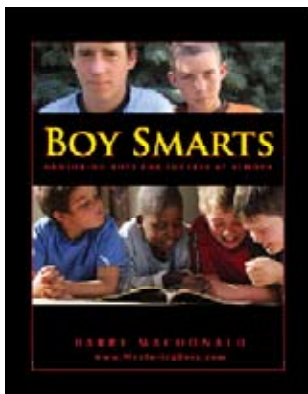


The Heat Around Homework



Dear Barry,

My son is in primary school and he already loathes homework. The school expects him to sit still and learn for long periods of time during the day and then again later at home. I worry that homework is turning him off school altogether and that it will only get worse as he gets older. It just seems ludicrous to me that parents are expected to make kids sit at home and complete more schoolwork after a day in school. I see it as pure drudgery yet teachers say that homework will help him develop his work habits and a good stick-to-it attitude, and that it will reinforce the skills he has learned at school.

Homework also troubles me because of what my son is missing. What about the many other wonderful learning adventures that life offers? Aren't these early years also a time when extra-curricular activities should be encouraged to teach the pleasure of lifelong pursuits? Skating, swimming, skiing, soccer, tennis, music, photography, art, and visits to museums and libraries... these are the activities that I believe my son also needs to participate in to become a well-rounded person. Rather than sending assignments home for me to enforce when I am plain tired at the end of the day, need to get a decent meal on the table, and am not trained to teach, can't teachers find a way to help elementary-aged kids complete schoolwork AT school?

Which brings me to another big concern. Homework really interferes with our family time. My children get to see and interact with their dad for about one hour each evening and on the weekends because of his busy work schedule. I adore how they take this time to play together at the park, work on projects they dream up together, or simply buddy up to read fun stuff. Isn't this bonding time more important than writing sentences, completing worksheets, memorizing spelling lists, and practicing times-tables?

I want to do what's best for my son but I feel sooooo guilty when his teacher tells me that he is not completing his classroom work and is falling behind. My heart tells me homework is not the answer. Please help me find some balance.

Alison Palkhivala, Montreal



Dear Alison,

Homework is one of those heated, highly charged issues that parents bring up at **Boy Smarts Action Talk** workshops and teachers circle round during professional development days.

Like you, many people worry that homework can dull learning and further erode family life. However, others believe that the long-standing tradition of toiling through homework drudgery helps young students to develop good work habits that will get them better prepared for secondary school. Some parents even gauge a school's effectiveness by the amount of regular homework it

requires. Recent parent emails indicate that some elite private schools tout a strict homework policy, with the elusive benefits ascribed to it, as one way to keep enrollment up. Parenting magazines and newspaper articles, which see it as axiomatic that homework is part of school life, focus on advice about how students can best complete it.

Homework advocates claim that homework fosters responsibility and discipline. A Calgary parent recently emailed me about her son's teacher interpreting his lack of attention in completing his homework as a sign of disrespect to the teacher and the entire school community! However, developing an inner sense of responsibility is not the same as surface compliance. There are many ways to teach responsibility without resorting to strong arm homework tactics: for example, involving students in decision-making about their learning, teaching them how to self-assess, letting them design problem-based learning tasks, or allowing them to help manage classroom and school facilities.

Nevertheless, many teachers and parents argue that children need to develop their *stick-to-itiveness* and learn how to engage in struggle if they are to succeed in life. Over a hundred years ago William James Dawson wrote about the importance of drudgery in *The Making of Manhood* (1894): "We all have to do many things, day by day, which we would rather not do. Even in the callings that seem to present the most perfect correspondence between gifts and work, such as those of the writer or the artist, drudgery dogs the heels of all progress." Dawson further elaborated: "He who has never learned the art of drudgery is never likely to acquire the faculty of great and memorable work, since the greater a man is, the greater is his power of drudgery."

When Dawson wrote about the merits of drudgery in the late 1800's, schoolchildren merely had to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic to be successful. Over the years homework, which once focused on simple tasks of

memorizing math facts or writing spelling words, has evolved into complex projects. Demanding homework projects may often be disguised as “incomplete assignments.” Knowing full well that their son may simply need a break from traditional learning, parents who desperately want to help their son stay afloat plead with him to get that homework done. These desperate parents will often snatch at any possible lifelines offered by the school. In some learning communities homework is held in such reverence that educators are afraid to recommend its elimination—they will even elevate its importance above healthy activity or play breaks. One BC public school I recently visited organized a daily lunch-time *homework jail* for students who did not complete their assignments, and students who were required to complete their homework during lunch were supervised by teachers. Apparently, the parents of this community appreciated this plan, no doubt hoping that there would be less homework for them to fret about later. I worry that this sort of strategy will backfire over time.

