

## “Missing Out on Their Childhoods”

**A**FTER SPENDING MOST of the day in school, children are typically given additional assignments to be completed at home. This is a rather curious fact when you stop to think about it, but not as curious as the fact that few people ever stop to think about it. It’s worth asking not only whether there are good reasons to support the nearly universal practice of assigning homework, but why that practice is so often taken for granted—even by vast numbers of parents and teachers who are troubled by its impact on children.

The mystery deepens in light of the fact that widespread assumptions about the benefits of homework—higher achievement and the promotion of such virtues as self-discipline and responsibility—aren’t substantiated by the available evidence. As we’ll see later, supporting data are either weak or nonexistent, depending on the specific outcome being investigated and the age of the students. But, again, this has rarely prompted serious discussion about the need for homework, nor has it quieted demands that even more be assigned.

Parents frequently talk about homework when they get together, and it's one of the first subjects to come up when they meet with teachers, either individually or in group sessions. There's no more reliable way to pack the house at a PTA meeting than to promise advice for dealing with homework woes. Likewise, there's a seemingly limitless demand for books that offer help, books with titles like: *The Homework Solution: Getting Kids to Do Their Homework*; *Seven Steps to Homework Success*; *Homework Rules and Homework Tools*; *Ending the Homework Hassle*; *How to Help Your Child with Homework*; *Hassle Free Homework*, and so on.

Clearly this is an issue of acute relevance to just about everyone who's involved with children—and it's one that leaves many of us feeling frustrated, confused, or even angry. But the assumption that homework should, even *must*, continue to be assigned despite our misgivings is rarely called into question.

This posture of basic acceptance would be understandable if most teachers decided from time to time that a certain lesson ought to continue after school was over, and therefore assigned students to read, write, figure out, or do something at home on those afternoons. We might have concerns about the specifics of certain assignments, but at least we'd know that the teachers were exercising their judgment, deciding on a case-by-case basis whether circumstances really justified intruding on family time—and considering whether meaningful learning was likely to result.

That scenario, however, bears no relation to what happens in most American schools. Homework isn't limited to those times when it seems appropriate and important. Most teachers and administrators aren't saying, "It may be useful to do this particular project at home." Rather, the point of departure seems to be, "We've decided ahead of time that children will have to do *something* every night (or several times a week). Later on we'll figure out what to make them do." This commitment to the idea of homework in the abstract is accepted by the overwhelming major-

ity of schools—public and private, elementary and secondary. Even many schools that see themselves as progressive have adopted homework policies specifying that children at a given grade level will be required to do a set number of minutes of some kind of schoolwork at home.

Has anyone spoken up to challenge this state of affairs? Consider the following passage from an article in *Parents* magazine:

*If children are not required to learn useless and meaningless things, homework is entirely unnecessary for the learning of common school subjects. But when a school requires the amassing of many facts which have little or no significance to the child, learning is so slow and painful that the school is obliged to turn to the home for help out of the mess the school has created.*

If you’re a regular reader of *Parents* but don’t recall coming across that provocative statement, it may be because the article appeared in the November 1937 issue.<sup>1</sup> The author was a school superintendent named Carleton Washburne, for whom a school in his hometown of Winnetka, Illinois, was named after his death. As if to impress upon us how drastically attitudes have changed since then, the first thing a visitor to the Washburne School’s website notices today is a “student homework link.” But of course readers of mainstream magazines and newspapers already know how the subject is apt to be treated nowadays. The February 2004 issue of *Parents*, for example, includes an article that uncritically accepts the proposition that all children should be given homework, beginning in first grade, and then proceeds to offer practical suggestions for how to help kids “focus and finish” whatever they’ve been assigned.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who is dissatisfied with that sort of advice may feel a twinge of nostalgia for the pointed questioning and progressive thinking that were more common in the 1920s through the 1940s.

