

Quick Study

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Homework Can Be Hard Work – Especially for Parents! *A Teacher's View*

by Marjorie Gann

There has been a lot of discussion in the press about how much homework is appropriate for elementary students. Some educational “experts” think primary school students shouldn’t have any homework at all, while others recommend homework that stimulates creative thinking.

As for parents, at one extreme are a few who simply refuse to cooperate with their school’s policy of assigning homework at all; at the other are parents who pay tutors to do their children’s homework with them. Caught in the middle are many mums and dads who spend hours on homework with their children most nights of the week, to varying degrees of frustration.

In the course of a long teaching career, I was asked the same question by parents every September at meet-the-teacher night: “How much should we help our kids with their homework?”

As a parent, I know where this is coming from. I spent many hours with my own children, tearing my hair out, helping them with math homework and projects.

So perhaps I can offer a dual perspective on the roles parents and teachers should play over homework.

I disagree with the “experts” who recommend against homework in the primary years. You wouldn’t expect any child to make progress in piano if she went from one week’s lesson to the next without practice. Homework provides just that -- practice in spelling words, multiplication facts, handwriting, reading aloud. Gifted children may not need much of this, but most youngsters do.

Summary

- Homework is controversial because so much of it is poorly designed.
- Good homework provides practice for concepts that have been learned at school.
- It’s the teacher’s job to monitor students’ homework.
- Properly-designed homework is necessary and useful.

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A little every night goes a long way to helping a child remember that 7 plus 9 equals 16. It also teaches an early lesson about responsibility and delayed gratification: “No TV until homework is done” learned at age eight should make “No pubbing until after my essay is written” a bit easier in first-year university.

So if homework can be so beneficial, why is it such a problem?

Homework is a problem because so much of it is poorly designed. In far too many cases, the child doesn't know how to do what he's supposed to do, so the parent becomes the teacher.

The two biggest culprits are math and projects.

For the past two decades, math has been under the sway of a pedagogy that downplays drill and repetition and emphasizes solving one-of-a-kind, multi-step problems. When I helped my Grade 5 daughter with a problem on population density, I had to look up populations of provinces, then explain rounding, ratio, and equivalent fractions -- all in one night! No wonder there were tears!

Projects present other problems: The two biggest ones for students are selecting material they can read and understand, and putting it into their own words. Unfortunately, teachers often don't monitor the sources children use, and students often reach too high. Also, a primary child needs to be *taught* how to paraphrase a text by changing word order, finding synonyms, and combining related sentences. A middle grade student needs instruction in taking notes. When paraphrasing or note-taking is not taught, students copy what they read verbatim or cut and paste from the Internet.

Finally, what about the other frustrating part of homework: The large models of wigwams and igloos, the Plasticine volcanoes and Styrofoam maps? These often see parents doing most of the work. To make matters worse, they cut into a family's evenings and weekends.

Though children often enjoy the hands-on side of projects, teachers should remind them -- and their parents -- that what counts is content, not appearance. If this is reflected in the mark, everyone's focus will return to the steak, not the sizzle.

Parents and schools should be guided by three principles:

1. No work should go home unless it has been explained and modeled in school. Multi-step math problems should stay in school. If that's all the textbook offers, it's time the Ministry of Education took flak for using confusing math texts. Home is not the place to start writing a story or begin researching knights. It's the place where students recopy the story their teacher corrected or answer those last few questions on medieval armour.

2. Home is the best place for practice. The teacher introduces the 6-times table and assigns work sheets to reinforce the facts from two to six. But there's not enough time in the school day for every child to reach mastery; that's where parents come in. They make up a set of flash cards and run through them with their daughter until she has those facts down pat.

3. Finally, it's the teacher's job, not the parent's, to monitor long-term assignments. If a book report is assigned on November 1, due November 20, the teacher should see each part (introduction, summary, conclusion) in turn, suggesting improvements as the work progresses. That way, when Johnny finishes his report on November 19, the most he will have to do at home is to recopy and illustrate it. His parents' input should be minimal.

It's really very simple: Teachers teach; parents support. And parents have every right to complain if they're forced to do what teachers are paid for.