

A Homework Bill of Rights for Families

By
Cathy Vatterott

“It’s a most wonderful time of the year” Christmas music plays in the commercial’s background as parents shop for school supplies, secretly joyful that summer is over and it’s back-to-school. Tired of the brigade of summer camps, family trips, and the patched-together daycare in between, parents welcome the routine of school—until they remember what comes with it—the stress of homework.

Every year about this time, the internet, television, and bookstores are crowded with advice for parents on how to get children to do homework—yet no one seems to question the amount of homework children are assigned or the value of the tasks themselves.

For many parents homework means teary battles at the kitchen table, and a fear they will be deemed bad parents if their children don’t complete their homework. According to one poll, 22% of parents admit to doing their child’s homework for them, just to get it done.

I propose a Homework Bill of Rights to stop the madness and restore sanity to the homework process:

1. Children shall not be required to work more than 40 hours a week. Class time plus homework time shall equal less than 40 hours a week.
2. Children shall have the right to homework they can complete without help. If they cannot complete homework without help, children shall be entitled to re-teaching or modified assignments.

3. Children shall be free from unreasonable penalties for incomplete homework. A child's academic grade shall not be put in jeopardy due to incomplete homework. Children shall be entitled to an in-school or after school homework support program if they are unwilling or unable to complete homework at home.
4. A child's right to playtime, downtime, and adequate sleep shall not be infringed upon by homework.
5. Parents shall not be required to morph into tutors by night.
6. Parents shall have the right to peaceful evenings. Parents shall be entitled to excuse their child from homework that their child does not understand, or is too tired to finish.
7. Parents shall have the right to control their child's free time.
8. Weekend and holiday homework shall be considered cruel and unusual punishment. Families shall be entitled to weekends and holidays free from the intrusion of homework.

All this doesn't mean parents shouldn't work with teachers to help their child succeed in school. Homework is the child's job, but parents must safeguard the childhood their children deserve and the quality family time their family deserves.

Maybe then back-to-school *could* be a wonderful time of the year.

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Helping your Child with Homework!

At times, helping your child with homework is the last thing you feel like doing. But it is one of the most important jobs you have.

So what can you do?



Establish a Routine

- ✎ Make a schedule and stick to it.
- ✎ Decide with your child the best time and place for doing homework. You may think the best time is right after school, but your child may want a break first and then do homework after dinner.
- ✎ Try to do homework at the same time every day.
- ✎ If your child is involved in afterschool activities, homework comes first! Since coaches sometimes change practice schedules from week to week, plan ahead to complete homework assignments.

Homework Survival Kit

- ✎ Get the supplies your child needs: pencils, eraser, pencil sharpener, paper, crayons, dictionary, scissors, glue, ruler, calculators, and other supplies.
- ✎ Keep supplies in a box near the study area.

Set Up a Study Area

- ✎ Do homework in the same place every day.
- ✎ Find a place with proper lighting where your child is comfortable.
- ✎ A desk or table; even the kitchen table can be used before or after dinner.
- ✎ Help your child make a homework sign such as: “Genius at Work,” “Creative Mind Center,” or “Learning Place.”
- ✎ Post the sign when it is homework time. Add some personal items such as plants, pictures, or other things your child likes.

Distractions! Distractions!

- ✎ Homework time needs to be a time when your child can concentrate. Work at reducing distractions and interruptions.

When to Call the Teacher

- ✎ If your child is having a great deal of difficulty, schedule a conference with your child’s teacher.
- ✎ The teacher may be unaware that your child is having trouble with the assignments.
- ✎ Together, you can work out a plan for your child’s success.

Time Spent on Homework

- ✎ A general rule of thumb for time to spend on homework at each grade is:
 - Grades K-1 = 10-20 minutes
 - Grades 2-3 = 30 minutes
 - Grades 4-6 = 60 minutes
 - Grades 7-9 = 90 minutes
 - Grades 10-12 = 120 minutes



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Top ten things teachers should know about homework

1. We have a moralistic attachment to homework

“Our belief in the value of homework is akin to faith” (Kralovec and Buell, 2000)
We think we’re teaching them responsibility, but are we teaching them math?

2. Homework is overrated as an instructional strategy

- Research is inconclusive, poorly designed, cannot prove causation
- Homework’s correlation with achievement increases with grade level:
in grades 3-5 the correlation is nearly zero, in grades 5 to 9,
correlation is .07, in grades 9-12, correlation is .25 (Cooper, 1989, 2007)
- That doesn’t necessarily mean that homework can’t work, it just means there’s a lot of bad homework out there!

3. Homework should not be used for new learning

- Homework is more beneficial for rote memory, practice, or rehearsal of skill already developed than for complex tasks that require integration of knowledge and skills.
- Sometimes we think it’s practice when it’s really new learning.

4. Homework that cannot be done without help is not good homework

The primary purpose of homework should be for practice, or to check for understanding or learning progress, without penalizing the student for not understanding.

5. The “10-minute rule” is a good guideline for limiting homework.

- Maximum of 10 minutes per grade level per night (all subjects combined) recommended by the PTA and the NEA
- The 10-minute rule is consistent with the research
- Too much homework can actually cause achievement to decline.

6. Like instruction, homework should be differentiated

- For readiness, learning style, interest, LD, ELL students, gifted students
- Should be time-based, not task-based
 (“do as many problems as you can in 20 minutes”)
- Adjusted to respect family’s scheduling needs

7. Homework should not be causing students to fail

- Late policies and grading—is the climate one of learning or compliance?
- Using grades to “reward virtue” and “punish vice” is often detrimental to learning and motivation
- Giving a zero for incomplete homework is not “holding them accountable”.
Accountability is making them finish the work.

8. Homework can “entrench privilege” for upper class children and unfairly discriminate against lower class children.

- Lack of resources, parental monitoring, handicaps learning
- Grades affect retention and GPA

9. Homework should not be a source of stress for families

- Parents want to control their child’s evenings and weekends
- Parents want children to have downtime and adequate sleep

10. Homework support programs are growing in popularity

- After-school homework assistance—mandatory or voluntary
- LAW—lunch and work
- ZAP—zeros aren’t possible

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