

How involved should parents be in children's homework?



Parents should see themselves as coaches, experts say, providing their kids with snacks, suggestions and moral support. But that's not the same as doing it for them

Erin Anderssen

From Monday's Globe and Mail Published on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009 7:27PM EST Last updated on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009 7:38PM EST

Bedtime has come and gone, and your grumpy 10-year-old is staring bleakly at his half-finished essay. It's due tomorrow, and there's a choice before you: Send him to school with the work incomplete. Or give him a little extra "help" to end the agony and get the job done.

There likely isn't a parent out there who hasn't grappled with this homework quandary: How much help is the right amount? Will your child become "a slacker" if you take option B and prod (or, let's be honest, pull) him along? Will he hate school if you don't?

Think of yourself as a coach, say parenting experts and researchers. Not the kind that barks from the sidelines, consumed with winning, but someone who provides the tools (the desk, the pencils, the quiet space), the cheers and the occasional suggestion – and knows once exhaustion sets in, when to close the books.

"Be at the elbow but don't hold the pen," says Linda Cameron, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and veteran teacher, who researches homework. (And admits to helping her own now-grown children a little too much on occasion.) "You can prompt, give them resources, give them snacks."

And while parents need to curb the urge to give the answers, Dr. Cameron says, they should never send their child to school the next day without a note explaining why their homework isn't done – don't leave it up to your child to defend that unfinished essay. "I wrote many notes to school, saying we spent this much time on it and enough's enough, we need family time," she recalls.

Dr. Cameron, who completed a major study on homework in 2008, says she doesn't think there should be any for children under 11. Still, most younger students do get at least some, and studies show that the effectiveness of parental involvement depends on grade level.

It helps in elementary school, as children are building good study habits, but hinders in the middle grades, says Erika Patall, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who analyzed 34 homework studies from the United States and Canada.

In high school, she says, students more typically rely on parents for expert advice, when they are knowledgeable on a certain subject.

But even in the early years, the best assistance to children is setting clear rules for when and where homework should get done. "Be as specific as possible about what the procedures are every day," Ms. Patall says, but don't give answers. "It's better to leave it undone than cheat."

But parents also have the right to shape what kind of homework their children do, suggests parent educator Judy Arnall, who lectures at the University of Calgary – even if that means calling a halt to it entirely. Ms. Arnall recently took the extreme step of pulling her 15-year-old daughter from school when, after a request for a homework exemption, the teachers kept giving her zeroes.

"If you want your kids to have a balanced life we should speak up for that," she tells parents. Her daughter, who is involved in clubs, volunteers and is writing a novel, now does high school online and manages her own time.

In most cases, it should never get that far. Better to negotiate a compromise with the teacher, Dr. Cameron cautions, since tension and mixed messages can also impact a child's view of school. Homework should not require a lot of parent intervention, and if it does, it's important to request a meeting. "No matter what you do, you need to show respect," she says. "Maybe the teacher hasn't thought through the negative effect of what she intended [with the homework]."

But while pressure comes from all sides, researchers suggest it's often heaviest from parents, who need to be more sensitive about their expectations and cautious about piling on too many scheduled activities.

"Parents want their kids to be the best and get into Harvard, so they're advocating for homework without thinking about what it means for the kids," says Dr. Cameron.

But a good coach, she advises, knows when to say "enough is enough" – and go for ice cream instead.

What Canada's school boards say about kids and homework

Wency Leung

From Monday's Globe and Mail Published on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009 7:28PM EST Last updated on Monday, Nov. 23, 2009 12:29PM EST

Toronto District School Board

The TDSB's policy states that homework should not be assigned to kindergarten students, nor should it be assigned on holidays. For students in Grades 1 to 6, homework should be "differentiated to reflect the unique needs of the child." In early grades, any homework should take the form of reading, playing games and interactive activities, such as building and cooking with the family. For students in Grades 7 and 8, completion time for homework should be an hour or less. In Grades 9 to 12, homework should have an estimated completion time of two hours. Moreover, the policy states "effective homework assignments" need to be based on the curriculum, should be given feedback, should require no additional teaching outside the classroom, and do not require resources or technology to which students may not have access.

English Montreal School Board The EMSB does not specify how much homework should be assigned, so the amount can vary wildly. But general guidelines say homework tasks should be given regularly, and it "shall be appropriate to the students' level of achievement and shall reflect the specific needs of individual students or groups of students." It also notes the capacity for students to handle homework increases as they advance. Michael Cohen, the board's communications and marketing specialist, said the onus is on parents to research the school whose academic expectations best suit their children.

Calgary Board of Education The CBE recommends that students in Grades 1 to 3 not be given formal assignments, but recommends five to 10 minutes of systematic study a night, mostly involving reading. For students in Grades 4 to 6, teachers may use their discretion, but assignments should focus on reading and should not exceed 20 minutes. Students in Grades 7 to 9 are expected to study 30 minutes to an hour a night. Grade 10 students are expected to do 1 1/2 hours a night; those in Grades 11 and 12 are expected to do two hours a night. "While the Board is anxious to promote the supportive role of the home in the child's education, it is anxious at the same time not to interfere with the child's pursuit of other wholesome non-school interests of educational, cultural, or recreational value," the policy states.

Vancouver School Board

The VSB's policy was last updated in 1994, and is currently under review. It states that no formal homework should be assigned to children from kindergarten to Grade 3, and students in Grades 4 to 7 should devote no more than 30 minutes a day to homework. Students in Grades 8 to 10 should do no more than one hour; Grades 10 to 12 should devote no more than two hours. As of press time, school board officials were not able to say whether the new policy would change the amount of recommended homework time.

