



# Stop the Homework Wars!

STORY BY HARRIS COOPER, PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELIZABETH BRANDT

She was in for a big surprise, this *Boston Globe* reporter who called about my homework research.

"Where do your kids do their homework?" she asked.

"Anywhere they want," I said. Silence.

"Even in front of the TV?" she continued.

"Anywhere they want," I persisted.

I've been trying for more than a decade

to make sense of research results on the question, "Does homework work?" When I started, reports like "A Nation At Risk" were saying that U.S. schools were in deep trouble and that doing more homework was one way to accelerate children's learning. Some research studies said it did. Others said it didn't.

In the meantime, homework assignments accounted for about 20 percent of the time American children were spending on academic tasks. No one knew if it was time well-spent.

I had personal reasons to find out, too. When I began my search in 1984, my son was just turning 2 years old. I had to hurry if I hoped to know the answer in time for his first homework assignment.

After scouring the research literature, I ended up reading about 200 studies and

reports on homework dating back as far as 1916. A new way of combining the results of previous studies—meta-analysis—would help me make sense of them all together.

## ON AGAIN, OFF AGAIN

It soon became clear that Americans' attitudes toward homework have flip-flopped several times this century. Early on, the mind was considered a muscle. Educators of the early 1900s believed that memorization homework—facts, spelling, multiplication tables—was good mental discipline that led to acquiring knowledge. It was good exercise for the old brain muscle, too.

But by the 1940s schools had become interested in developing students' problem-solving ability. With greater emphasis

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** *Psychology Professor Harris Cooper lives his research. In addition to being a father of two students and the husband of a third-grade teacher, Cooper is president of the Columbia Public Schools Board of Education. He is a nationally known researcher and author on the topics of homework and meta-analysis.*

on student initiative and interest in learning, the rote learning of typical homework assignments was in question.

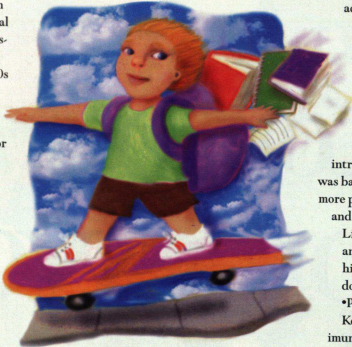
All that changed in the late 1950s after the Russians launched Sputnik. We Americans feared that a lack of rigor in education was leaving children unprepared for a technological future. Homework rushed back in, touted as a way of quickening the pace of learning.

But by the mid-1960s, the cycle reversed itself again because homework was thought to put too much pressure on students. A 1968 article said, "Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents."

Today, in a kind of Sputnik flashback, homework's stock has risen again amid concerns about poor achievement test scores and American competitiveness in the global marketplace.

After combining a century of research data, the single most interesting thing I discovered had to do with the age of students. Homework becomes more and more effective as kids get older. Take an average high-school kid—50 percent score better, 50 percent worse—in a class that does homework. If that kid suddenly transferred to a class that didn't do homework, he or she would score better than 69 percent of the kids in the no-homework class. In the same scenario but in junior high school, he or she would outperform about 60 percent of the no-homework students. Studies with elementary school kids showed homework had no effect on test scores. Other benefits may accrue, though. More on that shortly.

On another note, I learned that homework works best when the assignments are not particularly complex or new. The educators in the 1930s were right about at least one thing: Homework is a good



way to help kids learn spelling, math facts and vocabulary, both in English and foreign language.

#### A GUIDE FOR GOOD HOMEWORK

I did all this research with a very practical purpose in mind. I wanted to influence the way school districts nationwide used homework. So, I wrote a general set of homework policies that districts could modify for their own purposes. I won't trouble you with the details, but a few of the underlying ideas might be helpful.

- Elementary school students should do homework, even though it probably won't immediately improve their test scores. Homework can help them develop good study habits and foster positive attitudes toward school. It also shows them that learning takes place at home as well as at school.

Our kids' weekly spelling lists gave my wife and me the opportunity to sit with our children and express how important school is to us. It allowed us to communicate how "details" like accurate spelling give the reader a good impression of the writer. As a parent, I considered these objectives important, regardless of the

academic lesson learned.

- Elementary teachers should give short homework assignments that are easy to complete successfully and that use materials commonly found in children's surroundings. Homework should also take advantage of intrinsic interests. In my case, it was baseball. As a youngster, I got more practice calculating decimals and percentages by computing my Little League batting averages—and what it would be if I got a hit my next time up—than I got doing math homework.