Sadly, it seems necessary today to make the same arguments and fight the same battles against the same practices and premises that Washburne and his colleagues faced. But that doesn't mean the supposed "pendulum swings" of educational philosophy are matched by changes in practice. With respect to schooling in general, progressive theory has periodically generated a surge of excitement among researchers and theorists but has never made serious inroads into most American classrooms. The phrase "back to basics" is a misnomer: We never really left.<sup>3</sup>

With respect to homework in particular, it's equally important to recognize that shifts in attitudes on the part of scholars—or even the public at large—don't necessarily translate into significant variations in the amount of homework that students actually have to do. It's easy to confuse what's being discussed with what's being done. For example, a 1999 article in the *New York Times* included this observation: "Once the pendulum swings one way, it takes a long time to reverse direction, but there are signs that heaping on homework for young children is taking its toll."<sup>4</sup> The second half of that sentence is surely true and, as has happened during other periods, some writers have taken notice.<sup>5</sup> But that doesn't mean the pendulum is swinging or, mechanistic metaphors aside, that anything is being done to relieve children of this toll.

### *The Amount*

The most striking trend regarding homework in the past two decades is the tendency to pile more and more of it on younger and younger children. Even school districts that had an unofficial custom not so many years ago of waiting until the third grade before assigning it have abandoned that restraint.<sup>6</sup> Today it is the rare educator who is brave enough to question whether first graders really need to fill out worksheets at home. A long-term national survey of several thousand families discovered that the proportion of six- to-

eight-year-old children who reported having homework on a given day had climbed from 34 percent in 1981 to 58 percent in 1997, and the weekly time spent studying at home more than doubled for youngsters of these ages.<sup>7</sup>

In 2002, that survey was updated. Now the proportion of young children who had homework on a specific day had jumped to 64 percent, and the amount of time they spent on it had climbed by another third. Not only do these new numbers confirm the trend of more homework (as well as a greater likelihood of getting it) for children in the primary grades, but the *rate* of increase is remarkable given that only five years elapsed between the last two surveys. The proportion of six- to eight-year-olds who are assigned homework is now almost the same as that for nine- to twelve-year-olds.<sup>8</sup> In fact, homework is even “becoming a routine part of the kindergarten experience,” according to a 2004 report in *Teacher* magazine: “Some parents say nightly assignments are too much of a strain on children who, not long ago, were still taking afternoon naps to make it through dinner.”<sup>9</sup>

By age nine, according to the 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 21 percent of children said they’d been assigned no homework on the previous day, a significant decline from the 36 percent who gave that response two decades earlier.<sup>10</sup> (As with the previous survey, this doesn’t mean that such children get no homework at all. Even those who said they had none to do “yesterday” may well have had assignments over the course of the week.)

When schooling becomes departmentalized, sometimes years before high school, there is often no coordination among a student’s teachers, which means that each may assign homework without regard to how much other teachers have already given. Anecdotally, many parents of teenagers report being astounded by how much more homework their kids get as compared with what they themselves were required to do a generation ago, and many are also

struck by how much more difficult these assignments seem. This is particularly true for high school students who are taking the kinds of courses required for admission to selective colleges.

The hard numbers for older students are mixed; everything depends, as is so often the case, on how the question is framed. As with younger children, the proportion of thirteen-year-olds who reported having no homework yesterday dropped dramatically—from 30 percent in 1980 to 20 percent in 2004. For seventeen-year-olds, there was also a decline, from 32 percent to 26 percent.<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Education analysts continue:

The amount of time students spend doing homework each day, however, has not changed significantly. A greater percentage of 17-year-olds said they do homework for mathematics classes often in 1999 than in 1978. A greater percentage of 9- and 13-year-olds read more than 20 pages each day for school or for homework in 1999 than in 1984. There was no significant change, however, in the pages read per day by 17-year-olds.<sup>12</sup>

As for international comparisons, a 1995 study found that U.S. twelfth graders reported spending less time on homework than did their counterparts in most of the other nineteen countries that participated in the survey—1.7 hours a night as compared to an average of 2.7 for students elsewhere. This may have been related to another finding in the same survey: American seniors worked at a paid job for an average of three hours a day, about triple the time for those in other nations.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, U.S. twelfth graders who took *advanced* math and science classes “reported being assigned homework. . . more frequently than the international average.”<sup>14</sup> Even more striking is a cross-national comparison published in 2005. The United States, it turns out, is now “among the most homework-intensive countries in the world for 7th and 8th grade math classes.”<sup>15</sup>

