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The Myth About Homework

By Claudia Wallis

Sachem was the last straw. Or was it Kiva? My 12-year-old daughter and I had been drilling social-studies key words for more than an hour. It was 11 p.m. Our entire evening had, as usual, consisted of homework and conversations (a.k.a. nagging) about homework. She was tired and fed up. I was tired and fed up. The words wouldn't stick. They meant nothing to her. They didn't mean much to me either. After all, when have I ever used sachem in a sentence--until just now?

As the summer winds down, I'm dreading scenes like that one from seventh grade. Already the carefree August nights have given way to meaningful conversations (a.k.a. nagging) about the summer reading that didn't get done. So what could be more welcome than two new books assailing this bane of modern family life: *The Homework Myth* (Da Capo Press; 243 pages), by Alfie Kohn, the prolific, perpetual critic of today's test-driven schools, and *The Case Against Homework* (Crown; 290 pages), a cri de coeur by two moms, lawyer Sara Bennett and journalist Nancy Kalish.

Both books cite studies, surveys, statistics, along with some hair-raising anecdotes, on how a rising tide of dull, useless assignments is oppressing families and making kids hate learning. A few highlights from the books and my own investigation:

- According to a 2004 national survey of 2,900 American children conducted by the University of Michigan, the amount of time spent on homework is up 51% since 1981.
- Most of that increase reflects bigger loads for little kids. An academic study found that whereas students ages 6 to 8 did an average of 52 min. of homework a week in 1981, they were toiling 128 min. weekly by 1997. And that's before No Child Left Behind kicked in. An admittedly less scientific poll of parents conducted this year for AOL and the Associated Press found that elementary school students were averaging 78 min. a night.

- The onslaught comes despite the fact that an exhaustive review by the nation's top homework scholar, Duke University's Harris Cooper, concluded that homework does not measurably improve academic achievement for kids in grade school. That's right: all the sweat and tears do not make Johnny a better reader or mathematician.
- Too much homework brings diminishing returns. Cooper's analysis of dozens of studies found that kids who do some homework in middle and high school score somewhat better on standardized tests, but doing more than 60 to 90 min. a night in middle school and more than 2 hr. in high school is associated with, gulp, lower scores.
- Teachers in many of the nations that outperform the U.S. on student achievement tests--such as Japan, Denmark and the Czech Republic--tend to assign less homework than American teachers, but instructors in low-scoring countries like Greece, Thailand and Iran tend to pile it on.

Success on standardized tests is, of course, only one measure of learning--and only one purported goal of homework. Educators, including Cooper, tend to defend homework by saying it builds study habits, self-discipline and time-management skills. But there's also evidence that homework sours kids' attitudes toward school. "It's one thing to say we are wasting kids' time and straining parent-kid relationships," Kohn told me, "but what's unforgivable is if homework is damaging our kids' interest in learning, undermining their curiosity."

Kohn's solution is radical: he wants a no-homework policy to become the default, with exceptions for tasks like interviewing parents on family history, kitchen chemistry and family reading.

Or, in a nation in which 71% of mothers of kids under 18 are in the workforce, how about extending the school day or year beyond its agrarian-era calendar? Let students do more work at school and save evenings for family and serendipity.

Bennett and Kalish have a more modest proposal. Parents should demand a sensible homework policy, perhaps one based on Cooper's rule of thumb: 10 min. a night per grade level. They offer lessons from their own battle to rein in the workload at their kids' private middle school in Brooklyn, N.Y. Among their victories: a nightly time limit, a policy of no homework over vacations, no more than two major tests a week, fewer weekend assignments and no Monday tests.

Why don't more parents in homework-heavy districts take such actions? Do too many of us think it's just our child who is struggling, so who are we to lead a revolt? Yup, when it comes to the battle of homework mountain, we've got too many Indians and not enough sachems.

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