



The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It

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Does assigning fifty math problems accomplish any more than assigning five? Is memorizing word lists the best way to increase vocabulary—especially when it takes away from reading time? And what is the real purpose behind those devilish dioramas?

The time our children spend doing homework has skyrocketed in recent years. Parents spend countless hours cajoling their kids to complete such assignments—often without considering whether or not they serve any worthwhile purpose. Even many teachers are in the dark: Only one of the hundreds the authors interviewed and surveyed had ever taken a course specifically on homework during training.

The truth, according to Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, is that there is almost no evidence that homework helps elementary school students achieve academic success and little evidence that it helps older students. Yet the nightly burden is taking a serious toll on America's families. It robs children of the sleep, play, and exercise time they need for proper physical, emotional, and neurological development. And it is a hidden cause of the childhood obesity epidemic, creating a nation of "homework potatoes."

In *The Case Against Homework*, Bennett and Kalish draw on academic research, interviews with educators, parents, and kids, and their own experience as parents and successful homework reformers to offer detailed advice to frustrated parents. You'll find out which assignments advance learning and which are time-wasters, how to set priorities when your child comes home with an overstuffed backpack, how to talk and write to teachers and school administrators in persuasive, nonconfrontational ways, and how to rally other parents to help restore balance in your children's lives.

Empowering, practical, and rigorously researched, *The Case Against Homework* shows how too much work is having a negative effect on our children's achievement and development and gives us the tools and tactics we need to advocate for change.

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Dirk Pratt says

So some in the education community actually believe this new wave of thinking. That is why I chose to read it. My original conclusion still stands.

What is supposed to be academic scholarship regarding the conditions of the schools and the learning environment, for me, turned into a whiny exposé about how teachers are over-burdened with papers to grade, students with no free-time and parents actually having to sit down with their children a few nights a week going over what their children are learning.

The halls of academia is for learning and expanding the mind, not socializing and getting some “down time”. The authors include a few school schedules of children that support their claim, such as “This student only has 1 and a half of ‘free time’”. Again, I fail to see how this is a bad thing. Evidently the student in question, has completed his homework and did what he was supposed to and now has some ‘free time’. These students have Saturday and Sundays off for the most part unless they are in sports, which by the way, is an extra-curricular program.

Students should understand that in the real world, this is how life operates. Your boss gives you a deadline, you make it. If the boss wants an hour long presentation in 2 days, that’s what you do. If K-12 is supposed to be preparing our children for the ‘REAL WORLD’ then let’s keep it real. By 18, these seniors are supposed to be functional adults that will eventually take over the business from their parents. Homework teaches ownership, responsibility and provides a taste of both success and failure which are both important. Homework is a learning tool. It teaches you because it is hands on, meaning it forces one to open a book to read, or to calculate or to create a project. It demonstrates the students’ ability to comprehend the problem presented and his ability to research and solve it.

Of course students are going to complain that they have too much homework. College also. But for teachers to complain is absolutely mindboggling for me. Why on earth are you a teacher then?! You wanted to be a teacher! You can’t choose only to have the good aspects of teaching! You want to teach 4 classes of 35 students well then you’ll have to grade 140 papers. K-12 is meant to teach children through young adults the basics of all subjects AND provide a stimulation for the children so that they pursue higher education. In college, the professor can then philosophize between Aristotle or Plato and how the Utopian world should be.

If we want to improve, society tells us, then we have to be constantly improving. This is what homework is for.

I also find it humorous that the authors say that homework should not be given until junior high. I can definitely see that going well. As for parents, they should find it disconcerting to hear that their school administrators and teachers are opting of this. After 18, who cares! Kick them out of the house. But why not make sure that they are the smartest 18 year old out there? Your child may not need help in certain subjects, but that is why you need to sit down with them and see what areas need improvement and what they are learning. Are they learning?? How do you know? What are they learning? Are you sure your child that got

an A in a subject because he or she is smart and not an A for mere participation?

This book deserves 1 star because it lacks a sturdy argument other than what all three parties want, more time for themselves.

Sharon says

I think Alfie Kohn's "The Homework Myth" provides stronger evidence against homework than this book does. That being said, "The Case Against Homework" is a quick and easy read and provides a nice introduction to why homework should be reduced or eliminated in elementary and middle school education. I also liked that the book gave a lot of ideas for how to approach the topic with teachers, school administrators and other parents -- while Kohn's book left me convinced, this book left me feeling more like I could actually do something about that conviction.