Recently, a few writers who strongly support homework (and sometimes other traditional education policies as well) have attracted considerable press attention by claiming that American children actually get too little homework.<sup>16</sup> They contend that any concerns we may have about excessive assignments, or even about the growing burden on younger children, are misplaced. Interestingly, back-to-basics advocates in Japan have lately been making the same claim about *their* children—sometimes even warning that they’re falling behind harder-working American students.<sup>17</sup> Presumably these polemicists theorize that if we accept their account of the way things are (kids have it too easy!), we’ll be more receptive to their advice for the way things should be (kids ought to be made to work harder!). Data always can be cited selectively to support the conclusion that the homework burden really isn’t so onerous and that students could be doing more. But it may not be so easy to sell this argument to parents who have a front-row seat every evening from which to watch their kids toiling away.

More troubling is the number of scholars and journalists whose reports assume that if U.S. students really did have less homework than kids elsewhere (or than their grandparents did), that would of course be a bad thing. But why? On what basis do so many people regard the prospect of less homework, or even none, as reason for concern? Clearly, we need to look carefully at the data and evaluate the arguments on both sides. The two questions to be investigated in this book, then, are as follows:

1. On balance, does homework turn out to be beneficial?
2. Why not?

### *The Impact*

To sort out the complaints one frequently hears about homework is to identify five basic themes.

**1. A burden on parents.** Gary Natriello, a professor of education at Columbia University's Teachers College, once wrote a paper supporting the value of homework. That recommendation, tossed off without a second thought, continued to make sense to him until a few years later when his "own children started bringing home assignments in elementary school." Only then did he begin to understand just how much is required of moms and dads.

Not only did we need to establish a time and place for the homework to be done, but we found ourselves working through the directions and checking progress each step of the way. For you see, not only was homework being assigned as suggested by all the "experts," but the teacher was obviously taking the homework seriously, making it challenging instead of routine and checking it each day and giving feedback. We were enveloped by the nightmare of near total implementation of the reform recommendations pertaining to homework.

Even "the routine tasks sometimes carry directions that are difficult for two parents with only advanced graduate degrees to understand," Natriello discovered, while the more creative assignments can be even more burdensome for parents. At a minimum, "they require one to be well rested, a special condition of mind not often available to working parents."<sup>18</sup> Many mothers and fathers return each evening from their paid jobs only to serve as homework monitors, a position for which they never applied.

**2. Stress for children.** One frustrated father declared that homework is "a curse put on parents." Unfortunately, he made that declaration in front of his child, who shot back, "If you think it is difficult for parents, you should be a kid. It's horrible."<sup>19</sup> Most attentive parents can testify that their children are chronically frustrated by homework—weepy, stressed out, and fed up. Some are



better able than others to handle the pressure of keeping up with a continuous flow of assignments, getting it all done on time and turning out products that will meet with the teacher’s approval. Likewise, some of those assignments are more unpleasant than others. But only an individual squirreled away in the proverbial ivory tower could deny—and only someone bereft of human feeling could minimize the importance of—the fact that an awful lot of homework is emotionally trying for an awful lot of children. In the words of one parent, it simultaneously “overwhelms struggling kids and removes joy for high achievers.”<sup>20</sup>

Often homework feels like an endurance contest. “School for [my son] is work,” one mother writes, “and by the end of a seven-hour workday, he’s exhausted. But like a worker on a double shift, he has to keep going” once he gets home.<sup>21</sup> Exhaustion is just part of the problem, though. The psychological costs can be substantial for a first grader who not only is confused by a worksheet on long vowels but also finds it hard to accept the idea of sitting still after school to do more schoolwork.

