

# Too much pressure?

There is a growing expectation that today's parents should help their children with their homework. But is this just adding to the stress of modern family life? Or is homework the vital link between you and your child's education?

Karen Glaser reports



LAST WEEK my daughter Leah came home from school and did the following: practised her part for the end-of-term school play; penned five paragraphs for a 'book' she is writing; learnt twenty words for the weekly Friday spelling test. Learning words such as hydroponics and pandemonium caused a bit of the latter, but on the whole I'd say her teacher had got things about right on the homework front. My eight-year-old was able to complete the tasks and still find time for television, violin practice and lots of conversation with me and her two-year-old brother, Aaron. And at bedtime, it was

her, not me, who insisted on the fifteen minutes of daily reading her teacher recommends.

In total, Leah's homework took her about two hours, half an hour more than the Government's recommended amount for children in Year 3 and 4. Mind you, if I hadn't been hovering over her, the two hours she spent could have easily doubled. For even though one of the main arguments marshalled in favour of homework is that it helps children become responsible and manage their time, all the parents I know get involved: they supervise their children's homework

and help them with it when they find it boring or difficult. But not all parents feel they can spare the time to help their children with homework, and others feel it puts too much pressure on parent and child. It is this kind of scenario that prompts school-gate banter such as: it is my homework, not his. And which causes other parents to claim homework is only for middle-class parents with time on their hands.

## Quality time

My friend Clara is not one of homework's detractors. For her, it is

absolutely right that parents spend time helping their offspring complete charts of words beginning "mo" and testing them on the seven-times table. "It forces you to sit down for half an hour and really engage with what your children are learning at school. Otherwise, how, frankly, do you know what they are doing all day? It would be easy for me as a working mother to delegate the homework supervision to my childminder or to send my kids to a homework club, but I know that both I and my kids need this quality interaction."

For Alex, however, there is nothing positive about the interaction she has with her eight year-old daughter Dora over homework. She attends a Leicester C of E primary and Alex dreads what she calls the homework hour. "I use the expression advisedly - the homework often does take up to an hour, which is absurd for a child her age. She loves learning and is doing very well

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academically, but she absolutely hates doing homework and I think it does nothing to reinforce what she does at school. I also really resent how it eats into family time. After she's been at school for seven hours I think Dora should be allowed to simply relax. On occasions, she's been so upset and tired I have done her homework for her - forging her handwriting by writing with my left hand."

Sion Humphreys, assistant secretary at the National Union of Headteachers, is not unsympathetic to Alex's predicament. "Homework can be too much for some

children, particularly those who participate in after-school activities, and I think schools should be sensitive to this notion. What is important is that children enjoy a varied and enriching diet of activities - in some cases that could mean forgoing the homework."

It is also, he says, crucial that homework is inextricably linked to classroom work. "It should never be bolt-on. It is the connection with and reinforcement of what they have learned during the day that makes homework meaningful."

Like Alex, Heather also finds her son's homework onerous. Her child, Laurie, is in Year 3 of a Manchester prep school. "I think up to 20 minutes a day is fine, and is a valuable way for children to see whether they've really understood a topic - we all often think we've understood something only to discover on a revisit that, in fact, it hasn't really sunk in.

"But Laurie regularly gets an hour a night which is a very different

## Guidelines and support for parents

### How much homework should your child be doing?

[www.directgov.co.uk](http://www.directgov.co.uk)

This site provides parents with the latest government advice on how much homework should be set. Current homework guidelines are as follows:

**Years 1 & 2: one hour per week**

**Years 3 & 4: 1.5 hours per week**

**Years 5 & 6: 30 minutes per day**

The guidelines for secondary school children are:

**Years 7 & 8: 45-90 minutes per day**

**Year 9: one to two hours per day**

**Years 10 & 11: 1.5 to 2.5 hours per day**

A free downloadable booklet: *Getting the best out of homework* offers lots of practical advice and tips for parents on helping children with homework. It is available from:

[www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk)

The Literacy Trust provides detailed advice for parents wanting to help their children with reading at both primary and secondary level and also provides links to other homework-related and home learning resources: [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk)

## Curriculum focus



proposition. It confuses and demotivates him in equal measure. It also means the few hours after school and before bedtime are frantic."

Mindful that homework is increasingly billed as part of the school/parent partnership, earlier this year Heather voiced her concerns to Laurie's teacher. "I explained that it was stopping him from doing other things like swimming and gymnastics and would it be okay if he sometimes didn't finish his homework? She said absolutely not – that it wouldn't be fair on the other pupils."

Unfortunately for Heather, the parents of those other pupils are more than happy with their children's heavy

homework schedule. "There are some who actually think an hour isn't enough and who set their own homework in addition. They wake their children up at six o'clock to do music practice and extra spellings, and there is one mum who quietly boasts that her daughter knows her 13 to 18 times tables. Even when they are on holiday, these otherwise privileged kids get no break – they have to write daily compositions about what they have seen and done, and do their Kumon maths sheets."

According to Rebecca, a secondary school English teacher and mother to Noah, six, and Thea, three, these parents are labouring under a serious misapprehension: namely that homework

is a sure-tested means of equipping young children with a mindset and skills that will set them on the path to success. "In reality, too much homework can completely backfire and turn kids off school," says Rebecca.

"I don't think KS1 children should do anything after school except read, and I don't think reading should be seen as homework. When you are very young it is exciting to feel so, and part of that excitement comes from looking forward to things like the day you start getting homework. It should feel like a milestone."

What do you think? Email us with your feedback at [claire.mahoney@solutionspublish.co.uk](mailto:claire.mahoney@solutionspublish.co.uk) ●