

Homework harms kids, says debunker

Longer school day has no upside, ruins child's yen for learning and stirs conflict at home, author says

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Boston author and lecturer Alfie Kohn's views have stirred debate among parents and educators.

Alfie Kohn is a Boston-based author and speaker on educational and parenting issues who wrote *The Homework Myth: Why our kids get too much of a bad thing*.

The *Star* spoke with him prior to his appearance tonight at Sterling Hall School in Toronto. For information, go to cais.ca/alfie_kohn.

What's wrong with homework? Most parents already have a front-row seat to what's wrong. They watch the frustration and exhaustion on the part of their children; they are pulled into the conflict and into nagging. They watch children who lack the time to pursue interests they care about after a full day in school.

Homework may be the single greatest extinguisher of a child's curiosity. It tends to make kids less excited about learning.

Is there such a thing as "good" homework? The burden of proof rests with anyone who says six hours of academics a day is not enough for children.

Moreover, I think there's another value issue here: Who gets to decide what happens during family time, the schools or families?

I think there are, from time to time, examples where it does make sense for schools to presume to infringe on family time. An example would include free reading, where kids pick the books without having to read so many pages for so many minutes.

What about work not finished in class? Who decided on these assignments, and how valuable are they? Any decent teacher would never assign the same thing to all the kids in the class – not just because kids work at different rates, but because kids have different levels of understanding.

If it's a worksheet, it shouldn't be done anywhere because that's not, according to the best research, a useful way to help kids become proficient thinkers or lifelong learners.

So no worksheets in class? The best teachers don't have kids filling out worksheets, because that's more a focus on rote memorization than it is on learning what it means to read with understanding, to understand mathematical principles from the inside out.

The remarkable fact (about homework) is there doesn't appear to be an upside. No research has ever found benefit to assigning homework to kids before high school. In fact, in elementary school, there's not even positive correlation between doing homework and any measure of achievement.

At the high school level, there is a weak correlation, but no proof of a causal relationship. In other words, some older kids who do more homework also get higher marks and test scores, but there's no proof they get higher marks because they did homework.

What about the non-academic benefits? The claim that homework promotes self-discipline, independence, responsibility or good work habits is absolutely unconfirmed by any data whatsoever. It's folk wisdom.

The Toronto public board has a new policy limiting homework to one hour in Grades 7 and 8, and two hours in high school. And an elementary school in Barrie has banned homework.

The Toronto policy is a teeny first step.

My guess is those kids in Barrie are doing fabulous. I've heard from schools in the U.S. that have banned homework that kids are more likely to read for pleasure, to follow the news in the newspaper, to pursue a question online, to show their parents a science experiment they did at school, and so on.

Some Barrie parents said without homework, they lost their classroom connection.

We can solve that problem in five minutes. Teachers can send home annotated guides to the curriculum – here's what we are teaching and why. They can invite parents to come in and have a look around. Making sure that parents are in the loop is a desirable goal, by the way.

PARENTS, HEAR THIS ON HOMEWORK

Tips from Alfie Kohn (www.alfiekohn.org), author of *The Homework Myth*:

- **Educate yourself**

Make sure you know there is no evidence of any academic benefit from homework in elementary school, little reason to believe it's necessary even in high school.

- **Check the policy**

Compare how much homework your child is being assigned with school limits; confirm the teacher's time estimates.

- **Focus on quality**

Don't assume all is well just because kids are being given a reasonable amount to do. Are the assignments inspiring them?

- **Ask probing questions**

Don't limit yourself to the details ("Can kids consult the Internet for this assignment?"). A far more important question: What reason is there to think that this particular assignment is worth doing?

- **Remember the big picture**

Your job is to support your child's emotional, intellectual, social and moral development, not to be a homework enforcer.

- **Organize**

Speak out on the issue. Rally others with concerns.

COMMENTS ON THIS STORY

I agree with Mr. Kohn

I completely agree with Mr. Kohn regarding having no homework, for the elementary level at least. I'm in my 30s now, but I went to a Montessori school through grade 6 and had no homework unless we wanted to bring work home. There were specific subject areas we had to work in every day at school - we worked at our own pace and could choose what to do to for each subject, within reason. After school I had time to read, play outside, be with friends and family, or do sports and music. Entering grade 7 - and having homework - was no problem. I think no homework promotes a balanced life and allows children spend time with family and friends and learn to fill their time as they choose. Children are naturally curious - given the freedom and time, they will learn and discover amazing things on their own! There's plenty of time later in life to have homework. In the meantime, promoting a love of learning and helping students figure out **how** to learn are more important.

Posted by snickerdoodle at 3:37 PM Monday, September 22 2008