The situation plays out differently for a high school student, buried under endless assignments in chemistry and literature, French and history and trigonometry. (“It is not at all rare for our 11th-grader to be up after the rest of us go to bed and also before we get up,” laments one father.)<sup>22</sup> A study published in 2002 found a direct relationship between how much time high school students spent on homework and the levels of anxiety, depression, anger, and other mood disturbances they experienced.<sup>23</sup> A young child may burst into tears; an adolescent may try to cope with the stress in more troubling ways. Both may be unhappy on a regular basis.

No discussion about homework should be taken seriously if it fails to address the impact on real children. When I hear self-satisfied pronouncements from adults about the importance of demanding “higher expectations” and insisting on the need to teach children “good work habits,” or when I read academic

monographs that talk about “extending a value-added education production function to treat homework as an additional measure of school inputs” (that’s a real quote, incidentally), I want to ask, Do these people have a clue? Do they have a *child*? Can they really be oblivious, or indifferent, to the impact on flesh-and-blood kids: the loss of cheer, the loss of self-confidence, the loss of sleep—in extreme cases, over time, the loss of childhood? Forget the abstractions. This is the reality experienced by millions of families.

Homework is tough on parents, then, and it’s also tough on children. Moreover, these two effects are related. If parents feel pressure from school authorities to make sure their kids are buckling down and keeping up, then that pressure is passed along to the kids. When Mom senses that her parenting skills are being evaluated, you may be sure her offspring will share the burden. In an interesting study conducted by Wendy Grolnick and her colleagues, third graders and their parents were asked to work together on a homework-like task involving the rhyme scheme of poems. The parents who had heard from the experimenter that their children would soon be tested on the skills became more controlling in their interactions. Later, each child was left alone to tackle a similar assignment, and those whose parents had been warned of an evaluation ended up not doing as well.<sup>24</sup>

**3. Family conflict.** Beyond its effects on parents and children, homework’s negative impact—and specifically the nagging, whining, and yelling that are employed to make sure assignments are completed on time—affects families as a whole. As one writer remarked, “The parent-child relationship. . . is fraught with enough difficulty without giving the parent a new role as teacher” or enforcer.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, the sorts of relaxed, constructive family activities that could repair this damage are among the casualties of homework’s voracious consumption of time.

More than a third of fifth graders in one study said they “get tense working with their parents on homework.” And in a survey of more than 1,200 parents whose children ranged from kindergarteners to high school seniors, exactly half reported that they had had a serious argument with their child about homework in the past year that involved yelling or crying.<sup>26</sup> (Since so many people admitted this to a stranger, one can speculate how much higher the actual numbers may be.) The more that parents helped with homework, moreover, the more tension children experienced—and without any apparent long-term academic benefit from the assistance.<sup>27</sup>

When an assignment is particularly challenging—or simply unclear—the probability of unpleasant interactions is even higher. “Despite my years of professional experience,” the eminent educator Nel Noddings remarked, “I’m often hard put to figure out what the teacher wants. . . [on] some assignments given to second graders. . . . I can well imagine these exercises adding to the tensions of home life instead of bringing parents and children together.” She added parenthetically, “Picture what happens when, in addition to the original struggle, the assignment gets a poor grade!”<sup>28</sup>

Family conflict is also more common when the children are struggling. In fact, every unpleasant adjective that could be attached to homework—time-consuming, disruptive, stressful, demoralizing—applies with greater force in the case of kids for whom academic learning doesn’t come easily. Curt Dudley-Marling, a former elementary school teacher who is now a professor at Boston College, conducted interviews with some two dozen families that included at least one such child. In describing his findings, he talked about how “the demands of homework disrupted. . . family relationships and den[ied] parents and children many of the pleasures of family life.” The “nearly intolerable burden” imposed by homework was partly a result of how defeated such children felt; how they invested hours without much to show for it; how parents felt frustrated

when they pushed the child but also when they didn't push, when they helped with the homework but also when they refrained from helping. "You end up ruining the relationship that you have with your kid," one father told him.<sup>29</sup> Such parents have often accepted what they've been told—that homework is useful and kids ought to be made to do it. But what they experience directly are "the tensions and frustrations, the angry words, the frequent yelling, the storming away, and the slamming of doors."<sup>30</sup>

