

Why this mum hates homework

Helen Hayward
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I HATE homework. Although I'm certain my children's teachers don't intend it, I feel mildly persecuted by it. As a rule-abiding parent, I want to uphold the idea of homework, not least to see my children daily made more disciplined, independent and resourceful. (Sounds lovely, doesn't it?) However, my children are only 10 and eight and, higher up their list, as they sit at the kitchen table with their legs dangling, comes yawning, head scratching and general distraction.

Clearly, teachers don't mean to keep parents in line by monitoring us through a homework grid, and yet they do. My children's homework grid is set out in squares: with three compulsory activities in red and two or three elective activities in black.

The elective squares include activities such as shopping for and preparing a meal, helping with housework, practising times tables and describing a class discussion. This seems rather jolly: how can a child freely choosing from such a list make her mother feel that she has been set homework? (It's usually, but not always, the mother.)

I'm pretty organised, but never so organised that I have a spare hour or so at the end of the day. This is a time when everyone's blood sugar is low and there is washing on the line, peas are thawing in the back of the car and the dishwasher is waiting to be emptied. "What's for homework this week?" I ask my daughter, tentatively. "I'm to write a story about a magic carpet," she replies.

Making up a story is easy ("It has to be *my* story, mummy"); however, getting her to write it down, in her careful hand, takes about 20 times longer than composing it in her head. Surely teachers realise that asking a child to write a story about a magic carpet ceases to be a source of wonder when your mother is nagging you to "just finish it" before supper, when it's wedged between your reader and piano practice on a near-empty tummy?

New guidelines for the primary years stress that homework shouldn't be a chore, that it should consolidate learning and that it shouldn't be repetitive or dull. It shouldn't exceed 30 minutes a day for prep to year 4; and 45 minutes for years 5 and 6, with none on weekends. Nor should parents be drawn into doing their children's homework for them: instead we're to "prompt" them, without — and this is where I fall down — collapsing into nagging. Because, as studies have shown,

positive parental involvement with homework is crucial to its lasting benefit. (Pity our lasting benefit doesn't come into it.)

Readers may be thinking how enlightened it is for teachers to set tasks such as cooking and quiet reading for homework. I once did too, before I twigged that helping my son to cook a meal involves far more time, planning and emotional energy than throwing a few chicken drumsticks and vegetables on to the hob in the late afternoon. Some children cheerfully down Harry Potter and more; but my daughter has to *want* to read, and she wouldn't do it at all if I didn't nudge her on to the sofa in the first place. I applaud teachers' efforts to link the classroom with the kitchen table, and to chide children into helping their harried parents about the house. But I wonder about the means.

Having said all this, I do realise that homework is not all bad. Once my son knuckles down to recite his tables, his forehead visibly uncreases. Clearly, it's a weight off his mind to know what nine times seven are without blinking. Equally, once my daughter is ensconced on the sofa, reading quietly is far from a chore; frequently, it's hard to prise her book off her at bath time.

Homework, that hoary chestnut, will never go away: parents and teachers will always stand divided between believers and unbelievers (and agnostics, such as myself, too). What homework shows you is just how challenging your child is to teach. "That's why your son can't do his tables," my son's homework is telling me. "It's because he always has better things to do than knuckle down and learn them." "That's why your daughter isn't reading chapter books," my daughter's homework is telling me. "Because she's always peering over the shoulder of her neighbour's book, in case it's more interesting."

Parents of toddlers tell themselves the consoling story that once their children start school they'll be whisked away by the education system, taken off their hands until the end of the term. During the early years, it can be a bit like this. But as children creep into upper primary, after-school activities and homework start cranking up, as if in some weird tandem.

I'm not a hurried mother, and I don't have hurried children. Yet I find it hard not to feel harried when the golden after-school hours (of messing around in the garden, and kneeling on the bedroom floor with Lego) are spent in the shadow of the homework grid.

Helen Hayward is a Melbourne writer.