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Evaluation/Proposal
English 030.014
November 30, 1999

Warning Parents

How much homework is too much
for your child?

Do a little test for me if you will. Ask your parents how they spent their afternoons after they were let out of elementary school. They will probably tell you about a sandlot baseball game, playing in the creek, or riding their bike around the neighborhood with their friends. And then ask yourself what you remember doing after school. For most of us, we all reluctantly have the same answer: homework.

That's because we have grown up in a different generation where what was once considered a supplement to learning in primary schools has since completely taken it over. Some people may find this statement to be extreme, but the truth is, it's not. Elementary school children today are coming home with more and more homework--homework that may be supplementing their immediate academic achievement, but is wearing them down internally in the long run.

The average six-to-nine-year-old spent 44 minutes per week on homework in 1981; that number jumped to more than two hours in 1997; nine-to-eleven-year-olds fared just as poorly, the average homework load rose from 2 hours and 49 minutes to more than 3 hours over the same time period. I personally don't find these numbers to be all that surprising considering the competitive world that we live in today. And I believe that we can also expect those statistics to continue to increase

over the next several years. For us to allow this trend to continue may not be healthy for our children.

As parents we want only the best for our kids. We want them to get good grades in school so that they can attend a good college, and in turn get a good job and live a successful life. But where does this nasty thing we call homework fit into the equation? The answer is *everywhere*. Lyn Corno of Columbia University's Teachers College explains that that because homework too often is turning kids off to school, it has become more a part of the problem than a part of the solution.

Excuse me if I have put such a sour taste into the word homework. Truly it is not all bad. It is important for developing organization and time management skills in our children as well as teaching them how to learn autonomously. It can also encourage students toward good study habits and self-directed work, but only when it's not so overbearing that it turns them off from school altogether.

Recent research has shown that the amount of homework done does indeed have a direct correlation to a student's grade in *secondary* school. However, much of the exact same research has also proved that the amount of homework assigned in primary school has very little effect on a student's academic performance. Harris Cooper, a University of Missouri psychology professor who has reviewed more than 100 studies on homework, concludes that "piling on massive amounts of homework will not lead to gains and may be detrimental by leading children to question their abilities." Is that what

we want--a tradeoff of higher grades for lower self-esteem?

Let's hope not. Dr. James Garbarino, author and professor of human development at Cornell University, states that the most vulnerable time in a child's life is between birth and eight years old. If this is indeed the case and homework is having a negative effect on our primary school children, then we have much more to worry about than academic grades. For many young students, their self-esteem could be in serious jeopardy from the very start. No matter how high a child's grades are, low self-esteem will eventually drag him down, sometimes bringing the child's personal life and his family down along with it.

Christina Astrove, a mother in Massachusetts, recently had an encounter with her daughter that I fear has become all too common among today's youth. Erica, seven years old and in the second grade, said that she doesn't want to go to middle school, high school, or college because she's afraid of the homework there.

I can remember several times when I was in fifth grade myself crying in my mom's arms because homework scared me so much. I barely had enough time each night to finish my homework and I was only in elementary school. What was I to expect from middle school and high school teachers but an unbearable, undoable amount of homework?

Unfortunately for some kids, the problem has gone far beyond worrying and crying. Jeffrey Mandel, a six-year-old who attends public school in New York City, has suffered from homework-related nightmares during his sleep. His mother has walked into his room in the morning and gently tried to rouse him

for school, and instead has received the half asleep plea, "Oh, Mom, don't tell me there's another homework sheet."

It's cases like these that scare me because that is, in fact, what the homework is doing to these kids; it's scaring them. Many young children today have so much homework to complete each night that they end up staying up way past their normal bedtime. This process repeated over time can lead to frustration, elevated stress levels, chronic weariness, and strains within families that are completely unnecessary.

So how much homework *is* too much? Recent studies have given standardized tests to kids who reportedly did homework once a month and to others who did it on almost a nightly basis. Surprisingly, the kids who only did homework once a month or so received the higher scores. These results should not be misinterpreted as the idea that kids should only do homework once a month in order to score a 1600 on the SAT. Instead, it implies that the commonly used expression "more is better" for homework does not always hold true.

Obviously something must be done about the great homework problem in our primary schools. Unfortunately, there is no one clearly defined solution. Dr. Steve Farrow, director of primary initial teacher education at Durham University, points out that "the evidence on the amount of homework that primary school pupils should do simply does not exist." So is there anything we can do to calm our children's fears?