Even when children *are* able to keep up, and even when they get along well with their parents, homework reshapes and directs family interactions in ways that we have learned to expect but are troubling to consider. Leah Wingard, a linguist at the University of California–Los Angeles, videotaped thirty-two families in their homes and then pored over the results to analyze who said what to whom, when, and how. For starters, she discovered that when the subject of homework was brought up, it was almost always by the parent—and usually within five minutes of greeting the child. (How can a relationship *not* be affected when one of the first things out of our mouths is, "So, do you have any homework?" It may be useful to consider what else we might say to our children after not having seen them all day—what other comments or questions they might experience as more welcoming, more supportive, or even more intellectually engaging.)

On those rare occasions when it was the child who raised the topic first, the study found that he or she invariably did so either to announce with relief that there was no homework (or it had already been done at school), which generally elicited a positive response from the parent, or to ask the parent for permission to do something or go somewhere. "Children orient to homework as an organizer of their time, and a gatekeeper from other activities if there is homework to complete."

Mostly, though, Wingard was struck by how "homework talk and the doing of homework are one of the organizers of children's

afternoon weekday activities and have a significant impact on the time and activity planning of family life.”<sup>31</sup> In most of these interactions, homework is viewed by parent and child alike as something to be gotten over. Conversations typically deal with what kinds of assignments the child has, how long it will take to do them, and the ways in which activities will be scheduled around them. Wingard’s data indicate that even when homework is not an occasion for outright misery or hostility, it is, at best, something mildly unpleasant that families have learned to live with. (This is certainly consistent with other anecdotal reports: Even parents who defend homework against its critics often do so by insisting that it doesn’t do *too* much harm, or it’s *no longer* a significant source of conflict for their families.)

One of the fathers in this study is shown on tape raising his hand at the dinner table to high-five his daughter upon learning that she has finished her homework. But there are virtually no exchanges—in this or any other family—that deal with the *content* of the homework. No parent asks, “So, did the assignment help you to understand this topic?” or “What’s *your* opinion of [the issue you were working on]?” As a rule, the point of homework generally isn’t to learn, much less to derive real pleasure from learning. It’s something to be finished. And until it is, it looms large in conversations, an unwelcome guest at the table every night.<sup>32</sup>

4. **Less time for other activities.** Quite apart from the often disagreeable effects that homework has on parents, kids, and family interactions is the simple fact that an hour spent doing schoolwork at home is an hour not spent doing other things. There is less opportunity for children just to hang out with their parents. There is less opportunity for the kind of learning that doesn’t involve traditional academic skills. There is less opportunity to read for pleasure, make friends and socialize with them, get some exercise, get some rest, or just be a child.

In the mid-1960s, the American Educational Research Association released an official policy statement that said, in part: “Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time that should be devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents.”<sup>33</sup> Those basic needs apparently *aren’t* met in many cases. One clinical psychologist, for example, recalled “what my children and I used to do before homework took over our lives. We ate dinner together, telling stories about our days. We read together. Sometimes we played cards or Monopoly. Once we made an entire gingerbread town. The children had time to themselves, too. Time to play, time to go outside, time to do nothing.”<sup>34</sup>

It is the rare school that respects the value of those activities—to the point of making sure that its policies are informed by that respect. One independent school in Colorado has taken the position that, in the words of its director,

6½ hours a day in school is enough. . . . Kids and families need the rest of the days/evenings/weekends/holidays for living—playing, having friends and pets, shopping, solving problems, cooking, eating, [doing] chores, traveling, playing on sports teams, communicating, finding out about world news, playing musical instruments, reading for pleasure, watching movies, collecting things, etc., etc., etc.<sup>35</sup>

To fill in those “et ceteras” with activities of one’s own choosing is to tally what homework displaces. This is not to imply that the presence of homework entails the complete absence of other activities. Most children do homework and they also do other things. But often there just isn’t enough time left for some of those nonacademic pursuits once all the homework is done. This objection, in other words, is predicated on how much of a child’s day is absorbed by academics. Other critics, meanwhile, offer a stronger objection,

arguing that there is a principle involved: Schools shouldn't be dictating to families how *any* of their children's time in the late afternoon or evening must be spent.

