



Homework in Elementary School: Where Do We Stand? A Position Statement from Chicago Children's Museum

"I get the same answers everywhere in the country when I ask teachers and parents what their long-term goals are for kids. They say we want kids to be creative, compassionate, caring. We want them to be ethical and happy. We want them to love learning and think deeply and critically. And those are precisely the characteristics that tend to be sacrificed by many traditional practices."

– Alfie Kohn, American author and lecturer in the areas
of education, parenting, and human behavior

There is no conclusive evidence that homework increases student achievement in the early elementary grades.¹ Despite this, the assignment of homework continues to be a standard practice in many schools, often starting as early as Kindergarten. As experts in early childhood education, Chicago Children's Museum calls for a halt to "traditional" pencil-to-paper "busy work" and a reframing of homework to focus on meaningful, play-based home-time activity for children and families.

Background

Homework, defined as "tasks assigned to students by teachers that are intended to be carried out during non-school hours,"² as it applies to children in early elementary grades (Kindergarten-3rd grade) is a controversial topic. Increasingly, parents report that homework intrudes on family life, "spending every night as homework monitors, a position for which they never applied."³ For young children, the impact of homework can be demoralizing. Curt Dudley-Marling, a former elementary school teacher turned professor at Boston College notes, "The nearly intolerable burden" imposed by homework [is] partly a result of how defeated children [feel]—how they [invest] hours without much to show for it.⁴

In the last decade, the National Parent Teacher Association and National Education Association have endorsed a "10-minute Rule" derived from research conducted by Duke University Professor of Psychology, Harris Cooper: no more than 10 minutes of homework per night starting in 1st grade, increasing in 10-minute increments for each subsequent grade level. Yet many schools don't follow this guidance. A 2015 study by the *American Journal of Family Therapy* found that the youngest students studied (Kindergarten through 3rd grade) were getting more homework assigned than the recommended amount—Kindergarteners averaged 25 minutes a night.⁵

In addition to causing stress, homework in early elementary grades results in a loss of time for play—a critical and developmentally-appropriate means by which young children make sense of their world.

Research

To date, there is no study that demonstrates a clear benefit to assigning homework in elementary grades. Arguments *for* homework typically center around increasing academic achievement and parental involvement. However, these outcomes have not necessarily proven true for elementary students. Some of the most comprehensive research on homework found that while a positive correlation between homework and academic achievement existed for 7th through 12th graders, there was *not* a clear positive correlation found between time spent on homework and academic achievement for elementary students.⁶

While homework may have some non-academic benefits such as developing good study habits,⁷ time-management skills, self-discipline, and responsibility,⁸ some studies show the opposite impact: physical and emotional fatigue, negative attitudes about learning, and limited time for chosen activities.⁹ Evidence has also shown that too much homework harms student health and family time.¹⁰

As for whether homework encourages parental engagement—a key concern is that homework can actually engender *negative* parent engagement. Specifically, "adult assistance can stifle children's independent thinking. [...] Because their children feel so overwhelmed, parents must prod, cajole, and nag their children to do the work."¹¹

¹ "Research Review: What Research Says About the Value of Homework," Center for Public Education, last modified February 5, 2007, <http://centerforpubliceducation.org>.

² H. Cooper, *Homework* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1989), 7.

³ A. Kohn, "Down with Homework," *Instructor* 116, no. 2 (2006): 45.

⁴ Kohn, "Down with Homework," 68.

⁵ R.M. Pressman, D.B. Sugarman, M.L. Nemon, J. Desjarlais, J.A. Owens, and A. Schettini-Evans, "Homework and Family Stress: With Consideration of Parents' Self Confidence, Educational Level, and Cultural Background," *American Journal of Family Therapy* 43, no.4 (2015): 297-313, last modified July 15, 2015, <http://tandfonline.com>

⁶ H. Cooper, "Homework for All—In Moderation," *Educational Leadership* 58, (2001): 34-38.

⁷ J.K. Johnson and A. Pontius, "Homework: A Survey of Teacher Beliefs and Practices," *Research in Education* 4, no. 1 (1989): 71-78.