I did think the model letters and conversations relied too heavily on giving teachers "excuses" about why homework wasn't done (i.e., we had a really busy night/my child was exhausted/the baby was sick). This, to me, makes it sound like you are asking for a one-time, "special exception" for your child. It seems to me that it would be more effective to skip the excuses and just say what you mean. I also thought that if I were a young teacher without children and I read this book, I would get irritated with all of the "teachers without kids don't understand how busy we are" passages. It may be true, but pointing it out is bound to lead to defensiveness.

Cortney says

I'm pretty progressive when it comes to educational philosophy. I'm all about out of the box, new ideas that get kids engaged, and I agree that a lot of what we accept as business as usual is pointless busy work in school. That being said, parts of this book made me want to throw it against the wall, while uttering however many prayers to as many deities as possible that would guarantee that I, as a teacher, would never encounter the kinds of parents profiled in this book. They were held up as models for "fighting for their kids" and "going to bat" for them and standing up against the homework assigning, meanie teachers. Mind, some of these parents protested against *all* forms of homework- even, say, writing a thoughtful essay, or perhaps studying notes for a test. They had a whole section on "sample conversations" that was incredibly asinine. One great example is how a parent might get a teacher to relent and say "ok, fine, your kid doesn't have to do the 10 minutes of homework I assign each night, and he won't get a bad grade for it, nothing will change, do whatever you want, but he won't get a certificate at the end of the week for completing his homework". To me, I'm thinking this is a pretty good deal- homework protesting parent gets her kid off the hook, there is no impact on his grade, and everyone is happy, right? Oh, no, not right. The parent follows up with how not getting a homework completion certificate will "hurt his self esteem" and how "maybe he can get his own special certificate since he'll be reading every night?" Hmmm. Maybe Mrs. Individualize Everything for My Child could read up on the home school laws in her state and get to crackin', since she's such a great teacher? I mean, honestly, the nerve of saying "my child will have his self esteem damaged if he doesn't get a certificate for completing something he didn't complete" is pretty amazing.

I'm saying this all with a wink, because honestly it was just so ridiculous it was funny. I truly do think that we over burden kids with too much homework, and I certainly remember some pointless homework that was

basically a check mark. If the book left it at that, I'd be on board. But there are a lot of condescending "tips" given to parents- the target audience- about how "remember, most teachers aren't even certified in their subject!" and "did you know most teachers don't even know how to give proper assignments?" or "young teachers, especially those without kids, just don't understand that parents know best". I could just picture the stereotypical concerned parent, wanting to "go to bat" for their angel baby, picking up this book for advice. Best of luck to the teachers on the receiving end of their memorized, scripted conversations!

Overall, this book could have been a thoughtful, well researched assessment of homework and its place in education- I've read some short essays that were just that, and they were more enlightening than this wordy book. In the end, however, it reads as a "mama bears know best!" kind of cheesy opinion piece, that seems to be targeted to the hand wringing parents who are constantly on the look out for anything that might ding the self esteem of their special snowflakes. It was frustrating that I would end up disliking a book that, in many ways, aligned with my own educational philosophy. A lot more research and several chapters less emotion would have turned this into a great book that tackles a worthy debate.

Gillian says

I wholeheartedly agree with the general idea of this book, that children have too much homework and that it doesn't improve the overall quality of their education. The book felt very repetitive to me though- I got the point without the endless examples of what I've already experienced with my own child. I am glad this book is out there and hope the tide turns against such heavy homework loads for children, but I would have liked more emphasis on the research related to homework and fewer anecdotes about homework gone wrong.

Suzanne says

This book gave me a different perspective on homework. I took from it the importance to value the free time that students have and to respect that by only assigning valuable assignments.

Masoncehs says

[The book *The Case Against Homework* is telling the reader that homework does not improve your grade, it just adds more busy work for the student and the parent. Since the 1900's kids have been getting more and more homework and the parents have had to help them with it because they are overwhelmed. "We feel like we're rushing our kids from the minute that they walk through the door at 4 until they crawl in bed," (1). This shows that the kids are overwhelmed with homework and have

Nathan says

I feel compelled to qualify my 3-star rating. I agree with almost everything the authors contend regarding homework for elementary students; the research is pretty clear on this. I agree with the authors' assertions regarding the specific case studies and anecdotal evidence provided concerning middle school students; the case studies and anecdotes are extreme cases (after all, that's how one makes an emotional appeal, right?).

The authors generally steer clear of high school homework. However, the authors make some assertions about the state of kids today that I believe are misdirected and falsely attributed to homework and teachers. Additionally, the second half of the book, no matter how well-intentioned, certainly could be considered subversive, manipulative, insubordinate, disruptive, etc., if parents take the authors' advice about how to deal with schools regarding homework.