Although I very frequently meet teachers who are opposed to saddling children with onerous homework, your email reminds me that some teachers are still assigning far too much homework to elementary schoolchildren. Parents in a situation such as yours are placed in a double bind: support the teacher’s request or respond to their son’s genuine need.

Widespread misconceptions about learning and what motivates children to *WANT* to write can lead to misunderstandings with homework. While some children might become motivated to *get it done* to avoid *homework jail* or its equivalent, I suggest that your son would likely not benefit from this coercive approach, particularly when he is already struggling with writing. Perhaps your son has not yet developed his fine-motor skills, or he needs to be engaged in more visual-spatial or kinesthetic ways of learning. It is also possible that your son may have a deeper struggle with learning that may warrant more investigation—certainly not more pressure to

complete assignments in the time that he could be re-charging his mental batteries.



As a longtime teacher, university instructor, and coordinator of students at risk of not completing school, I have learned that piling on homework assignments is not effective for most learners. Pressure to complete schoolwork at home commonly builds stress, resentment, and frustration—for parents as well as children. Students who are repeatedly given homework tasks that are too hard for them, or too tedious, or too pointless, are more likely to resist school learning. Students who get failing grades for incomplete homework turn bitter.

Day-to-day levels of stress among children have been skyrocketing, and few would argue that high levels of stress and frustration do create optimal learning conditions. Pediatricians and counsellors report many stress-related symptoms among children, such as stomachaches and headaches, related to children’s anxiety with homework stress. Stanford University now sponsors a program called *Challenge Success* that brings together students, teachers, counsellors, administrators, parents and other caring adults to discuss how their learning community can implement strategies known to improve students’ mental and physical health and engagement in school: their research reports that the stress associated with too much homework, or homework that is not perceived as meaningful and relevant, is damaging.

The *Challenge Success* study reports that in the Bay area, 70% of parents say that their 9-13 year old children

experience “moderate to alarming levels of stress,” to which “schoolwork and homework” are the greatest contributors. Recent alarming news about childhood obesity, sleep deprivation, and the established connection between the two add strong arguments for schools to reduce homework and to allow for more exercise, play, and sleep. Research demonstrates that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy physical, emotional, and spiritual development. Richard Louv, the author of *Last Child in the Woods*, warns that today’s overworked and overscheduled children suffer from *nature deficit disorder* that leads to obesity, anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorder.

Let’s face it—young children are busy. If your son cannot learn what needs to be learned in a six hour school day, we are probably expecting too much of him. We are constructing a jam-packed hurried day without opportunity to play, reflect and interact. Do we really want our children to have longer *work days* than many adults?



At a time when the public demand for school accountability has reached a new high in its intensity, research fails to prove that homework is worth all that trouble you are experiencing with your son. While the research on homework is extensive, I offer the following summary of research highlights on homework:

1. Decades of investigation have failed to turn up any evidence that homework is beneficial for students in the elementary school grades. The only effect that does show up is more negative attitudes among students who get

more homework assignments. A large, long-term national American survey found that the proportion of six- to eight-year-old children who reported having homework on a given day had climbed from 34 % in 1981 to 58 % in 1997, and the weekly time spent studying at home more than doubled. Sandra Hofferth, one of the authors of that study, later released an update based on 2002 data and found that the proportion of young children who had homework on a specific day jumped again to 64 %, and the amount of time they spent on it climbed by another third. The evidence to justify homework with younger children isn’t just dubious. It’s nonexistent.

2. Some secondary school studies do find a correlation between homework and grade attainment or test scores, but it’s usually fairly small and disappears when more sophisticated statistical controls are used. It is important to note that when an association does appear there is no evidence to indicate that higher achievement is due to the homework itself. In the 1999 *Trends in Mathematics and Science Study* data from 50 countries researchers boldly stated: “Not only did we fail to find any positive relationships,” but “the overall correlations between national average student achievement and national averages in the amount of homework assigned are all negative.” Not surprisingly, evidence like this leads scholastic organizations such as the *National Council of Teachers of Mathematics* to recommend that math classes revolve around making meaning rather than assigning the memorizing of rules as homework.

3. There is no conclusive evidence to support the widely accepted assumption that homework teaches responsibility or yields nonacademic benefits for students of any age, but especially for children who are not yet in high school. Alfie Kohn, author of *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, reviews the usual defenses of homework and finds that they are not supported by research or experience.



So what are the alternatives to homework?

What can a parent do?