Either way, the loss of time is not like other adverse effects, which at least in theory could be tested empirically. Here, research isn't relevant. This is a matter of value judgments: To what extent do we believe children (and families) should be able to decide how to spend their time together? For that matter, what do we think childhood ought to be about? To require students to do homework on a regular basis is to give one kind of answer to these questions. If we don't like those answers, then homework should come in for sharp scrutiny. After all, it is not a fact of life that must be accepted but a policy that can be questioned.

**5. Less interest in learning.** Homework's emotional effects are obvious, but its adverse impact on intellectual curiosity is no less real. Kids' negative reactions may generalize to school itself and even to the very idea of learning. This is a consideration of overriding importance for all of us who want our children not only to know things but to continue *wanting* to know things. “The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning,” said John Dewey.<sup>36</sup> (Then again, perhaps “formed” isn't the most appropriate verb. As the educator Deborah Meier reminds us, a passion for learning “isn't something you have to inspire [kids to have]; it's something you have to keep from extinguishing.”)<sup>37</sup>

Anyone who cares about this passion will want to be sure that all decisions about what and how kids are taught, every school-related activity and policy, is informed by the question, “How will this affect children's interest in learning, their desire to keep reading and thinking and exploring?” In the case of homework, the answer is disturbingly clear. Most kids hate homework. They dread it, groan about it, put off doing it as long as possible. It may be the single most reliable extinguisher of the flame of curiosity.

A father in Massachusetts wrote to me not long ago about having asked his thirteen-year-old son whether he (the son) liked something he had just read. “Well, it was a good book,” his son replied, “but I really never enjoy reading when I have an assignment hanging over my head.” Mused the father, “Yup, that’ll teach a lifelong love of learning.”

Phil Lyons, a high school social studies teacher in California, came to much the same conclusion. Homework, he told me, basically contributes to a situation where students see learning as just an unpleasant means to an end, “a way to accrue points”:

It simply reinforces what is already a terrible problem in America’s archaic educational system; it emphasizes reading because there will be a quiz on the reading, it mandates dozens of identical math problems because the test will contain dozens more just like the ones on the homework, and it asks students to respond to end of chapter questions like, “Which country did Napoleon invade in 1812?” All of these tasks are time-consuming, dreary, uninspiring and serve only to kill whatever motivation remains in students.

This teacher concluded that trying to improve the quality of homework assignments wouldn’t solve the problem. He finally decided to stop giving homework altogether. Later I’ll say more about his reasons and results—as well as those of other teachers and schools that have also pulled the plug. For now, I want to report one thing Lyons noticed immediately: In the absence of homework, “students come in all the time and hand me articles about something we talked about in class or tell me about a news report they saw. When intrigued by a good lesson and given freedom [from homework], they naturally seek out more knowledge.”<sup>38</sup>

Precisely because most kids find most homework so unappealing, parents often feel compelled to offer them praise and other in-



centives for doing it—or threaten punitive consequences for failing to do it. So, too, do many teachers. Elsewhere, I’ve written at length about how the main effect of such carrots and sticks is to reduce people’s interest in whatever they were rewarded for doing (or punished for not doing).<sup>39</sup> People who rely on these tactics to make kids complete an assignment end up making the learning itself seem even less appealing, which then makes bribes and threats seem even more necessary, creating a vicious circle. But the problem isn’t due merely to these crude techniques employed by desperate adults. It’s a function of the homework that drove them to do this to children.

### *The Attitudes*

The effects I’ve listed here, if not universal, are surely pervasive. Every child won’t experience all of them, but most of them will be familiar to the majority of families. The next logical question, then, would be: What conclusions about homework do people form in light of these consequences?

