

Leah McLaren: Too much homework stifling your kids? Let them just say no

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Homework is a bummer, almost everyone agrees, but most parents shoulder the burden without even thinking. We sit our kids down at the kitchen table and “supervise” as they writhe and moan, gnaw at pencils and eventually slide off their chairs like limp rag dolls who have been exorcised of all imagination, natural curiosity and will to live.

When I complained about this daily torture on social media recently, an overwhelming number of parents agreed. But one Kingston-based mother, Dawn Livicker Quelch, got in touch to share her own innovative personal strategy. “My house is a homework-free zone,” she said. “At the start of the school year, I send a note to the teacher indicating that in our family the value of work-life balance is highly prized and homework-for-the-sake-of-homework will not be accommodated.

“I make it clear that if my daughter needs remedial help or if it is a time-management issue that is leading to incomplete classwork, then I’m fine with that,” Quelch continued. “But photocopied worksheets are returned uncompleted with a sticky note from me that reads ‘We talked about this, remember?’ ” Quelch hasn’t had any major pushback from teachers, but her daughter is only in Grade 2.

It’s no secret that homework has increased in recent decades. Talk to anyone who grew up in the 1970s or 80s (including most parents of school-age children) and you will find that, prior to middle school when complex math and grammar really kick in, they barely remember doing any homework at all.

Homework, in those days, was a burden for pre-teens and older students. And that, as it turns out, was exactly as it should be.

There is simply no scientific evidence to back up the commonly held view that more homework makes young kids smarter or more hard-working. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that for children in primary and elementary schools, the opposite is true – that large amounts of homework can have a detrimental effect on learning and

intellectual and social development. And yet for the most part, our pushy homework culture still exists. The question is why?

The reason, mostly likely, is misinterpretation of the existing data – in particular the assumption that what’s good for older kids must also be good for their younger counterparts. And, by extension, that more of a good thing is obviously great.

Harris Cooper, a neuroscientist at Duke University and author of the bestselling book *The Battle Over Homework*, has established a name for himself as North America’s reigning homework research guru. His argument, in essence, is that a moderate amount of homework is good (it’s linked to higher achievement) for students at a high school level.

Before that, however, he has observed there simply “is no evidence that any amount of homework improves the academic performance of elementary students.” In fact, he writes, too much homework for small children can actually put some kids off education – as any parent who has ever argued with a raging and recalcitrant seven-year-old over the need to practice times tables on a sunny day can attest.

Cooper’s analysis is extensive, conducted over multiple decades and involving hundreds of thousands of students. He compiled 120 studies in 1989 and then went on to analyze another 60 studies in 2006. His findings have been widely written about and discussed, except that most North American public school boards still ignore them, handing out homework to kids as young as six.

Slowly, however, this is changing.

Last school year, Collège de Saint-Ambroise, an elementary school with 339 students in the Quebec’s Saguenay region, made headlines across the country when teachers restricted homework for all students in Grades 1 to 6 as part of one-year pilot project. Since then, several other Canadian schools on the so-called “alternative model” have followed suit.

In the United States, some schools have adopted the practice of “no homework nights” to give students a break. A few years back, New Yorker writer Adam Gopnik led the charge, along with a small group of concerned parents, to have homework reduced at their kids’ elite Manhattan private school.

Here in Britain, a handful of state primary schools have adopted “no homework” policies that ban the practice outright for students under that age of 11.

The Toronto District School Board’s official homework policy for kids at the “late-primary” level is gentle in rhetoric, if not always practice. Homework, it says, should be “clearly articulated and differentiated to reflect the unique needs of the child.”

Perhaps the most surprising change is the way some parents – like Quelch – are simply taking matters into their own hands and putting their young kids on voluntary homework strike. It's a revolutionary approach – so liberating, so humane, so sensibly rebellious.

Now that spring has sprung, I might just might drag my poor kid out from under the kitchen table and try it.