Susan says

When a friend told me her child's school had offered a mandatory "math for parents" class so that parents could help their kids with their homework, I was a little horrified and amused. When I was a kid--and likely when you were a kid--homework was something kids did alone, maybe asking for help only occasionally. Not anymore. Across the country, standardized tests and fears of falling behind are causing kids in pre-school and kindergarten to be assigned hours of homework a night, and this after long days in the classroom (and much more than the 10 mins per grade level recommended). There are myriad things to be angry about in this book: the perception that parents **should** be doing their kids' work alongside them to create "family time", the notion that if kids don't have homework they'll just watch TV, the idea of busywork, the antagonistic taskmaster/subordinate relationship that parents and kids are finding themselves in.

I'm convinced and angry. The good news is that only half the book is spent whipping you into a frenzy about homework. The rest is full of useful role-played conversations and emails helping you challenge meaningless assignments, homework overload, etc. Included are fact sheets, surveys (for other parents in your kid's class), meaningful homework policies, and step-by-step instructions for organizing other families to help reclaim their evenings, weekends, and holidays.

This is a must read (even just a skim) for all parents not planning to homeschool.

Liz B says

I put this on my professional shelf because I think it's important for me to know 1) how homework can affect families; 2) what at least some parents in my area are reading and possibly thinking.

Unfortunately, I was not impressed. The research the authors refer to almost constantly is almost nonexistent. They cite over and over a single review of homework research that showed

**that the amount of homework in elementary school is not correlated to achievement;*

**that the amount of homework in middle school is somewhat correlated to achievement (oops! but we'll downplay that);*

**the amount of homework in high school _is_ correlated to achievement (double oops!)--but not if there's too much, for some undefined amount of "too much."*

Their other bit of research that they encourage parents to share with each other/ administrators/ teachers is that very few teachers have taken a course in "homework."

Well, yeah. As an English major I never took a course in "how to use MLA to cite sources." But it sure was part of what I learned.

The thing that irritated me the most about this book was the pseudo-scientific tone, referring constantly to research (the above-mentioned items, as well as a survey the authors conducted) and the near-constant use of the vague but suggestive word "many." As in, "Many teachers themselves believe...;" "Many experts in the field say..."

And they definitely believe that the plural of anecdote is data.

So I was aggravated by this book, in spite of the fact that I agree with the authors almost completely about the amount and kind of homework students in elementary and middle school should be expected to do.

(If you're curious, this is what I think--not what the authors lay out, but it aligns with much of what they say: k-2: reading books of their own choice, alone or with parental assistance.

3-5: reading books of their own choice, mostly independently; some math practice (not much, and not every night); some writing; studying for assessments.

6-7: reading books of their own choice independently; math practice most nights; studying for assessments; writing at least once a week; finishing up projects/ essays/ labs, etc., which should be started and worked on in class.

8th grade: All of the above; some of the reading will become required reading, but not all; also, some projects/ essays/ assignments may be completed mostly independently.)

In the end--not recommended, even for those interested in the topic. I'm on to Alfie Kohn next.

Vít Kotařka says

Výborná kniha. Tedy, záleží, na které straně spektra stojíte. Ale pokud vnímáte domácí úkoly jako negativní věc, že se tyto negativy projeví na vaší rodině, je to pro vás ta pravá kniha.

Skládá se ze tří částí:

1) Popisuje jak mají domácí úkoly negativní dopad na americké domácnosti, včetně konkrétních příkladů. Tady je důležité zmínit, že situace v Americe je velmi odlišná od té naší české - děti tam dosávají neuvěřitelné nálože a to už ve školce!!! Za zmínku taky stojí, že Česko je v jedné studii zmíněno jako pozitivní příklad.

2) Jak tyto negativní aspekty řešit - na individuální úrovni, na úrovni třídy a na úrovni školy. Včetně pár reálných úseků. Tohle je nesmírně cenná část, protože pokud budete něco takového potřebovat řešit, tak takovéhle informace jsou k nezaplacení. ???

3) Šablony emailů a telefonních/face-to-face konverzací, dotazník pro rodiče, seznam faktů, ukázky reálných školních politik pro domácí úkoly a další zdroje ke čtení.

Zase jednou to byla knížka, kde jsem si podtrhával jako divý - celkem přes dvě zvýrazněných pasáží.

Kimber says

I loved this book, because I really dislike spending time on homework. I'd much rather my kids go outside and play or participate in some other enriching activity. The bottom line is that they are in school 7 hours a day, that is good enough. This book offers great suggestions on how to reduce the amount of homework your child brings home. I believe that every educator should be required to read this book. I highly recommend this book to any family who thinks they spend too much time on homework.

