

## **Perspectives: Calling all parents: How did you do on your homework?**

**Karen DeBord**

It is that time of night. Time to sit at the table and get out the sharpened pencils, paper, and textbooks. Homework time! Every school-age child knows the routine. Every parent dreads the routine and wishes there was an easier way. How much time should be spent on homework? What is its purpose? And, does assigning homework assure parental involvement and school achievement?

It is my opinion that homework in moderation reinforces concepts learned while in school. It is one way parents and children can connect and have some positive interaction. It allows the child to hear an problem-solving explanation from a different perspective than that of the teacher. But is this the scene we generally find? Of late, it seems that homework has become a burden, and in many families, interferes with family time and adds to family stress.

- Are teachers requiring too much homework for many children today?
- Are schools working with parents to assure that they are interacting with their child in an appropriate way to complete homework assignments?
- Are the student accountability standards adding to the homework stress?

These questions have been uppermost in my mind as a parent of 10- and 15-year-old children. I have heard other parents say, "What is it about the homework? We didn't have this much homework. What is the deal?"

Many parents (including me) are spending more and more time supporting their children's learning through homework completion. After school, parents who try to expose their child to extracurricular activities rush to get to community activities or extracurricular lessons, and children miss out on down time, neighborhood play time, and above all else, family time. Recently I informally queried parents through an e-mail listserve and through a parents'

discussion group. Consider these recent comments from parents about their children's homework:

*" We don't have any family time anymore because we are spending so much time on homework."*

*" While he was working on one page of his math, I was copying problems for him from the next page he had to do."*

*" Forget extracurricular activities. If we have to squeeze in more activities, we could not get all the homework done!"*

*"I have a nine-year-old son who is given 'homework' that really is for the whole family! Under the guise of 'parental involvement'. "*

*" There is no longer a stay at home parent waiting to assist children to complete their homework ."*

*" Schools are seeking parental involvement in school but perhaps have confused making cupcakes and completing homework each night with rich dialogue on field trips, or working together through inquiry based learning to solve complex problems."*

*"Homework winds up being our family time."*

*"Whenever possible, we have dinner together, and then we all engage in "homework."*

These are real comments by parents who feel their child has too much homework and that it could be contributing to eroding family time. Is there too much homework? What are the alternatives? Let's consider each of the questions.

### **Are teachers requiring too much homework for many children today?**

According to one study conducted at the University of Michigan, elementary school children were spending 50 percent more time on homework in 1997 than in 1981. Although educational principles have long indicated that children whose parents who are involved in their learning are more successful in school, this strategy has been carried to an extreme causing the pendulum to swing too far. It is time to determine the optimum amount of involvement and what sorts of parental involvement lead to greater school success. My guess is that more homework is not better and that more has led to a build-up of anger and resentment with the total educational system by the parental taxpayer. Involvement by parents comes in many forms. Loading on homework sometimes begins to feel like a punishment to the parent who must also devote the

greater part of the evening checking or assisting with homework to say nothing of cooking dinner, washing a load of laundry, or attending PTA!

**Are schools working with parents to assure that they are interacting with their child in an appropriate way to complete homework assignments?**

As children grow into their adolescence, they should begin to assume more and more personal responsibility for their own assignments. This is a tough transition to make but homework is a great place to start. Many parents worry about their child's school success. And although parents value education and want a good future for their child, they find themselves working doubly hard on raising a responsible child while supporting the completion and correctness of homework. There are various types of parents along this continuum who want to assist their children.

One end of the spectrum is the parent homework helper who is an over-achieving parent who gains personal esteem through their child's excellence. On more than one occasion, I have witnessed parent completions of the projects, with little child involvement. You've seen those projects at the science fair! How does this make the child feel who had little to do with the completion? Dishonest, left out, lacking personal esteem, and realizing that quality work is only completed by adults? How does that make the children who genuinely worked age-appropriately on their own projects feel? What does it tell us as adults when we see the major differences between these projects once displayed in the classroom? What well-meaning parent who had his or her child do the work has not felt sorry or even ashamed that their "family project" did not hold up against the other parent-made projects?

Also within this parental spectrum, there are non-involved parents leaving the child completely on his or her own, or a parent who becomes so stressed, the scene ends up with shouting, tears, and punishments. Homework time need not turn into a negative, frustrating time leading to punishments or complaints with tired parents and tired children working toward completing the last ten odd-numbered math problems. Negative interactions can sabotage the child's overall learning so that homework becomes associated with quarreling. Learning is best when children and their adult guides are open to the possibilities, nurturing inquisitiveness, together seeking solutions, solving problems, and searching for answers, not merely fussing through worksheet completion and clocked table sessions.

Public Opinion On-line last year found that 50 percent of parents are saying they had serious arguments with their children over homework.

(<http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/parent/parent7.htm>). Perhaps a suggestion would be for schools to bring teachers and parents together to build then adopt a school wide philosophy about homework. This philosophy can acknowledge that homework time can be stressful but it can also provide some guidelines for both parents and teachers with contingency plans in place for those

times when the child or parent is on edge, when a family crisis arises, or when homework is not contributing to positive family functioning. Strategies to share the homework philosophy and strategies to work with parents to learn about positive homework interactions could be shared broadly in the school community. I feel there is a great deal of work to do in this arena.

### **Are the student accountability standards adding to the homework stress?**

This is the information age, a time when things happen with microwave-like haste, and perhaps this pace is driving the frantic demand for higher student performance. With greater demands by schools to be "accountable," many systems are placing the responsibility for learning with the child. Teachers may be feeling equal stress driving them to include parents in student learning. As children age, certainly responsibility for their own learning and future is critical. Adolescents and teens are still developing a sense of responsibility and may respond to the structure and framework offered by the state standards of learning.\* Young children, however do not realize the impact that retention can have on their future success and schooling.

In North Carolina accountability involves administering an End of Grade test as a criterion for passing to the next grade. Failing an End of Grade test leads to retention or remedial programs. This one snapshot test can negate the passing grades and send children into a remedial program for the entire summer with the hopes of meeting a defined standard. My response is that remediation forecasts and attention to specific learning needs should occur prior to the test and prior to a decision to retain a child. Part of the difficulty with this is that added attention is difficult when class sizes are so large. And the larger question may be: With End of Grade tests, does it really matter if the homework is done as long as the child learns the concepts? It is food for thought. These times are difficult for designing accountability standards that include multiple measures, work samples, and assessments by which to assess a child's progression to the next learning stage. Accountability is critical, but the standards should be evaluated against the age of the child as well as the total school package, homework included.

I believe parents are indeed interested in and concerned about their child's learning. Further, I believe that parents want their child to learn and in turn want an accurate reflection of their child's abilities on their individual reports. At the same time, parents may be teetering between raising a responsible child while being worried about assuring school success through homework. True partnerships between families and schools to address not only accountability but how homework can enhance learning and parent-child relationships can be addressed. This may be better addressed at the classroom level then filtered up to the school level for policy design. More involvement may occur that way. In the end, however, parents and schools must form a partnership so that children grow through inquiry, discovery and cooperative teaming rather than the standard worksheets, drills, and information deluge strategies of the past. Creating a learning environment that places the child at the center but not in the middle between school

and home can lead to lifelong skills of learning how to think, how to inquire, how to wonder, and how to solve problems creatively.

\* Every state has adopted some sort of accountability plan. See Standards for accountability by each state [http://www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/Publications/Publications\\_Accountability.htm](http://www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/Publications/Publications_Accountability.htm) . . . . .  
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**Cite this article:**

DeBord, Karen. 2001. Perspectives: Calling all parents: How did you do on your homework? *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 6(3).

