

Who Invented Homework?

By Lisa Harp

Who invented homework? And why does it continue to plague our lives like a sore that just won't heal? These questions have tormented me both as a parent and a teacher. I constantly hear parents complain about this touchy subject as well. Their biggest beef? Not having enough family time because of the intense homework loads that are doled out to their kids. By the time they get home from work, feed the kids, and supervise homework, there is little time left for anything else. Throw in a sports schedule and it can turn into chaos.

Growing up in North Dakota in the 1960's, I don't recall ever having any homework. After school my sister and I walked home, grabbed a quick snack, threw our ice skates over our shoulders, and raced back to school where there was a huge skating rink. All of our friends were there and we played crack the whip and skated until dark. Once again, we walked home where my mom had a hot cup of cocoa waiting for us.

Here's the news flash. We weren't overweight. We knew how to read, write, and do math just fine. We could spell words. We could write sentences and our handwriting was actually legible. Our teachers insisted on it. Our grades were good and we were rarely in trouble.

This scenario has changed. Our modern child starts school at age 5, sitting all day at a desk. Gone are our sandbox kindergartens where gross motor skills were enhanced and children could learn at their own pace. The older student sits in a classroom all day, is carted home by parents or rides the bus, and will often spend up to three hours each night doing homework. There is little down time for this child.

Free play? Forget it. There's no time for that. Sports are organized, and this child's time is structured. The little amount of free time this child has is often spent in front of a television, computer, or playing video games.

The result? Childhood obesity is on the rise. Test scores are dismal. Kids are struggling to read, write, and do math like never before. Currently, our nation has 2.9 million children receiving special education services. One child in five has dyslexia. One out of every eighty-eight (fifty for boys) children has autism. Has anyone stopped to think that what we are currently doing in our educational system is simply not working? And that increased homework is not the answer to solving this problem?

Recently I was working with a darling first grader. She handed me her spelling list. She was failing every week, and she really wanted to do better. I looked at

the list and my jaw dropped. There were twenty words that she was expected to learn. That in itself seemed a bit harsh. Then I looked at the words. There were two word patterns that she was expected to know –one was “all” and the other was “ight”. The words started out as four or five letter words and then advanced to such a level as “recall” and “delight”. This child has been alive on this earth for six years, and she’s expected to remember the spellings of these words? Ludicrous.

Here’s the sad truth of it all. Research indicates that homework has no real value for a student until the high school level. And we know that children, young children especially need to be physically active to help their brains function optimally. Yet educators continue to pile on more homework, chaining these kids to their desks at home for more hours than is necessary.

As a parent I resented this. As a teacher, I had other opinions about homework. There were just too many variables. It seemed unfair to send an assignment home and expect it to be accomplished well. There is nothing worse for a student struggling in math than to perform twenty math problems incorrectly. Some kids got help at home. Others didn’t. Was it fair to penalize the kids who went home to an empty house? Or the kids whose parents didn’t know how to help them or didn’t care? Should a child be penalized for lack of parental involvement?

Homework should be fair. It should have a time limit. If a student is wasting class time, sending the work home doesn’t guarantee that it will be done well or even done by the student. A homework assignment should be something that every child in the class can do –without help. If the student is struggling, then the homework should be decreased. Doing five math problems correctly is much more effective than doing forty incorrectly.

Schools and districts have guidelines for homework assignments, and usually they are reasonable. What’s unreasonable is a fifth grader spending three hours completing assignments each evening. If this is your fifth grader, then something needs to be done. Sooner than later.