



## Does homework really work?

After decades spent trying to assess the value of homework, researchers still argue over the simplest findings.

How much is too much?  
Study our grade-by-grade guide to appropriate homework.

Looking for ways to reduce your child's workload? Get some tips from this anti-homework activist.

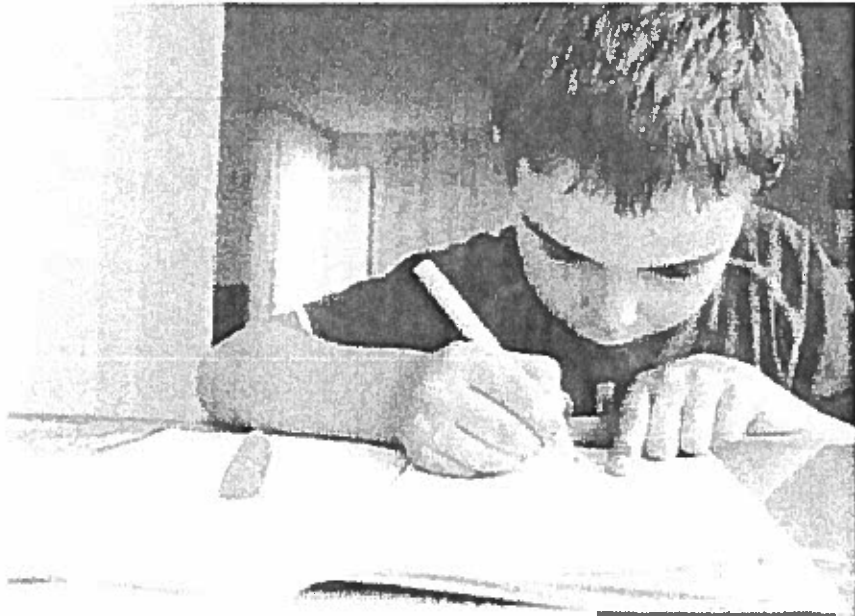
Study time vs. family time: Parents sound off on finding a balance between homework and home life.

A case of procrastinitus: One expert weighs in on a girl whose homework foot-dragging is making her fall behind.

"What's the point?" One teen flat-out refuses to do her homework. Can our expert bring her around?

Scattershot syndrome: A surprising diagnosis for a student struggling with disorganization and distraction.

Disorganization disorder: Can our expert help a middle-schooler struggling with structure?



By Leslie Crawford

You know the drill. It's 10:15 p.m., and the cardboard-and-toothpick Golden Gate Bridge is collapsing. The pages of polynomials have been abandoned. The paper on the Battle of Waterloo seems to have frozen in time with Napoleon lingering eternally over his breakfast at Le Caillou. Then come the tears and tantrums — while we parents wonder, *Does the gain merit all this pain?*

However the drama unfolds night after night, year after year, most parents hold on to the hope that homework (after soccer games, dinner, flute practice, and, oh yes, that childhood pastime of yore known as playing) advances their children academically.

But what does homework really do for kids? Is the forest's worth of book reports and math and spelling sheets the average American student completes in her 12 years of primary schooling making a difference? Or is it just busywork?

## Homework haterz

Whether or not homework helps, or even hurts, depends on who you ask. If you ask my 12-year-old son, Sam, he'll say, "Homework doesn't help anything. It makes kids stressed-out and tired and makes them hate school more."

Nothing more than common kid bellyaching?

Maybe, but in the fractious field of homework studies, it's worth noting that Sam's sentiments nicely synopsise one side of the ivory tower debate. Books like *The End of Homework*, *The Homework Myth*, and *The Case Against Homework* and the film *Race to Nowhere* make the case that homework, by taking away precious family time and putting kids under unneeded pressure, is an ineffective way to help children become better learners and thinkers.

One Canadian couple recently took their homework apostasy all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. After arguing that there was no evidence that it improved academic performance, they won a ruling that exempted their two children from all homework.

So what's the real relationship between homework and academic achievement?

## From the homework laboratories

The good news: In an effort to answer this question, researchers have been doing their homework on homework, conducting hundreds of studies over the past several decades. The bad news? Despite scores of studies, definitive conclusions remain a matter of some debate.

"A few studies can always be found to buttress whatever position is desired, while the counter-evidence is ignored," writes the nation's top homework scholar, Harris Cooper, in his 2006 homework meta-study at Duke University's Department of Psychology and Neuroscience.

## How much is too much?

If you're not ready to make a national case out of your child's nightly worksheets, it's worth knowing that she may be complaining for good reason. For better or worse, homework is on the rise in the United

States. A survey done through the University of Michigan found that by the 2002-'03 school year, students ages 6 to 17 were doing twice as much homework as in 1981-'82. The homework ante has been upped as school administrators respond to increasing pressure for their students to perform better on state-mandated tests.

So how can you know if your child is doing the right amount? Who came up with that 10-minutes-per-grade rule that's become the accepted norm? (And if that is the magic number, why is my neighbor's 8-year-old daughter doing two-plus hours a night?)

The oft-banded rule on homework quantity — 10 minutes a night per grade (starting from between 10 to 20 minutes in first grade) — is ubiquitous. Indeed, go to the National Education Association's website or the national Parent Teacher Association's website, and 10 minutes per grade is the recommended amount for first through 12th grade.

But where did it come from? "The source [of that figure] was a teacher who walked up to me after a workshop I did about 25 years ago," says Cooper. "I'd put up a chart showing middle school kids who reported doing an hour to an hour and a half were doing just as well as high schoolers doing two hours a night. The teacher said, 'That sounds like the 10-minute rule.'" He adds with a laugh, "I stole the idea."

If you think your child is doing too much homework, Cooper recommends talking with her teacher. "Often there is a miscommunication about the goals of homework assignments," he says. "What appears to be problematic for kids, why they are doing an assignment, can be cleared up with a conversation." Also, Cooper suggests taking a careful look at *how* your child is doing her assignments. It may seem like they're taking two hours, but maybe she's wandering off frequently to get a snack or listening to her iPod.

## **Less is often more**

If your child is dutifully doing her work but still burning the midnight oil, it's worth intervening to make sure she gets enough sleep. Recent studies suggest that proper sleep may be far more essential to brain and body development.

In fact, for elementary school-age children, there is no measureable academic advantage to homework. For middle-schoolers, there is a direct correlation between homework and achievement if

assignments last between one to two hours per night. After two hours, however, achievement doesn't improve. For high schoolers, two hours appears optimal. As with middle-schoolers, give teens more than two hours a night, and academic success flattens.

### **Not all homework is created equal**

Just as revealing, it appears that grade level has a direct impact on homework's effectiveness.

In a previous meta-study conducted in 1989, Cooper's team at Duke University found that grade level heavily influences how much homework helps with academic advancement (as measured by standardized and class test scores.) It appears middle- and high schoolers have much to gain academically by doing their homework. The average high school student doing homework outperformed 69% of the students in a class with no homework. Homework in middle school was half as effective. In elementary school, there is no measurable correlation between homework and achievement.

Despite all the research, homework remains something of a mystery. Until Cooper and other researchers discover the best homework practices at every stage of a student's development, parents will need to use their own best judgment.

Leslie Crawford is a senior editor at GreatSchools.

Follow @LeslieMCrawford