

EXCESSIVE HOMEWORK

By Kamala Nair

Nancy Kalish's daughter was an enthusiastic middle-schooler — until homework started to take over, consuming her evenings and weekends. When she started dreading school, the Brooklyn mom began to grow alarmed.

Kalish teamed up with Sara Bennett, a fellow frustrated mom, to write *The Case Against Homework: **How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It*** (out this month from Crown) for parents of kids in grade school on up. Their investigation drew on academic research and inter-views with educators, parents, and kids around the country. Kalish spoke to Parenting about their findings:

How can too much homework negatively affect kids?

They **don't have time to just be kids** anymore — they're so bogged down. And since many of the assignments are simply busywork, learning often becomes a chore rather than a positive, constructive experience. Homework overload is also affecting family life — a lot of kids can't even make it to dinner, and as a result, the only interaction they have with their parents involves arguments about homework.

What are signs that your child might be getting too much?

If he starts to hate school, like my daughter did, that might be one, as are nightly hysterics over homework.

The National Education Association recommends that kids have a total of **ten minutes per grade level** of homework per night. Anything above that is excessive.

The bottom line is that a child will understand a concept better if he has time to work on five problems, rather than struggling to race through 50.

What can parents do?

First, talk to your child's teacher, with the assumption that he or she wants what's best for your child. Often teachers are unaware of the havoc that homework is causing.

If that doesn't work, talk to the principal about your concerns. She may agree and set policy changes in motion. Or, you may need to involve other parents and go to the school board. It may not be simple to stem the tide of homework, but parents around the country are showing it can be done.

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Children's Homework Should Not Dominate Their Downtime

Focus on the Family by Dr. James Dobson

QUESTION: How do you feel about homework being given by elementary schools? Do you think it is a good idea? **If so, how much and how often?**

DR. DOBSON: Having written several books on discipline and being on the record as an advocate of reasonable parental authority, my answer may surprise you: I believe homework for young children can be counterproductive if it is not handled very carefully. Little kids are asked to sit for six or more hours a day doing formal classwork. Then many of them take a tiring bus ride home -- and guess what? They're placed at a desk and told to do more assignments. For a wiry, active, fun-loving youngster, that is asking too much. Learning for them becomes **an enormous bore** instead of the exciting panorama that it should be.

I remember a mother coming to see me because her son was struggling in a tough private school. "He has about five hours of homework per night," she said. "How can I make him want to do it?"

"Are you kidding?" I told his mother. "I wouldn't do that much homework!"

Upon investigation, I found that the elementary school he attended vigorously denied giving him that many assignments. Or rather, it didn't give the other students that much work. The school did expect the slower boys and girls to complete the assignments they didn't get done in the classroom, in addition to the regularly assigned homework. For the plodders like this youngster, that meant up to five hours of work nightly. There was no escape from books throughout his entire day. What a mistake!

Excessive homework during the elementary school years also has the potential of interfering with family life. In our home, we were trying to do many things with the limited time we had together. I wanted our kids to participate in church activities, have some family time, and still be able to kick back and waste an hour or two. Children need opportunities for unstructured play -- swinging on the swings and skipping rocks and playing with basketballs. Yet by the time their homework was done, darkness had fallen and dinnertime had arrived. Then baths were taken and off they went to bed. Something didn't feel right about that kind of pace. That's why **I negotiated with our children's teachers**, agreeing that they would complete no more than **one hour per night of supervised homework**. That was enough!

Homework also generates a **considerable amount of stress** for parents. Their kids either won't do the assignments or they get tired and whine about it. Tensions build and angry words fly. I'm also convinced that child abuse occurs at that point for some

children. When my wife, Shirley, was teaching the second grade, one little girl came to school with both eyes black and swollen. She said her father had beaten her because she couldn't learn her spelling words. That is illegal now, but it was tolerated then. The poor youngster will remember those beatings for a lifetime and will always think of herself as "stupid."