- Parents, this one's just for you: Keep your teaching role to a minimum. Moms and dads differ in

interest, knowledge, teaching skills and time. Obviously, in earlier grades parents should be more involved. In addition to helping their children practice reading, spelling and math, parents can express their interest by establishing rewards for completed assignments, or simply by signing homework before it is returned to school.

- In most cases, teachers should collect homework, check it for completeness and give intermittent instructional feedback. This shows that homework is serious business and has a purpose. But it's not just another opportunity to test.
- Teachers and parents should never give homework as punishment because it implies that school work is boring and something to be avoided.

#### Hi, NEW YORK TIMES HERE

The phone started ringing almost immediately after my meta-analysis was published in 1989. It turns out that homework controversies are "serio-comic"—serious for the families involved, comic for everyone else. Perfect for filling a slow news day.

First, a newspaper reporter would call. If it was a national paper like *The New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*,

smaller dailies would pick up the story shortly thereafter. Then came the radio talk shows. After those appearances, principals, teachers and PTA presidents would ring me up asking for help. I learned as much about the issues surrounding homework from these exchanges as from the research literature:

"What should I do about my daughter who waits to the last minute to do her homework?" asked a mother from Wisconsin.

"If she gets it in on time and her grades are good," I said, "don't do anything."

The mom didn't like my answer. It quickly became clear that homework was only a flash point for what she saw as her daughter's lackadaisical attitude. Many complaints like this one arise not from the assignments themselves but from general school-related tensions. A parent's expression of concern about a child not doing homework often turns into a broader discussion about academic motivation and self-discipline.

When kids get their dander up about parental pressure over homework, the real issue is which activities are most important. I've spoken with high-school students who want to work part time for spending money. But mom and dad, who have their sights set on Ivy League schools, see working as stealing time from study.

The amount and difficulty level of homework is a major source of tension between teachers and both parents and students. One mom weighed her child's book bag to show how excessive the assignments were. A single father struggled for a year to get his reluctant son to do his homework. The following year, the new teacher didn't give homework. He felt defeated.

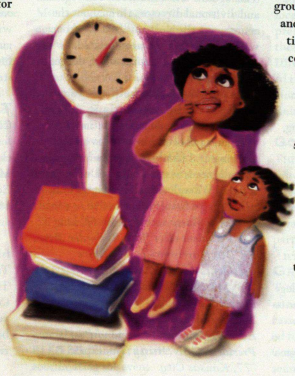
Generally, schools and teachers give amounts of homework that reflect the norms of the community. Some teachers, on the other hand, give homework based on personal teaching beliefs, regardless of com-

munity norms.

In any case, homework norms never represent every family. Parents who say their children could benefit from more homework are probably correct. But so are parents who suggest their children do not benefit from homework they already receive. Teachers know that individualizing homework takes a great deal of effort but, the research shows, has minimal pay back.

The adults in this equation must be willing to reach a compromise on this issue. When parents ask for less homework, teachers can make that child's assignments partly mandatory and partly voluntary. When parents demand more homework, they also must be ready to jump in and supplement their child's academic activities.

I tell teachers that complaints about the "right" amount of homework will never completely disappear. But they'll know they're getting close when they hear the complaints "too much" and "too little" about an equal number of times. I also encourage teachers to ensure that both students and parents know the purpose of homework. Homework should be



integrated into the broader curriculum in understandable ways. All parties should be able to come up with a quick and clear answer for the question, "Why do this homework?"

I tell parents that supporting teachers could be the single most important ingredient in keeping their child's academic progress on track. Supporting teachers through cooperation over homework tells the child that the parent and the teacher are a team. Divide and conquer ought not be a possibility.

## BACK TO MY HOUSE

So, how does this all translate into my son (and now his younger sister) doing homework in front of the TV? First, the research has led me to believe that the potential for homework to foster self-discipline and time management should not be ignored. My kids ought to control when and how they do it. Second, when I examined my own study habits I found that reading manuscripts in airports and poring over computer printouts with a ball game play-by-play in the background were quite typical for me. Writing, however, was always done without background noise. If that's the way I work, and if my kids see me doing it all the time, why not let them find their most comfortable and, I hope, most productive work surroundings?

Of course, we also have an iron-clad agreement: Restrictions will be placed on their freedoms at the first sign of dropping grades or incomplete homework assignments.

The *Boston Globe* reporter captured my point nicely when she wrote this line for her piece on homework: "Parents who let their kids take the lead in homework teach the best lesson." \*