It would appear that the positions taken by parents are more varied than the reality to which they’re responding. Some endorse homework enthusiastically and without reservation. Quite a number of educators will tell you that “excessive homework has been brought about to a very large extent by parental pressure.”<sup>40</sup> Occasionally the parent’s motive may just be to keep children busy: One New York teacher reports that she has “actually had parents come up and tell me to give their child lots of homework because if the kid does not have anything to do, [he or she] will drive them (the parents) crazy.”<sup>41</sup>

What seems to be more common, though, is a simple desire on the part of parents for their children to succeed academically, accompanied by the belief that homework is a critical means to that end. Thus, a Washington elementary school teacher, who con-

cluded after ten years in the classroom that homework is a waste of time, has been thwarted in her attempts to stop assigning it by the fact that “parents want it. I have actually been told that by not requiring homework I am setting their children up for failure later in life.”<sup>42</sup> And from an Ohio middle school teacher: “Most of what the other core subject teachers in my building assign is what I consider ‘busywork.’ Many students don’t bother to do it and most who do complete it don’t learn anything from it. In my opinion the other teachers assign homework because parents and administrators expect it.”<sup>43</sup>

In fact, some parents seem to figure that as long as their kids have lots of stuff to do every night, never mind what it is, then learning must be taking place. Educational quality is assumed to be synonymous with “rigor,” and rigor, in turn, is thought to be reflected by the quantity and difficulty of assignments. “I have been contacted by parents on a number of occasions who demand that their children do ‘something,’” reports a high school English teacher in California. “They don’t seem to care what their children think *about*, so long as there is plenty of homework to be done.”<sup>44</sup> This perspective isn’t limited to any single demographic, by the way. It can be found among parents of overachieving students and underachieving students, among rich and poor, liberal and conservative.

Other parents, by contrast, wind up endorsing the institution of homework despite misgivings based on how it affects their children. Some send mixed messages to teachers and principals: They complain about lost family time but also assume that too little homework reflects a worrisome lack of seriousness about academics on the part of the school. They object to the burden placed on their children but at the same time are suspicious of teachers who don’t give as many assignments.

Still other parents can’t be described as active supporters of homework, but neither do they oppose it. They’ve never taken a

position on the subject one way or the other; they just go with the flow of assignments their kids get. One politically progressive, well-educated New Hampshire mother spoke to me with remarkable candor about how it can be appealing to avoid looking too hard at what’s going on. After reading an early description of this book, she wrote, “As a total type A good girl, it never occurred to me to actually check the value of [my high school son’s] homework. I just make him do it. So this weekend. . . I took a look. Holy cow—how stupid it all is. Of course, now I’m just ticked off at you because I either have to admit to my son that it’s all stupid or go talk to the high school principal about its being stupid. Neither conversation is very appealing.”<sup>45</sup> Needless to say, many parents in this camp never end up having such conversations—or even ruminations. They just continue to treat homework as a fact of life and make their children do it.

But some parents *do* think about it and find themselves moved to take a stand. They conclude that homework is “more a hindrance than a help” as far as learning is concerned; they describe it as “busywork, with zero redeeming qualities”; they are anguished that their children “have grown up in their rooms doing homework,” “missing out on their childhoods.”<sup>46</sup> And they resent the fact that they, along with all other parents, are pressured to swallow their doubts and push their children to do whatever has been assigned, even if they can see little benefit. National policy documents, as well as memos from school, frequently give the impression that the objective is to ensure compliance from parents as much as from students.

That compliance, even for willing parents, often entails walking a tightrope. On the one hand, teachers and policy makers blame parents for doing too little. Nearly four of every five teachers in one survey said they “believe parents are barely involved in their children’s homework.”<sup>47</sup> A front-page article in the *Washington Post* sounded an extended note of indignation about students who fail

to do what they've been assigned, and it quoted teachers who said "the fault ultimately lies with parents who don't pressure children" to do so.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, parents are often faulted for getting *too* involved. It's not unusual to find teachers (and journalists) for whom this is the primary grievance when the topic of homework is raised. And indeed, some parents do take over their kids' assignments.<sup>49</sup> It may be because of competitiveness (they want their child to outshine his peers), or enmeshment (their own self-esteem is bound up with their child's success), or misplaced priorities (they become so concerned about the quality of the product that they forget the point is supposed to be about the process—that is, learning). You know something is amiss when parents talk about the homework "we" had last night.