Many parents believe the answer is no, that there is nothing they can do to help their child out with homework trouble. The teachers who assign it should know what they're doing and if they don't, then they're probably too

stubborn to listen to suggestion anyway. For such parents, homework is a frightening struggle but they see no way around it if their child is to get a quality education.

Through my experience, however, I have found that passive attitudes of this sort only make the problem worse. Parents must step in and do something if their child is coming home overloaded with homework. Young children cannot be expected to do outrageous amounts of homework each night and also cannot be expected to bring about any change in the policy for themselves. Parents are the ones who will have to speak up for their child in order to protect them from being swamped by more assignments.

Some school systems have taken the initiative and set a mandatory limit on the amount of homework that can be assigned in the lower grades, usually around an hour's worth per night. Marilyn Haring, dean of the School of Education at Purdue suggests that twenty minutes to an hour three to four times a week is just about right. However, reducing the quantity of homework is more than likely not the answer. Of course it will help ease tension in young children and around the home, but it's not at all guaranteed to retain or improve current academic achievement.

Instead, it is probably much more worth our time to concentrate our efforts on improving the *quality* of homework. Many elementary school teachers today hand out assignments that are much too long, boring, and vague for students to be able to handle. Younger children inherently have shorter attention spans and therefore should be given shorter assignments that can be completed quickly. This way, they will also be able to visualize their finished assignment

before they start it--a helpful tactic to anyone, regardless of age.

Also, homework should almost always try to be different from classwork. Personal, creative, and exploratory activities should be assigned for at home, drawing kids away from that dull repetition of class time at school. Gary Griffin of Teachers College provide an example of writing fictional letters from a Northerner to a Southerner concerning the Civil War rather than just memorizing names, dates, and battles. Other suggested ideas for mixing skill-building drills with creative tasks are interviewing grandparents for a social-studies lesson or using sports scores and standings to learn about statistics.

However, students will not do these assignments if there is not some sort of incentive waiting for them at school the next day. Too many times, teachers will assign homework and then never go over it in class. This leaves the child wondering whether or not he completed the assignment correctly and why he ever did it in the first place. And as discussed earlier, the last thing we as parents want for our children is for them to question their abilities.

So what can we personally do as parents of elementary school kids with too much homework? In addition to suggesting the above ideas to your child's teacher you could also take a stand in the community. In Hinsdale, Illinois parents and administrators worked for several months designing a formal policy that requires "meaningful and purposeful" homework at all grade levels but limits the load according to age. Such a policy may not be too far-fetched for your own school district.

For those of you who feel that delving into such legal areas may be too extreme, an alternative may be to inform

your child's teacher how much time is being spent each night on homework. Pepperdine University president David Davenport, father of a fourth-grader, always writes down the amount of time his daughter spent on a particular assignment at the bottom of the page. "Sometimes," he says, "teachers are not aware of how much time is being spent."

Also keep in mind that at some point your child might need outside assistance in order to understand a topic covered in class. You as the parent may be required to help teach your child after school when a situation like this occurs, or if you are not able to do this, you may need to go see the teacher or sign up for an after school tutor.

Finally, you must remember that as a parent your child constantly looks to you for guidance. If you express negative attitudes about homework, whether silent or aloud, your child will pick up on them and acquire the same ideas. Try to avoid these attitudes around your children and instead address the issues when you are with the teacher, administrator, or someone else.

To change our nation's current policies and attitudes towards homework will require our support as parents and the support of our children's teachers. It will not be an easy task and will surely take some time to accomplish. But the rewards will hopefully make life much, much easier for our children. And it's them that we're looking out for after all, isn't it?

Dr. Scott Guirlinger is an esteemed professor of elementary education at Penn State University. In addition to his teaching and his research, he has two children, Matthew and Sarah, both currently enrolled in primary school.

For Further Reading:

"The Homework Ate My Family: Kids are Dazed, Parents are Stressed." Time. January 25, 1999. p. 54-63.

"Making Homework More Effective." USA Today: The Magazine of the American Scene. December 1998. p. 15-16.

"Startling findings on primary homework." Times Educational Supplement. July 2, 1999. p. 2.

"Homework Doesn't Help." Newsweek. March 30, 1998. p. 50-51.