

IS HOMEWORK GOOD FOR MY CHILDREN? OR NO TO HOMEWORK, NOT NO TO LEARNING AT HOME

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Homework is usually taken to mean any work set by the school which is undertaken out of school hours for which the learner takes the primary responsibility. (Hallam 2004)

Every year the debate about whether or not homework is good or bad is played out in schools and newspapers across the world. There seems to be some anxiety in the community that perhaps homework is not the panacea to a lack lustre academic record we once thought it was. Perhaps given children's increasingly busy lives there are other things they should be doing? Perhaps we need to consider a work life balance for children?

It seems the intensity of the debate about homework implies that there is something more at stake than students' education. Some researchers have argued that homework is driven by an economic and political agenda that is tied up in preparing children for a life of work in a competitive environment. Get children to do a lot of homework after perhaps a busy day at school and they will be used to long hours at work. This is a cynical view I know but given that the research around homework having an impact on children's academic improvement is inconclusive at best, why do we continue to give it to them?

Did you know that in the first half of the twentieth century some states of the United States of America had banned homework so that children could have fresh air and play? It wasn't until the fifties when the Russians beat the American's into space that homework regained its momentum. The thinking at the time was that if everyone worked harder the country would do better this included children at school.

Some of the problems associated with the research on homework shows that it is difficult to isolate homework's contribution to learning, The reported amount of time spent on homework is unreliable - it depends who you ask, parents, teachers or students, the quality or type of homework is rarely taken into account and researchers tend to concentrate on the quantitative not the affective or qualitative aspects of homework.

In a nutshell if the goal of homework is to improve academic results for students then the research indicates there is no evidence of this benefit for students in the first five years of school and whilst there may be some academic benefits when children are older the research indicates that you can either give too little or too much homework and therefore cancel out any real benefits and perhaps put some children off their learning altogether.

It seems to me that time would be better spent if teachers helped parents and carers of the students they teach understand how children learn and how both teachers and parents can enhance that learning in partnership with each other. Unfortunately, many schools haven't really established this kind of partnership primarily because they don't really have the resources.

What might parents do in the meantime? My advice comes from one of my favourite educators Alfie Kohn. Alfie suggests that homework must meet at least one of two criteria in order for it to be useful to children. Firstly, any homework given must promote a love of learning and help your children love learning more, and secondly it must help your children become deeper thinkers and develop deeper understandings of how the world works. If the homework isn't doing either of these things then you may need to question the value of the homework being given.

In the meantime, you can continue to read as a family, talk about the world as a family, and help your children make sense of the world they live in and the contribution they might make. After all, isn't this what learning and living is all about.

References:

Hallam, S. 2004, Homework The Evidence, Institute of Education University of London.

Kohn, A. 2006, The Homework Myth: why kids get too much of a bad thing, Da Capo Press.