What's lost in criticizing such behavior, though, is the real dilemma that almost all parents face. It's one thing to agree in theory that children should be responsible for doing their own homework; it's something else to put the abstract principle of self-sufficiency ahead of pleas from your child who is overburdened, frustrated to the point of tears, and begging for your help. Some caring parents provide that help because they've concluded it's the least bad way of dealing with a difficult situation; other parents step back and chew their knuckles for the same reason. The tendency to blame parents for doing too much—or too little—is, above all, a way of deflecting attention from problems with the homework itself.

If parents sometimes feel squeezed—"Get more involved. . . but not *too* involved!"—so, too, do many educators. One teacher who worked at three different elementary schools over the course of a decade told me, "No matter how much or how little homework I assigned, I always had some parents asking for more homework, and others asking for less."<sup>50</sup> You can find teachers—just like parents—at all points on the continuum. Some are strong believers in the value of homework. (When Chicago teachers were asked by re-

searchers what the negative effects of homework might be, one out of three replied that there weren't any.)<sup>51</sup> But others detest homework or at least find it unhelpful, and assign it only because they feel pressured to do so. Based on their years of classroom experience, many have concluded that homework has little pedagogical value. Some, however, had to see things from the other side before the light dawned. I've spoken to several teachers who rarely, if ever, give homework, and when I ask what led them to this practice, their first words were, "Well, I'm a parent myself, and when I watched *my* kids . . ." Disturbingly, some teachers seem to lack this perspective unless, or until, they have their own children. "Now that I'm a parent myself," one fourth grade teacher in North Carolina said, "I realize they have lives at home."<sup>52</sup>

It's understandable that parents critical of homework would fault teachers, teachers critical of homework would fault parents, and students critical of homework would fault both. But it's important to recognize that all three constituencies often have a substantial burden in common, along with a feeling of powerlessness. To blame any of the victims here is to miss the structural issues, the forces that discourage us from asking whether homework is really desirable or inevitable.

Moms often sit on playground benches and commiserate about what homework is doing to their families, but then limit the questions they ask of their children's teachers to those dealing with the details: When is this assignment due? What sorts of binders will our kids need? It's acceptable to ask, "How much time should they be spending on this each evening?" but not to ask, "Is it really necessary to assign homework on this topic?" Teachers, too, may catch themselves wondering just how useful it really is to send children home with those packets, but then assume their only option is to revise the packets' contents.

Why do so many of us recognize the detrimental effects of homework and yet continue to put up with it, even defend it? Several

possible answers will be reviewed in the course of this book. But the most obvious response is that we assume homework's benefits outweigh its costs. It's hard for us to watch as our children mechanically, joylessly grind out their assignments, perhaps frustrated by those that are too difficult, perhaps exhausted from having to do too much. At least it's doing them some good, we tell ourselves. At least it's improving their achievement, teaching them independence and good work habits, helping them become more successful learners.

But what if none of this is true?

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## Does Homework Improve Learning? A Fresh Look at the Evidence

**B**ECAUSE THE QUESTION in the title of this chapter doesn't seem all that complicated, you might think it has a straightforward answer. You might think that open-minded people who review the evidence should be able to agree on whether homework really does help.

If so, you'd be wrong. "Researchers have been far from unanimous in their assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of homework as an instructional technique," according to an article published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. "The conclusions of more than a dozen reviews of the homework literature conducted between 1960 and 1989 varied greatly. Their assessments ranged from homework having positive effects, no effects, or complex effects to the suggestion that the research was too sparse or poorly conducted to allow trustworthy conclusions."<sup>1</sup>

When you think about it, any number of issues could complicate the picture and make it more or less likely that homework would



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