The Case for Homework

By Martha Brockenbrough

I've been reading a fair amount lately about how homework is bad for kids. Part of me would like to believe this. It can be a real challenge to sit down every night after school and work with my kids on their homework — especially when we have other activities going on, dinner to prepare and that oh-so-worn-out feeling that comes at the end of a long day.

But another part of me knows these rallies against homework are sometimes misleading, and almost certainly skewing the big picture.

The truth is that good homework assignments help kids become better students. But good homework assignments can do even more. They can strengthen the family-school connection, help you know and understand your children better, and — with the right support — help your kids enjoy greater success later in life.

Researchers at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, looked at 60 studies conducted on homework between 1987 and 2003 and found that it did, in fact, help kids do better in school — though the benefits for kids in middle and high school are greater than for kids in elementary school. "With only rare exception, the relationship between the amount of homework students do and their achievement outcomes was found to be positive and statistically significant," read a report in the spring 2006 edition of Review of Educational Research.

First, though, the objections to homework. I hear them, I really do.

**Gripe 1: There's too much, too soon**

I didn't expect to have to deal with my kids' homework until middle school. That's how old I was when I first started getting assignments beyond "read a book."

Things are different today, though. A pair of studies showed that kids ages 6 to 8 did 45 minutes of homework per week in 1981, compared to two hours a week for the same age group in 2001.

I felt this acutely when my first child started to get homework in kindergarten — kindergarten! — and I believe I experienced what can only be called parental grief: shock, horror, disgust and irritation that eventually faded to low-level griping at pickup time.

Five years of age seems awfully young for a child to have homework, I thought at the time. I still think so, but have no objections to kids this age being assigned daily reading with a parent.

I was also really annoyed that my daughter and I would do the work but never see it again. Nor did we hear about it in parent-teacher conferences or student reports. Frankly, I didn't know whether the teacher looked at it or used it to wallpaper her bathroom. (This is one of the reasons we switched schools.)

After thinking about this for a few years, I've come to realize the problem wasn't the homework itself; it was the type of homework and the way that particular teacher handled it (more on this later).
Gripe 2: Kids don't have time for homework

Another big objection is that kids today are simply too busy for homework. This might be true for some kids. My own are involved in lots of activities: dance and music classes, dramatic productions, the church choir. I consider these things an indispensable part of their education, and sometimes I do wish that school really ended when that final bell rang.

But, somehow, my kids still manage to get their work done. And they help with dinner. And they play with each other, mess up the house, walk the dog and make hilarious short videos, among other kidlike things.

There is one thing missing from their lives that makes this possible: the chunk of time the average kid of the same age spends in front of the TV. A recent Nielsen study put TV watching at an eight-year high for kids: 28 hours per week. (A Kaiser Family Foundation report from 2005 found they spent another 16 hours interacting with computers and gaming devices.)

I'm not anti-TV (or computers or games). There's plenty of great stuff on TV, and there are also data indicating that kids who watch some TV do better in school than kids who don't. Nobody but a media critic needs to watch 28 hours of TV a week, though.

Gripe 3: Homework steals from playtime, sleeping time and family time

One book called homework "a hidden cause of the childhood obesity epidemic, creating a nation of 'homework potatoes.'"

Please. Until kids are doing 28 hours of homework a week, this is not the sitting that's widening waistlines. It's TV. You might as well blame bathing and brushing teeth for our weight problems. "We're expected to do it every day! It steals time from the family! Good hygiene is making us fat!"

People who eat too much and move too little tend to have weight problems. Kids do need plenty of exercise and fresh air (and so do parents). It takes planning and discipline to create a life with this kind of balance, especially as schools cut recess and PE time to save money and attempt to increase academic rigor. Nobody said this was easy. Homework, though, is the wrong thing to blame.

Gripe 4: Homework doesn't teach independent thinking

For me, this is one of the most compelling arguments people make against homework. And I can see why: Fill-in-the-blank worksheets generally aren't stirring stuff. All too many kids get this kind of assignment.

When I was teaching high-school students at a top-notch private school, I was surprised by how many kids didn't have great independent thinking skills. Many would flounder if I didn't give them a clearly defined assignment that had set metrics by which they'd be graded.

But is homework to blame for this? Or is it a school system that in almost all areas grades kids based on their ability to follow assignments and get the "right" answer?

I'd argue the latter. Kids should get opportunities for independent thinking throughout school, and they should know that much of their success in life will depend on how they are able to direct their own learning, efforts and work.

Less emphasis on grades and scores, more opportunities for independent work, and more acknowledgement for individual efforts would make a big difference.

The good stuff about homework

This brings me to the positive aspect of homework. At its most basic, it's a chance for kids to practice — and practice all sorts of things.

They can practice what they were taught in school. This is when it's important that homework gets done — and by the student, not the parent. If a student doesn't understand or remember what happened in school, a
teacher can learn that quickly by looking at the homework. It's also why the value of homework plummets if the teacher isn't looking at it afterward.

Kids can practice other habits with their homework as well: how to organize a learning space, how to keep track of assignments, how to stick to something that's challenging, and how to inject fun into something that feels like work.

This is where a parent's role is crucial. By helping your elementary-school-aged children learn the basics of organization, you're helping them internalize good work habits that will serve them later. If you make the homework experience fun — with snacks, exercise breaks and rewards for effort — all the better. People have an incredibly valuable life skill if they know how to enjoy doing something that they have to do.

Watching your child struggle with homework can also give you valuable insights about his strengths and weaknesses. You will be able to intervene earlier if it's necessary, and you will certainly be prepared to talk with your teacher come conference day. In fact, homework is the best link between home and school you have. You know what your child is learning and how well. You also have evidence to make a case for change if the teacher isn't giving great assignments or reviewing them properly.

Probably the most important thing, though, is how homework can teach your child the value of effort and persistence, two things that matter more than raw IQ when it comes to success. The encouragement you give — praising a child's hard work — makes a difference. (You actually don't want to praise children for being "smart," because this can make them fear failure and underperform).

Getting good at anything — math, organization, spelling, even persistence — takes practice. There's a theory that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert at something. That's about three hours of daily practice for 10 years. It's possible to help build in some of this practice time without being overly academic. A few focused minutes a day is all it really takes (and here's to those teachers who know how to keep assignments small).

I do wish that all homework assignments were fun and exciting and that they encouraged independent thinking, but sometimes just the act of practice is worthwhile, and it will pay off when homework starts to count.

In any case, good luck out there in the homework trenches. You have my sympathy.