What the research says about kids and homework

Carly Weeks

From Monday's Globe and Mail Published on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009 7:28PM EST Last updated on Monday, Nov. 23, 2009 12:29PM EST

A report this year by the Canadian Council on Learning concluded that homework is effective – but only if it's assigned properly. More isn't necessarily better, and children in elementary school don't benefit from after-school assignments the same way that high-school students do.

The council, a non-profit corporation funded by the federal government, conducted a review of 18 studies on homework effectiveness conducted between 1987 and 2003 in the United States and Germany. Their findings offer a compelling argument for why homework matters.

When is homework effective?

When it engages students and requires them to use skills they learned in class to complete an assignment, according to Paul Cappon, president and CEO of the learning council. Instead of unfocused, open-ended or make-work projects, homework should have a particular objective that reinforces classroom learning. "The child will invest a mental effort because they know that it's useful," Dr. Cappon said.

When it can be done by the student, without help from parents. Although parents may spend time with their kids while they do homework, effective assignments are those the students can complete on their own so they reinforce what they've already learned. A parent's role is to provide time and space to do homework that is free of distraction, Dr. Cappon said.

When it has a purpose. Assignments should help anchor a new concept or skill in a child's mind and not be pointless busywork. For instance, reading assignments should stretch children's vocabulary so they can answer questions about what they've read, Dr. Cappon said. And more isn't always better. Students, particularly in younger grades, seem to benefit more when assignments don't take an excessive amount of time; assignments that take too long can diminish their effectiveness.

What's the bottom line?

There's little evidence to show that homework is effective among primary-school-aged children – except for those who are performing below their peers.

Many homework experts live by the "10-minute rule": Kids shouldn't do more than 10 minutes of homework for each grade they're in. That means a student in Grade 1 would do no more than 10 minutes, while a student in Grade 4 would do no more than 40 minutes. High-school students could do up to two hours a night. Spending more than two hours is not associated with higher academic achievement, concluded a 2006 Duke University study led by Harris Cooper, a homework expert and professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience.

Homework should reinforce what a child has already learned, be presented in a clear, manageable way and be engaging.

Less homework won't make us slackers, students say

Kids in one B.C. class respond to globeandmail.com critics who suggest easing up on homework will create lazy students

Globe and Mail update Published on Friday, Nov. 20, 2009 11:40AM EST

In Robyn Ladner's Grade 6 class, her students don't receive much homework. Ms. Radner, a teacher in Vernon, B.C., would rather they spend their evenings reading a good book, and get a good night's rest. Last week, she read to her class some of the online comments that were posted in response to the Globe and Mail's stories on homework. Her students had some strong opinions, particularly about the suggestion that homework-lite schooling would create "slackers" who won't be able to compete in the future. Here's what they said:

Anna Rice: In our class we don't get loads of homework. Slackers are people who get a minimum amount of homework and don't feel the need to complete it. I strongly believe that children should get the chance to work on a project before it is sent home for homework. Because I do not have homework most of the time I still have the energy and free time to go to my sports, play with my puppy and friends, and mostly I get the chance to spend time with my family. But on the other hand banning homework completely is taking it to far if you ask me. Everyone is given the chance to finish projects at school. That separates the wasting time kids and the using time wisely kids. Even though I don't get much homework I still get good grades and learn tons. Homework doesn't necessarily make you smarter.

Seth Blundell: In our class Mrs. Ladner doesn't give us much homework. When I am not doing my homework I get more time to play with my mom, dad, sister, and all of my other relatives. This isn't creating slackers. Those are kids who never do homework, never study, and don't care, no matter how much it is. We get as much as we need. I always pretty much get straight A's and I haven't had very much homework all the time I've been in school. I think I'm giving all my effort even if I haven't had a whole ton of homework.

Jordan McGrath: In our class Mrs. Ladner believes that we should have a small amount of homework. We finish what we didn't finish in class so we can do activities after school, like sports, hang out with my family, and play with my friends. After school I read books, I play with my friends and do other things. I believe that too much homework would prevent kids from doing their activities. I still get good marks in school even though I get less homework. I still try my best

Kyle Cuirka: Mrs. Ladner gives us homework if we do not finish it in class time. When I don't have homework I usually play video games, watch TV, and relax but sometimes I have sports but that is usually not a problem. I use my class time wisely so I don't get homework but still, I get really good grades in school from test and schoolwork. I think some homework is good because it is easy to get overdue work done.

Katrina Kleefman: In our class, Mrs. Ladner doesn't believe that homework makes a good student. That is why she will not give out a lot of homework unless it is an assignment that was unable to be finished during class time. Recently, we have been working on our book reports which we started three to four weeks ago and will be doing one each month. When we do projects like that, she will allow us to take it home so we can have plenty of time to use our best effort. I really like not having much homework so that I may spend more time with my family, play sports with my friends, read, do chores, and get a chance to relax.

Just because our teacher doesn't hand out too much homework, it doesn't mean that her class produces slackers. There are many kids in my class who always use their time wisely, give their best effort, and get excellent grades, even if we don't have much schoolwork to do at home. True slackers need some homework to do, because most of the time they have nothing better to do than sit in front of the TV or play video games. Homework isn't a waste of time unless it is completely unnecessary.

Homework doesn't build a better person.