

Homework Article

SMH - Life after school: all homework, no play

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There is no evidence homework is beneficial in early school years, writes Ainslie MacGibbon.

The children arrive home from school, you offer them a snack while asking about their day before sending them off to play until dark. Hardly.

What's more likely to ensue is a quip about starting homework, followed by measured promises about what there "may" be time for "after you finish your homework".

YOUR SAY: Do you think homework is beneficial in the early school years?

The merit and need for some homework is generally accepted in secondary schools, but the practice has crept all the way down to kindergarten, where its benefits are highly contentious.

Australian seven- to eight-year-olds spend an average of 954 hours in the classroom annually, according to the *OECD Education at a Glance 2009* - among the highest of the OECD countries. This excludes time spent on homework. Compare this with the same age group in Finland, who spend on average 608 hours.

A Finnish child usually starts schooling closer to age seven, when it is deemed developmentally appropriate - two years later than Australian children. Yet Finland is regarded as having the most successful

education system in the world, based on OECD and World Economic Forum indicators.

Historically, times of insecurity coincide with increasing pressure on children in classrooms. When the Soviets launched Sputnik, there was a significant shift in America on the amount of homework expected of children. Progressive homework policies since 1900 - some totally banning homework - were blamed for the US falling behind technologically.

Globalisation, and the advances in neuroscience regarding early child development that focus on brain capacity (and how much can be absorbed during early years of life), have applied pressure too. Uncertainty - even a global economic downturn - may bring a stronger desire to "equip" and "prepare" children to survive in difficult circumstances.

Geoff Scott, president of the NSW Primary Principals Association, is of the belief most parents support some form of homework "as long as it doesn't overcome the child because liking school is what's critical at this age". He says all homework should be relevant, short, sharp and to the point and "not homework for homework's sake".

Christine, from Glebe, a mother of two primary school children, cut her working hours so she could spend more time with her children after school. Six months later, she has returned to full-time work, feeling "totally defeated" by homework. "I thought we would be playing together and doing fun things, but we fight and cry about homework every afternoon," she says. "It impinges on my attempts to become closer as a family."

The homework policy formulated by the NSW Department of Education and Training is implemented in all government schools.

According to the policy, teachers will generally not set homework in kindergarten, but for years 1 and 2 children may be asked to complete simple computations, copy letters or words, or complete an activity

sheet.

As students progress through years 3 to 6, they will "increasingly work independently on their homework". While this seems reasonable, this is not the experience of some children - or their parents.

Individual schools can create their own homework policy, in consultation with parents and teachers, using the department's policy as a guide.

The NSW Department of Education and Training says homework is valuable because it reaffirms the role of parents and caregivers as partners in education and gives them an insight into what is being taught in the classroom and the progress of their children. Scott supports this, emphasising the value of parents engaging during the early years at school.

If set correctly, homework allows practising and consolidating the work done in class. It can also serve to challenge gifted students and help close the gap for struggling students. Homework can also establish self-discipline, time-management and study habits which students will require later on.

But others disagree. The American educator Alfie Kohn says in his book *The Homework Myth* "homework provides absolutely no academic benefits for younger students" and evidence "challenges the belief that homework promotes independence and good work habits". He refers to homework as the "modern cod liver oil", which we are demanding in larger doses, despite the angst it causes.

Dr Richard Walker, of the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney, is researching a book about homework from kindergarten to year 12, due to be published next year.

Walker says the research literature is in agreement: there is no evidence that homework benefits achievement during the early school years. Given the research findings, he describes homework during these years, of half an hour or more each day, as "excessive". But he

says there is evidence supporting the benefits of homework at high school.

The strongest argument against homework is that it places stress on children and consumes the time when they should be playing with friends, siblings or parents.

Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, a child and adolescent psychologist, is a passionate critic of homework. He says the best thing parents can do is love their children, provide a safe environment for them and be there - all difficult to manage if there is constant arguing about getting homework done.

Carr-Gregg says homework interrupts a child's sleep, adds to oversized bags young children are forced to carry to and from school and is often completed - or at least corrected by - a parent. It is also possibly more difficult for parents to accept red-pen corrections on a page than their child. Time-consuming school projects also often become an opportunity to showcase the skills of parents, not students. Carr-Gregg laments that some parents equate the worth of a school with the amount of homework it prescribes.

So how can parents, schools and students strike a balance?

The experts say homework must be purposeful, reasonable and thoughtful. Often homework is accompanied by a suggested time frame - this, too, should be realistic, according to the child's ability.

A child - and parent - can become frustrated or despondent if homework takes significantly longer than the suggested time. For some schools it is a difficult balance: some parents want less homework, while others request more.

Negotiating with the school to have a component of the homework set as "optional" may be a solution. This will also avoid feelings of anxiety and failure if children (and their families) have been unable to complete a set task.

Carr-Gregg says we need to be more imaginative than we have been when it comes to setting homework.

He cites examples such as asking a child to play Scrabble with an adult, then photographing the board, or choosing a recipe for dinner and reading through the steps, helping with literacy and food preparation - they are also more pleasant family interactions.

Home reading for primary school children is another area creating angst. One primary school teacher says: "If it was up to me I would only set reading at night, but in my teaching career I have seen significant bracket creep - what used to be achieved by a year 4 student is now expected of a student in year 2. It's so serious, so early. Just let them read for fun."

Unfortunately, by the time parents reach the literacy part of children's homework - listening to them read - they may become frazzled and distracted by what else needs to be done, including mounting household tasks .

The popular children's author Paul Jennings, who has written a guide for parents who want to encourage their children to read, says parents should never do anything in a reading situation that's not fun. In his book, *The Reading Bug ... and how to help your child catch it*, he says teaching a child to read is an act of love.

Children can detect when parents are distracted, frustrated or not interested in hearing them, and perceive this as a form of punishment and rejection, he says.

Jennings hopes the days "where children were made to feel ashamed by the cover of a book they were holding" are over.

Making a big deal of what reading level your child is on - or worrying about what level other children are on - is not what helps them establish a long-term love of books.

READING TIPS

The chosen book should never be boring, or too hard.

Children are more likely to recognise words in a book on a subject they are interested in or familiar with.

Children who are constantly being corrected and getting words wrong are probably not deriving the pleasure that should come with reading. They need success to want to continue. A child learning to read is like an adult attempting to decipher Chinese characters for the first time. Patience and encouragement are essential.

Source: Paul Jennings's *The Reading Bug*