to serve them well into college; they feel better equipped to manage their time and approach professors with questions.

## **Standardized Testing**

One of the reasons that we continue to dole out mountains of homework, Kohn says, is our obsession with standardized tests. This concern is especially relevant with the latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results placing American students 25th in math and 21st in

science. “The standards and accountability craze that has our students in its grip argues for getting tougher with children, making them do more mindless worksheets at earlier ages so that we can score higher in international assessments,” Kohn says. “It’s not about learning; it’s about winning.”

Even if we can agree on the importance of kids doing better on tests like PISA, Kohn says, there is no research to suggest that homework is our ticket to success. Our “competitors” in the global marketplace are coming up with the same conclusions about homework. A recent comparative study of kids in China, Japan, and two U.S. cities shows there is no correlation between time spent on studying and academic achievement.

### **How Much Is Too Much?**

So, what’s the solution? The National Parent Teacher Association suggests children in kindergarten through second grade should do homework for no more than 10 to 20 minutes a day, and for third through sixth graders the limit is 30-60 minutes a day. Kohn says the question isn’t just, “How much homework is too much?” Many parents would be delighted if teachers reduced the amount their children are getting, but he says the quality of those assignments needs to be addressed as well. “Some of this stuff isn’t worth two minutes of their children’s time,” he says.

Kohn believes that the “default” setting for schools should be no homework, but that if evening work was assigned on occasion, it better be for a good reason. That means repetitive practice problems from 500-page textbooks get tossed out the window. Instead, Kohn says parents should be asking two fundamental questions:

1. Does this assignment make kids more excited about the topic and learning in general?
2. Does this assignment help kids to think more deeply about questions that matter?

### **What You Can Do**

For parents who want to probe deeper into the quality of homework their child is getting, Kohn says the first step is to check the school’s policy. In the case where poorly designed homework is being given, it’s time to talk to the teacher, sit down with the principal, write a letter to the editor, and/or speak up at the next school board meeting. “It makes sense to do this with other parents,” he says. “Ten parents saying that homework does more harm than good are hard to ignore.”

Wherever the homework debate goes next, be it the front pages or on the back burner, it’s worth taking a moment to examine if we’re asking the right questions about our children’s education. The good news is it’s never too late to start.