

# The Truth About Homework

One of the best known sacred cows of children's education is homework. It has been around for as long as schools and quietly creates stress and havoc for teachers, parents and students – and its time it was exposed for the fraud that it is.

Let's start where most good arguments start. Research. There is no research that shows that doing homework improves educational outcomes. No matter how much teachers and educators want there to be some rigorous research to back it up, it does not exist. Lord David Putnam brought this to the world's attention at an education conference in 2000 in Perth, WA. At the time many of the 500 teachers present felt he was just being a controversial Brit making a name for himself in the land down under. It's been 9 years and the truth is now really surfacing!

This argument is focused on primary school to keep things simple. Also reading is not homework and needs to be a normalized family activity early in life. Reading is pleasure and needs to be encouraged as much as possible.

Ironically, homework is often given to children because parents believe that is what good schools do and because parents want their children to do homework, because that means they "are learning more." Indeed homework policy is a big part of some independent schools' glossy prospectus brochures in the hope that this will ensure well meaning parents will part with their hard earned money to go "private." This is because more "homework" will ensure your son or daughter will become smarter and cleverer and do better at exams. Just not true.

What is true is that the two key factors that improve student performance are quality teaching and positive parental involvement. Both of these two factors have been shown to be positively influential. The better teachers are able to connect with students, the better they can teach.

**"Children don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."**

Competent primary teachers are able to consolidate learning WHILE students are in class, not needing to steal their time out of school. Teachers who have to start each day checking if homework has been completed can create stress in the students who have been unable to complete it. Don't you remember that awful feeling of getting to school with homework incomplete? Today's children are already living at higher stress levels with the pressures of modern living. They need to have down time from school to recover by doing fun things that correct the cortisol flooding that happens in their brain when they feel stressed and out of control. Stress can create a primitive response in the immature brain and it will lock down into the brain stem to go into survival mode. Upper cognitive functioning is impossible when stress is present.

Primary students definitely should not be spending time completing mindless work sheets, finishing long lists of words, colouring in or doing any more than 10 follow up maths activities. A teacher emailed me after my recent two minutes of fame on TV arguing against homework for primary kids.

*"I run workshops for teachers and watch them in their classrooms and I agree wholeheartedly with everything you have said about homework. It is great to have someone back this up with reference to research. When I was teaching I gave homework - worksheets, dull mindless revision in a booklet for the term because it is what parents asked for and the admin required. As a parent I hated the arguments trying to get my kids to do their homework when I would have much rather had them off playing sport etc."*

Some of the new principles that have come from brain compatible learned experts suggest that

1. Tiredness and stress negatively impact on learning
2. Learning outcomes are improved when students are interested and enthusiastic
3. Boredom and coercion are toxic to the brain
4. Calm, happy children learn best
5. Students need quiet "down" time after school to allow the brain to process new learning
6. Over-scheduled children can be easily overwhelmed by "more school work" at night

Children, especially up to 10 years of age are always learning. The emotional and social skills that they learn from playing with other children, siblings, parents and pets is vital in the healthy development of every child. Parents need to realise that just because they cannot measure or assess a child's emotional and social growth, it is not important. We all want our children to learn healthy social interaction skills, patience, how to share, to lose and how to win graciously. These things can not be developed when children are doing homework that stops them from playing and being kids!

There are deep concerns that the lack of outside play is impacting negatively on many areas of today's children's health and well being. Short sightedness is becoming more common because of "couch kids" who seldom play outside. Homework can be a hidden variable in many concerns for children's health including obesity, aggressive behaviour, poor sleep, anxiety disorders and maybe the increasing rate of childhood depression. The lack of play may very well be stunting the emotional and social growth of children, making them at risk of poor relationships, lack of motivation and no patience or persistence.

*“Many children played and learned in the streets, woods and fields without the looming presence of adults and albeit well meaning coaches. Their experiences were real, varied and enormously engaging. These hands on or concrete experiences with the real world prepared the brain for learning. What may have seemed to be unstructured play had a very serious purpose. It allowed children to discover the underlying rules and patterns that organize and make sense of the world. It may have set up a filing system for the storage and retrieval of information. Many of today’s children are starved of real life experiences”*

Terrence Parry & Gayle Gregory “Designing Brain Compatible Learning” p 30-31

Primary students can benefit from reading (or being read to), researching in the local library and playing games that stimulate thinking and imagination at home. Remember children are always learning and many learn very quickly to hate homework, and being made to do it every night especially when they are tired, stressed from some social or emotional challenge that may be happening in their life or they struggle with some aspects of learning.