Lissa Notreallywolf says

This book could have been half the length it is and still gotten it's point across. The most valuable resources are not in the anecdotal reports of the first three chapters, which might be helpful if you are feeling insecure about objecting to you child's homework burden. It might have been more useful if they gave some orderly criteria on how to assess "busy-work." Busywork for spelling includes word mazes and searches, writing a paragraph for each vocabulary word, all less effective than a half hour spent reading a book, in terms of vocabulary growth and learning to spell. The book doesn't always help clarify the teacher's agenda in giving such homework, outside of the lame excuse, "It's in our materials." In many instances I think elementary school teachers are trying to get children to write to improve their physical ability to form letters legibly, since handwriting is no longer a big unit. Let me confess that I have no school age children, and I am reading this book as someone who tutors children.

What I found useful as a nonparent, was the rule of thumb that 10 minutes per grade year is the increment of increase studies support. Of course one would have to read the studies in the back of the book because they aren't digested at length. Good bibliography, a teacher would say. And there are form letters, examples of conversations with teachers, counselors and administrators regarding homework overload. In my distant memories of my own school experience, I had little homework in elementary school and almost no parental involvement in my process. Assignments which required special supplies went undone. There was no after school snack, and no quiet place, unless the house was empty. And I still did quite well academically, with a few rough patches. Highschool was definately a time of homework overload, with AP courses, etc. By this point I was able to have a quiet setting, a snack and could purchase most of the things required, without parental involvement. Common sense will dictate how much should be budgeted for school supplies beynd the norm, and if it is beyond the family means the book gives a few lines on how to communicate it.

After reading this book, I would suggest that parents, wanting more family time, assess homework when it seems accessive or odious, and prioritize the most valuable assignments. See page 162 on that valuable life lesson. Accept that your child's intelligence may not be evenly distributed in all subjects. If you child has difficulty in a subject, communicate to the teacher, or find an outside party to help your child. A parent as a math tutor can be a ruinous experience to their primary relationship, whereas a trusted family friend the child likes might be more useful. I think there may be better books on the topic, and that this is an acre wide and an inch deep.

Amy says

This book left me feeling distressed about the amount and quality of homework that schools in the US are assigning. After a long day at school, young children are having to spend their evening hours on homework, which has no proven benefit, instead of on socializing, creative play, hobbies or being physically active. Homework (most of it useless busywork) is affecting the quality of life of not only children, but also of their families who are responsible for monitoring, grading and participating in homework. Sometimes I wonder

what's wrong with this country.... can't children just be children?? All in all, a very interesting book for parents.

Barney says

Homework is hurting children?!?!?! Ahh, bullshit. Kids whining because they have homework over winter break? Homework over summer? Well, in my day, we had to walk three miles to school in the snow both ways, doing Algebra I problems for that evil troll Dr. Cook who never gave us any fucking help on anything...

Wait one damn minute. Homework over Summer Vacation???? One poor bastard (a seventh grader) from Boston said he had to read "12 books over the summer and write a report on each of them." Granted, these were probably along the lines of the "Lightning Thief" and required the brain power of a dead toad, but 12 books? Even I, who teaches three AP courses, only assign one. One thing is for certain, however, and that is I never read one God Damn book over summer that I did not want to read. By God, that was Reagan' America.

The main point of the authors (and one I agree with) is that homework routinely becomes drudgery. You remember those mind-numbing worksheets, maps, vocab quizzes....and that was your 5th period history class with that jack ass who kept passing notes to you about that cute chick that sat in the front row and didn't know either of you existed. Well, multiply that by five and you have today's high school student. This point is well taken. Why do busy work? You get enough of that in college and graduate school. The authors take their starting point from a Stanford University study suggesting that there is no correlation between homework load and student achievement. Well, duh.

As Bennett and Kalish ask, "What is the point of that graphic plotting exercise that reveals the head of Abraham Lincoln?" There is no point besides petty tyranny of the teacher. That, and the ever present reliance upon testing to reveal who among us is worthy of ass kissing. In many ways, the authors miss a crucial point: the over reliance on testing in schools has led to a reliance on "homework" that teaches to the test. In other words, busy work intended to reinforce information and not produce independent thought. The litany of complaints over testing and No Child Left Behind is FAR too long to get into here; suffice it to say that the homework phenomenon of 2-3 hours per night for 8th graders is being fed by the standardized test beast. As the authors point out (and I can attest to this with experience) parents tend to do most of the work.