Then there are the parents who do the assignments for their kids just to get them over the hump. Have you ever been guilty of doing that? Shame on you! More specifically, have you ever worked for two weeks on a fifth-grade geography project for your 11-year-old -- and then learned later that you got a C on it? That's the ultimate humiliation!

In short, I believe homework in elementary school should be **extremely limited**. It is appropriate for learning multiplication tables, spelling and test review. It is also helpful in training kids to remember assignments, bring books home and complete them as required. But to load them down night after night with monotonous bookwork is to invite educational burnout.

In junior-high classes, perhaps two hours of homework per night should be the maximum. In high school, those students who are preparing for college must handle more work. Even then, however, the load should be reasonable. Education is a vitally important part of our children's lives, but it is only one part. Balance between these competing objectives is the key word.

QUESTION: Boy! Do I understand the perspective on homework you discussed last week. The greatest power struggle in our home is over school assignments. Our **fifth-grader** simply will not do them! When we try to force him to study, he sits and stares, doodles, gets up for water and just kills time. Furthermore, we never know for sure what he's supposed to be doing. Why is he like that?

DR. DOBSON: Let me offer a short discourse on school achievement, based on years of interaction with parents. I served as a teacher, a high school counselor and a school psychologist. As such, I became very well acquainted with children's learning patterns. The kind of self-discipline necessary to succeed in school appears to be distributed on a continuum from one extreme to the other.

Students at the positive end of the scale (I'll call them Type I) are by nature rather organized individuals who care about details. They take the educational process very seriously and assume full responsibility for assignments given. They also worry about grades, or at least, they recognize their importance. To do poorly on a test would depress them for several days. They also like the challenge offered in the classroom. Parents of these children do not have to monitor their progress to keep them working; it is their way of life -- and it is consistent with their temperaments.

At the other end of the continuum are the boys and girls who do not fit in well with the structure of the classroom (Type II). If their Type I siblings emerge from school cum laude, these kids graduate "Thank you, Laude!" They are sloppy, disorganized and flighty. They have a natural aversion to work and **love to play**. They can't wait for success and they hurry on without it. Like bacteria that gradually become immune to antibiotics, the classic underachievers become impervious to adult pressure. They withstand a storm of parental protest every few weeks and then, when no one is looking, they slip back into apathy. They don't even hear the assignments being given in school and seem not to be embarrassed when they fail to complete them. And, you can be sure, they drive their parents to distraction.

For many, if not most, of these kids, their "battles" over schoolwork and homework represent a conflict between their basic temperament and the frustration experienced and transmitted to them by their parents. A strict, but not punitive approach in which accountability for schoolwork and homework is transferred back from the parents to the child will effectively motivate them to assume responsibility for their work for many of them. An excellent, practical, description of this approach is provided by psychologist John Rosemond's book, "**Ending the Homework Hassle**" (Andrews and McMeel).

QUESTION: I have very little time to spend with my children these days, but I make sure the hours we do get to spend together are meaningful. Do you agree that the quality of time you are with your kids is more important than the quantity?

DR. DOBSON: I'm afraid the logic of that concept is flawed to me. The question is, why do we have to choose between the virtues of **quantity vs. quality**? We won't accept that forced choice in any other area of our lives. So why is it only relevant to our children?

Let me illustrate my point. Let's suppose you've looked forward all day to eating at one of the finest restaurants in town. The waiter brings you a menu and you order the most expensive steak in the house. But when the meal arrives, you see a tiny piece of meat about 1 inch square in the center of the plate. When you complain about the size of the steak, the waiter says: "Sir, I recognize that the portion is small, but that's the finest corn-fed beef money can buy. You'll never find a better bite of meat than we've served you tonight. As to the portion, I hope you understand that it's not the quantity that matters, it's the quality that counts."

You would object, and for good reason. Why? Because both quality and quantity are important in many areas of our lives, including how we relate to children. They need our time and the best we have to give them. My concern is that the quantity vs. quality argument might be a poorly disguised rationalization for giving our children neither.