Attitudes to homework can easily flow over to attitudes to school and learning in general. Over achievers can take homework too seriously and spend much longer than the recommended time doing it, they attempt their homework as though their life depends on it! This can lead to serious “perfectionism” issues that can lead to other more serious psychological issues later in life. Students with delayed readiness, or brain integration challenges will simply learn to hate it and will do anything they can to avoid doing it. Then the dreaded “homework wars” happen and parents begin the potentially destructive cycle of nagging, pleading or demanding that their child do their homework. This creates horrible tension in our already stressed homes. Homes need to be the safe place in children’s lives where they are able to re-fill their cups for another day at school. Long term stress will impact on the health of both children’s bodies and their relationships with those they yearn to love them the most.

As a high school teacher the only at home activity I had students do was read texts – all guided discussion, review of texts, corrections of written assessments and ALL written work was completed in class. This meant they learned to work during class time and had home time for the million other things adolescents needed to do. This also meant that any written tasks were done under class conditions within limited time frames. This meant that I knew who was actually doing their assignments and they become very competent at writing under exam conditions – and they seldom felt resentment towards me for stealing large amounts of their outside school times. Funny they only complained for about 3 weeks, and then were really glad they never had any English assessment tasks to do at home. Children and adolescents are not stupid.

Many parents hate not only being “homework aggro masters” they also feel very challenged when asked to help with homework to find it is simply too hard for them! Primary maths can be very tricky. Some parents are very sensitive when they “fail” their kids when helping! Time would be much better spent teaching them to play scrabble, chess, Uno or other board games that

require social interaction without a screen. This would help reduce the amazing disconnection felt by so many children.

Teachers have to take classroom time to organise homework tasks and then again, they need to use time to check homework. Why not use these vital minutes of class time to create a clear window where learning can be consolidated rather than trying to have it consolidated with homework? Keep school work for school – who likes taking work home from their real jobs to do at night?

Keeping school work at school would also create an even playing field for those children whose home environments are not conducive to doing homework. This can be those who live in challenging home environments or with toxic family dynamics. These children often turn up to just another “war” when they get to school with homework unfinished. Not a great way to begin a new day at school?

Today’s children often live “hurried childhoods” with very busy schedules and homework simply adds to their stress and overwhelm. Children are meant to be kids riding bikes, climbing trees, getting dirty and enjoying playing with dolls or having test matches in the back yard. Vital life skills are being learned by these activities and they help kids burn off excess stress from school. Children are not just brains running around on a body – they are much more than that. Real kids learn more from having real experiences with real people and pets in the real world. Play is very serious business in the development of the whole child. Homework does not shape the character of a child and unless a child comes home begging to do homework, it may be holding them back from learning some other valuable life competencies. Please question it – and have a conversation with your child’s teacher to check it’s true value in the precious years of your child’s life.

To help parents find the mid ground to keep teachers and children happy here are my top 5 tips for Homework Harmony.

1. Be realistic with your child – avoid putting too much pressure on them to do it completely all the time, without fail
2. Never do it for them – by all means suggest ways of helping, maybe do a maths example with them – but never start finishing their homework or you will be doing that for at least 12 years of their life
3. Let teachers deal with homework that is not done – and remember that you and the teacher are on the same side of the fence – never let a child believe that home and school are opposing sides of the school equation
4. Allow for transition time after school – and help your child work out what time best suits them to do their homework. Primary students is best before dinner – adolescents often better later – sometime much later
5. Put family first – on special days like birthdays or when grandparents visit, allow them to have homework free nights – simply let the teacher know

Remember children learn all the time not just when they are at school, or doing homework – they learn when playing Scrabble, Snakes and Ladders, doing crosswords, riding bikes, playing in sand pit or by chatting to adults. Just because we cannot see the neurons grow in their brains, they are learning all the time. Indeed children are biologically wired to learn from the world around them especially when they have some autonomy to choose what activity they want to do.

Patterns around homework start early in children's lives so please be gentle and allow kids to be kids before they have to be school students. A habit around doing homework can be formed in 3-4 weeks and there is plenty of time in early secondary education.

Until there is clear evidence that homework improves student performance, it needs to be reviewed. It is a sacred cow that needs to be sent off to a new pasture. The negatives far outweigh the positives.

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