How can you support your son's learning in his primary years?

1. Children are learning sponges. Visit libraries and museums to extend and reinforce learning on specific topics. Help your son develop his personal areas of interest. If he is drawn to a new activity such as skateboarding, visit a skate board park and you will be flabbergasted with the learning visibly occurring there.

2. Play games as a family: card games, board games, word games and even puzzles promote academic skills (colour and pattern recognition, number sense, logic and problem solving skills, literacy skills, etc.).

3. Appreciate that storytelling and free play activities encourage children to express themselves creatively. They also provide opportunities to learn how to cooperate and collaborate with others.

4. Know that informal games can encourage your son to make practical use of the skills he learns at school, such as arithmetic, estimation, rounding, shape identification, and grouping, to name a few.

5. Seek opportunities to challenge your son to apply his newfound skills during every day family activities. Running errands, commuting, watching a sibling play sports, and even waiting for appointments are all learning opportunities.

6. Reading to or with a child daily has been identified as the most conclusive way to boost their academic success. The chapter titled *Improving Boys' Literacies* in *Boy Smarts* is loaded with 10 practical guidelines to boost a love for literacy. Trust that when your son reads a book for fun, not as a result of bribery, he is developing a deep, enduring relationship with literacy. Those who develop a love of reading are more likely to become proficient writers.

As a parent of a bright and capable boy, you have every reason to be concerned and even frustrated with the volume of homework your young son is being assigned. Excessive homework, with its points and penalties and pressures, may extinguish the flames of natural curiosity.

It is my hope that this month's *Boy Smarts Newsletter* provides you with sustenance AND the courage to meet with your son's teacher to discuss your homework concerns. Just in case the teacher suggests that your son miss his playtime at recess or lunch to complete parts of his schoolwork, I suggest that you prepare for this meeting by reading the chapter entitled *Should Recess be Withdrawn for Incomplete Schoolwork?* in *Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion*. If you are met with resistance, you may choose to meet with the school principal and the classroom teacher together and also consider raising the issue at your next *Parent Advisory Council* meeting. Rather than bemoaning the ways that homework cuts into family time and play time with another stressed out parent, organize with other parents who have informed themselves about the research on homework. Large doses of homework should not be administered like cod liver oil, because it is supposedly good for children.

As caring mentors, we must find ways to guide our children, and keep alive their innate love for learning in a community of learning. Do we really want to try to educate them by instilling a greater capacity for drudgery? Or do we broaden our notions of success, helping our children to form and navigate their own goals, following what draws their curiosity and passion? We must do more than ask how to get through our homework headaches without developing migraines. We must ask thoughtful questions about what kind of homework—if any—is worthwhile. As educational psychologist Lee Shulman states, “Students must invest emotionally for deep learning. They need to believe that this is something that matters.” • • •

Barry MacDonald

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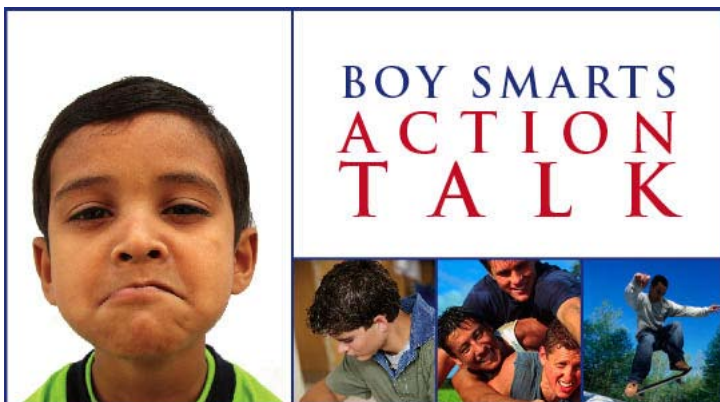
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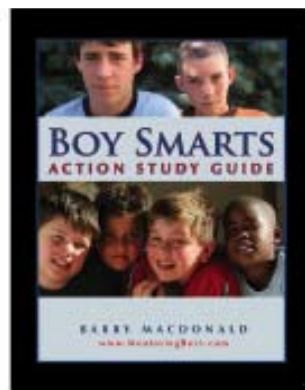
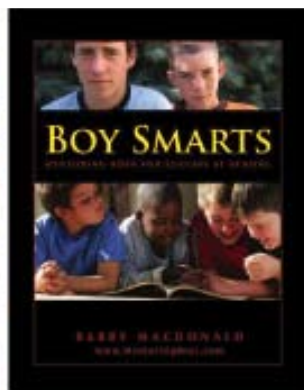
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