⁸ L. Corno and J. Xu, "Homework as the Job of Childhood," *Theory into Practice* 43, (2004): 227-233.

⁹ K. Reilly, "Is Homework Good for Kids? Here's What the Research Says," *Time Magazine*, August 30, 2016, <http://time.com>

¹⁰ Bennett, S. and N. Kalish, *The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Crown, 2006).

¹¹ W. Crain, "Homework and the Freedom to Think: A Piagetian Perspective," *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 20, no. 4, (2007): 14-19.

Recommendations

Stay away from “traditional” homework for young students.

Traditional homework (such as drills, recitation, practice), threatens the fundamentals of developmentally appropriate practice for early learners by failing to take into account children’s essential need for natural curiosity-driven learning.

Assign developmentally appropriate home-time activities.

Developmentally appropriate practice involves giving children experiences that enable skill development in all domains: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive. This necessitates activities that encourage a child to move about, engage in conversation, interact with others, express themselves creatively—in short, to *play*—which is generally not supported by typical pencil-to-paper homework.

Tie home-time activities to real world experiences.

The goal of teaching is student *understanding*. Traditional forms of homework have no use for the student if they don’t understand how to apply knowledge or skills to real and everyday situations.¹²

The burden and monotony of skill-and-drill homework has the potential to negate a child’s natural love of learning. As William Crain, professor at The City College of New York, notes, “Homework has become so tedious and burdensome that it frequently destroys children’s interests all together.”¹³

Homework should not be a foregone conclusion.

We must move away from the status quo: “We’ve decided ahead of time that children will have to do something every night...Later on, we’ll figure out what to make them do.”¹⁴

Redefine homework to focus on meaningful home-time activity for children. That is, engagement that invites positive and authentic participation from parents and caregivers and focuses on child-directed exploration and play—not clerical or “busy” work. In the Piagetian view (a long-held theory of child development by clinical psychologist Jean Piaget), children develop their minds when they pursue their spontaneous interests, solve problems on their own, and engage in ample free play.¹⁵

Policy in Practice

The following are practical tips for how schools and families might work together to redefine meaningful student learning and family engagement during out-of-school time.

- Focus not on “homework” but on open-ended opportunities for family engagement. (Games, outings, word play, making art.)
- Encourage *conversations* at home. (What are topics aligned with classroom learning upon which families can build at home?)
- Make time for nightly open-ended reading and writing. (Child chooses what to read/write, and for how long.)
- Look for opportunities to practice math and science in real contexts. (Cooking together, exploring nature, problem-solving.)

When schools do interesting enough activities, students will naturally want to continue them at home: “For example, trying to replicate some science experiment they did in school once they’re with their family in the kitchen or continuing to read something on the same subject as a topic introduced in class.”¹⁶

Schools and parents can also work together to prioritize home-time around those parental actions that can most directly benefit the child such as:

- Helping children develop strong social-emotional skills
- Spending time interacting with children in enjoyable ways
- Visibly showing how much they value education and effort
- Monitoring children’s usage of electronic media
- Supporting children’s continued learning naturally, through everyday household routines
- Continuously modeling the value of close relationships, support, caring, and fun¹⁷

Conclusion

Ensuring the best outcomes for children requires a commitment to developmentally-appropriate practice. A shift in policy *away* from traditional homework for elementary grades as a foregone conclusion and *toward* a new definition of meaningful home-time activity that focuses on playful, curiosity-driven engagement will create a better opportunity for children to grow and thrive in all domains.

¹² D. Perkins, “Teaching for Understanding,” *American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers* 17, no.3, (Fall 1993): 28-35.

¹³ W. Crain, “Homework and the Freedom to Think: A Piagetian Perspective,” 14-19.

¹⁴ A. Kohn, “Down with homework,” *Instructor* 116, no. 2, (2006): 44

¹⁵ J. Piaget, *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*. Translated by D. Coleman. (New York: Viking Press, 1969).

¹⁶ W. Crain, “An Interview with Alfie Kohn,” *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 20, no. 4 (2007):13-23.

¹⁷ M.J. Elias, “Homework vs. No Homework is the Wrong Question,” Edutopia, accessed October 27, 2017, <http://edutopia.org>