

Probing Question: Is homework bad for kids?

September 4 2009, By Alexa Stevenson

Ask an 11-year-old whether homework is a bad thing, and you'll likely be greeted with vigorous nodding and not a hint of ambiguity, but do grown-up experts agree? As with so many things, the answer is mixed.

"Very simply, too much of anything can be harmful," said Gerald LeTendre, head of Penn State's education policy studies department.

"What Harris Cooper has advised -- and he's one of the leading researchers who has some very good, accessible books on the subject -- is it's best to have no [homework](#) for [kindergarten](#) through second grade, and then maybe 10 minutes per day, increasing by 10 minutes as you go up each grade, so that you're up to an hour or hour and a half of homework by middle school."

More than that and there can be negative effects, studies suggest. Overburdened by homework, children may become disillusioned with school and lose [motivation](#), and excessive amounts of homework can interfere with time otherwise spent connecting as a family. This was a complaint LeTendre heard frequently as he conducted studies of homework amount and frequency.

Among other things, these studies found that the popular opinion that America does less homework than other nations is simply not true.

"There are myths about the 'lazy Americans,'" LeTendre noted, "but our findings about amount of homework were that the U.S. tends to be in the middle, not too far to one end or the other."

“Lyn Corno at Columbia University had an article that said ‘homework is a complicated thing,’” said LeTendre. “We think of homework as something very simple, almost like an afterthought. It’s not. It can be a very effective tool, but it is complicated.”

One of the complicating factors is age.

“Most small children and early adolescents have not yet developed the kind of self-reflective or self-monitoring skills to get the benefit out of either homework or self study,” Le Tendre said, “but as you move into high school, individuals are increasingly self-aware and can better self-monitor.”

However, age alone will not predict the usefulness of homework.

“If the homework isn’t addressing the [child](#)’s actual academic problem, the child is going to continue to fall further behind and get hopelessly lost,” he said.

The problem is that most teachers use “the shotgun approach,” photocopying worksheets and giving each student the same assignment, and many neglect to go over the homework after it’s completed, opting instead to merely check off whether or not it was done at all, he said.

“That’s not very effective,” said LeTendre. “Let’s say you assigned a worksheet on addition of two-digit numbers. If that’s what the child has been having difficulty with, then maybe the child, by doing it over and over, can figure it out and make some improvements, but maybe not. Maybe the child still doesn’t get it and you need to talk about carrying the one. Or maybe the child knows how to do it and is bored to tears. If there’s no feedback and no monitoring, the homework is probably not effective.”

What is effective, LeTendre said, is identifying the specific area where the child needs skill-building work, assigning that homework at an individual level, and then going over it with the child at regular periods to be certain that they're making progress.

"That kind of homework is exemplary, and you don't see it very much," he said.

The more teachers individualize homework in terms of its focus and monitoring, the better, LeTendre said, and the same goes for parental monitoring. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the level of parental involvement that suits a 10-year-old may not suit a teenager. Recent studies have found that parental involvement may be positive for elementary and high school students, but negative for middle school kids.

"In other words," LeTendre said with a laugh, "don't nag your pubescent children about homework. Kind of common sense."

What is important at all ages is communication. Figuring out what the best homework is takes some time and a little bit of research on the part of both parents and of teachers. According to LeTendre, it is crucial for parents and teachers to be on the same page.

"Read Harris Cooper's books, such as "The Battle Over Homework." That would be my first recommendation for parents," he said. "The other would be to go talk to the teacher. Ask the teacher to clarify the goals for this homework. Ask what the expectations are for the parents, and then be up-front with the teacher about what effect this has on the family. Try to negotiate something that works for everyone."

Source: By Alexa Stevenson, Research/Penn State

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