

Quality homework teaches kids how to learn

Well, it's almost that time of the year. School days are right around the corner.

What images spring to mind for parents? New clothes, supplies, maybe even a new school. All sorts of new and interesting possibilities lie ahead. Then the thought strikes: homework.

This time it will be different, we think. New rules: no going out until your homework is finished, no phone calls, homework first, then the video games, and many other resolutions are banded about.

It seems like, for many families, it's akin to strategy planning for battle; in many ways, the early evening hours are a battleground centered on homework, and just like any subject that is not well-understood, we invent our own answers for the question: "what is homework, really?"

Ask students and they may tell you that it is a drag, a punishment, busy work, and that it has little relation to what they do in class. An educator may say it is to study, to practice, to complete an assignment so that the student is able to grasp the material. Then there are those parents and educators who believe by doing homework we are preparing them for some future time when, in the real world, they will have to do things they don't

want to do. In this case homework becomes another one of life's lessons rather than a learning tool.

What do we know about this thing called homework? Well, the assigning of homework is increasing, especially in the younger grades. We know that most students hate and dread homework – and hate it even more if they feel the teacher doesn't even look at it. We know that the emphasis is on the completing of homework rather than on the content.

Most parents are relieved and satisfied, for example, when their child has completed their homework "Have you finished your homework, honey?" Or, "you need to get your homework out of the way before you leave." "Yes, Mom and Dad, it's done."

Notice the words: done, finish, get out of the way. Sounds more like taking out the trash than a true learning experience. Something has gone awry here.

Some teachers, unfortunately, grade solely for completion, mimicking the parental attitude of completion over content. Did the student learn a new skill? Did the student use critical thinking skills to overcome a problem? Often, neither teacher nor parent knows the answer.

A well-kept secret in education research is, in elementary school,

for example, there is little correlation between homework and grades or academic performance.

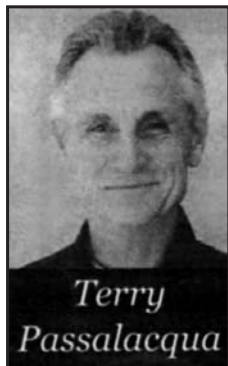
The reason may be because of the kind of homework given. A typical assignment may be: read chapter 4, answer the odd-numbered questions.

A better way might be to review the lesson and prepare with comments or questions about the assignment or the next day's lesson. At least, in this case, there would be a clear, specific goal.

Many teachers, after years in the classroom, have come to question the value of homework, especially when they find that they are lowering the student's grade for not completing the assignment, even if the student is doing well in class and understands the material.

Some teachers tell me they sometimes get pressure from parents to give more homework. To what end? Often homework serves the purpose of occupying the child's hours, thereby depriving the child of valuable family time. No different really, from propping your 2-year-old in front of the TV and hoping she gets something from it. Often parents, night after night, spend their hours helping their child with the assignments. Don't let your time be spent in vain.

What can you, as a parent do for your child? First, actively seek to understand what happens to the product of your child's labor. Unless the



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teacher gives some feedback to the assigned work, the time spent on the homework might be wasted. It's not that children don't waste their time, but assigned wasted time is a disservice.

Everyone, especially children, wants to see the fruits of their labor. When you plant a garden, does it not grow into something, hopefully something beautiful? What a tragedy then, to think of work completed, then nothing; the fruit dies on the vine.

If I could give you one piece of advice it would be: follow the paper trail. Follow what happens to the assignment from the minute it comes home, to when it disappears to the bedroom and emerges finished.

Then pick up the trail the next day. Where does it go? Who sees it? Exactly what feedback is given? Did the teacher eyeball it and mark a check mark in her grade book? Did the teacher sit down and discuss each problem with your child? Did the teacher at least explain the homework problems while the students were following along? Or, is the paper languishing in a pile somewhere?

Once you have this invaluable piece of information, you can then decide

what value to put on the homework. For example, if you, as a parent, find that the teacher didn't even look at the work, you may wonder how the teacher knows learning has taken place. After all, learning is the goal, isn't it? If there is some other motivation than learning then we aren't talking about education; we are talking about something else.

Once you have followed the paper trail, you can better help your child. What if you discover, for example, that the homework is really just busy work? And, moreover, it will be graded busy work. First, you should have a conversation with the teacher. What are the teacher's goals and expectations for homework? This may be a difficult conversation, but a necessary one. It will put you in alignment with your child. What you do or say to your child about the busy work/homework is up to you, but at least, you will have followed the paper trail; you will now be operating on a playing field, not a battlefield. More likely however, you will find that the teacher has put value on the homework. In this case your job is easy. You can support the teacher and your child by

following some simple guidelines. As a parent, you 'naturally' bring some baggage to the scene and everything you say or do to your child carries a charge. Children often feel pressure to complete the assignment in order to please their parents. Realize that completing the assignment, although necessary, is not the primary goal. It's learning or learning to learn. Once your child understands that you value the learning part of the assignment, he or she will be willing and eager to share what was learned with you. Be more of a listener than an editor.

Remember when your child accomplished something for the first time, like riding a bike or deciphering a word? The joy and flush of pride on his or her face made you smile. That's the feeling you want to capture. Support and acceptance will help you and your child win the homework war.

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