

Homework is wrecking our kids: The research is clear, let's ban elementary homework

Homework does have an impact on young students — but it's not a good one

By: HEATHER SHUMAKER

“There is no evidence that any amount of homework improves the academic performance of elementary students.”

This statement, by homework research guru Harris Cooper, of Duke University, is startling to hear, no matter which side of the homework debate you're on. Can it be true that the hours of lost playtime, power struggles and tears are all for naught? That millions of families go through a nightly ritual that doesn't help? Homework is such an accepted practice, it's hard for most adults to even question its value.

When you look at the facts, however, here's what you find: Homework has benefits, but its benefits are age dependent.

For elementary-aged children, research suggests that studying in class gets superior learning results, while extra schoolwork at home is just . . . extra work. Even in middle school, the relationship between homework and academic success is minimal at best. By the time kids reach high school, homework provides academic benefit, but only in moderation. More than two hours per night is the limit. After that amount, the benefits taper off. “The research is very clear,” agrees Etta Kralovec, education professor at the University of Arizona. “There's no benefit at the elementary school level.”

Before going further, let's dispel the myth that these research results are due to a handful of poorly constructed studies. In fact, it's the opposite. Cooper compiled 120 studies in 1989 and another 60 studies in 2006. This comprehensive analysis of multiple research studies found no evidence of academic benefit at the elementary level. It did, however, find a negative impact on children's attitudes toward school.

This is what's worrying. Homework *does* have an impact on young students, but it's not a good one. A child just beginning school

deserves the chance to develop a love of learning. Instead, homework at a young age causes many kids to turn against school, future homework and academic learning. And it's a long road. A child in kindergarten is facing 13 years of homework ahead of her.

Then there's the damage to personal relationships. In thousands of homes across the country, families battle over homework nightly. Parents nag and cajole. Overtired children protest and cry. Instead of connecting and supporting each other at the end of the day, too many families find themselves locked in the "did you do your homework?" cycle.

When homework comes prematurely, it's hard for children to cope with assignments independently—they need adult help to remember assignments and figure out how to do the work. Kids slide into the habit of relying on adults to help with homework or, in many cases, *do* their homework. Parents often assume the role of Homework Patrol Cop. Being chief nag is a nasty, unwanted job, but this role frequently lingers through the high school years. Besides the constant conflict, having a Homework Patrol Cop in the house undermines one of the purported purposes of homework: responsibility.

Homework supporters say homework teaches responsibility, reinforces lessons taught in school, and creates a home-school link with parents. However, involved parents can see what's coming home in a child's backpack and initiate sharing about school work—they don't need to monitor their child's progress with assigned homework. Responsibility is taught daily in multiple ways; that's what pets and chores are for. It takes responsibility for a 6-year-old to remember to bring her hat and lunchbox home. It takes responsibility for an 8-year-old to get dressed, make his bed and get out the door every morning. As for reinforcement, that's an important factor, but it's only one factor in learning. Non-academic priorities (good sleep, family relationships and active playtime) are vital for balance and well-being. They also directly impact a child's memory, focus, behavior and learning potential. Elementary lessons are reinforced every day in school. After-school time is precious for the rest of the child.

What works better than traditional homework at the elementary level is simply reading at home. This can mean parents reading aloud to children as well as children reading. The key is to make sure it's joyous. If a child doesn't want to practice her reading skills after a long school day, let her listen instead. Any other projects that come home should be optional and occasional. If the assignment does not promote greater love of school and interest in learning, then it has no place in an elementary school-aged child's day.

Elementary school kids deserve a ban on homework. This can be achieved at the family, classroom or school level. Families can opt out, teachers can set a culture of no homework (or rare, optional homework), and schools can take time to read the research and rekindle joy in learning.

Homework has no place in a young child's life. With no academic benefit, there are simply better uses for after-school hours.

Heather Shumaker's new book It's OK to Go Up the Slide (Tarcher/Penguin Random House) will be published March 8, 2016.

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