Our school is no different, and I have fielded complaints from parents that I do not assign enough homework. Perhaps I do not want to grade papers for 4 hours a night for \$32,971. This is another problem, that most teachers do simply not have the time to grade all of these assignments. Let's say you have four sections of US History, each with 35 students. Will you:

A. Assign an essay asking the students to discern the differences in domestic policy between Carter and Reagan

B. Assign a test that reads
Jimmy Carter

A. is a toothy Flake

B. is a peanut Farmer who was elected President

C. is married to Linda, better known as Wonder Woman

D. is a much better ex-president than a president

E. lost to Ronald "I Don't Recall" Reagan in UFC 66

You'll give the multiple choice test for laughs and to keep from reading 140 essays. That is our problem, and why most homework is mindless drudgery. Teachers do not have time. And, time is really the question. For a student who is out of school at 2:30 and has one of those things called, let me see, a "job" until 7:00 PM, the prospect of mentally masturbating over problems 2-32 even in the math text sucks. Forget eating with the family (the authors are guilty of a pollyanna-ish view of family life) or having quality time with friends. Homework rules.

The best part of this text is the end, which provide sound strategies for negotiating with teachers and schools to provide balance. It was gratifying to read "Don't go straight to the principal, go to the teacher." For those readers who have school age kids (all one of them) this advice is worth the cost of the book. Teachers work best with a positive, constructive relationship with parents. Kids work best in an atmosphere in which they feel safe to be themselves. School should be about exploration, not about how many grades one can cram into a semester. Bennett and Kalish provide several concrete examples of districts who have worked with parents to address the explosion of time spent on homework, and address how teachers can work with parents to find a happy medium. As a teacher, this book is excellent. I would think that as a parent, it would be indispensable.

Terry says

This book was FASCINATING!!! It was thought-provoking, and I mean that in the most literal way, and, I mean it as a very high compliment. I actually picked this book up and flipped through it in the library; then, outraged at something I read (admittedly out of context) I took it home and read it in one sitting. I don't agree with everything in the book, but, I think it raises some terrific points about education in Bush's America in general and it definitely made me think hard about my own theories.

While, as you can guess, the book is ostensibly arguing against homework, it also addresses the state of education as a whole in this country (and it doesn't have nice things to say, either). The authors point out that while the amount of homework has risen, test score have continued to go down. They argue quite sensibly, I think, that the rise in the amount of homework actually leads to many of the health (physical as well as mental and emotional) problems educators report in their students, which in turn hamper true learning. To my pleasure, they also point out that the focus on standardized testing has taken over all schools, public and private, and driven out everything that contributes to a healthy, as well as EDUCATED, child--art classes, music classes, p.e. classes, recess, even social studies and science, as well as--and they argue, perhaps most important--the chance for kids to be just be silly, loud, happy, playful, creative kids.

My main caveat about this book is that it paints teachers as The Enemy. The "scripts" the authors provide for parents to use with teachers in arguing for less homework usually have the teachers acting like COMPLETE MORONS! That was VERY frustrating to me. But I appreciate that the authors also note that teachers are required to do so many other "administrative" duties at their schools that even the best-intentioned teachers are sometimes overwhelmed.

Other minor quibbles include the fact that the book starts off with quite an antagonistic tone (Teachers as Enemy Number 1) and too much anecdotal "evidence"---someone's aunt's mother's sister's cousin's daughter has too much homework, and that one piece of "evidence" is discussed with as much reverence as the rest of the, I think, completely solid research they leave for later in the book. I was also a bit appalled by the amount

of interference by the parents with their kids' homework. When mommy and/or daddy rush in and say "I'm not going to let that mean teacher make you do this dumb homework!", I don't know what lesson they think THEY'RE teaching their kids. I'm not sure allowing an 8-year-old dictate the amount of homework they feel comfortable with is such a great idea. I mean, would the parents let their kids eat Ding Dongs for dinner? That's what an 8-year-old would feel is a reasonable dinner! Lastly, I was annoyed at parents who make the CHOICE to pay their own money to send their children to academically rigorous private schools of THEIR OWN CHOOSING, and then complain "This school is so academically rigorous!!!" Well, duh!

But the authors also make a good point that much homework--in private and public schools--is just busy-work or just plain tedious. I agree that many of the assignments for English classes end up taking ALL the pleasure out of reading, or, having to do 100 math problems a night is either tedious--if you know how to do them already--or torture, when you don't. If you don't know how to do the first five problems, you won't know how to do the next 95, either.

Despite all my quibbles, I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in education at all. Buried deep within this book are the seeds of revolution, says me. Sadly, that revolution will probably never happen, except on a school-by-school basis. If that. Well, now I'm depressed again. I think I'll go eat some Ding Dongs.
