

# The Homework Headache

*Homework should not be used to introduce students to new material.*

By Rory Donaldson

If you are an adult, no matter what your current age, 'homework' has changed dramatically since you were in school. It has altered in both volume and quality.

This increase in homework has been building for 30 years — probably in exact ratio to the size of the backpacks our children have to carry around. Why?

The single most useful answer is that classrooms are increasingly dominated by children with severe discipline and management problems. So much time is taken up with disruption, unrelated questions and pencil sharpening that there isn't much time left for instruction.

The problem is compounded by teachers who commonly lack discipline or classroom management skills. Many of these teachers report being frustrated by their poor background in the skills required to effectively teach basic skills such as reading and math.

Schools have changed. They are no longer places where children go to get hard skills. They are places where children go to get psychological assistance with self-esteem problems. More and more time is devoted to process and feelings, sex education, guidance, drug education, and so forth.

In a panic about how the new classrooms have led to poor test scores, schools increasingly rely on homework to fill the void. So much so, that today it is common for a grade 5 student to be assigned in excess of two hours of homework an evening, four or five evenings a week.

This at a time when the two-worker family requires mom and dad to be absent from the home and unable to offer much assistance. Many children are abandoned to their individual ability to sink or swim, while the lucky children who have parents with the time and resources to help out are unfairly advantaged.

All this, when there is absolutely no evidence to support the efficacy of what passes as homework at all. *Most of it does not work!*

There are four common types of homework:

- Drill and practice;
- Independent reading;
- Long-term projects; and
- Problem-solving.

Wrongly, all four are almost always used to introduce the student to new material. This means that Mom and Dad have to get involved in instruction, with the result that the chances of frustration, parent-child battles, and academic failure increase exponentially.

While well-designed homework may be appropriate, it is virtually impossible to find an example of homework in this category. The reality is that, for the most part, homework is alienating, anti-intellectual, and encourages deceit on the part of both the students and the parents.

This deceit is most clearly demonstrated at 'project night,' when parents come to school to see their children's projects, most of which were done by parents.

## What Really Works?

The type of homework that really works is that which leads to proficiency, mastery, achievement, and success.

- Effective homework is comprised of short drills that last 3 to 15 minutes each. Each drill emphasizes one to three of the most important skills and facts learned in class that day. These skills and facts should be drilled to proficiency in the classroom, allowing them to be reviewed and drilled to mastery at home.
- Homework should not introduce new material. The student must be able to succeed at homework without having to turn to mom or dad.
- Homework should have a definite time limit and be coordinated among teachers. Until grade 9, a total of 15 to 45 minutes of homework, four or five nights a week, is appropriate.

## What Can Parents Do?

There are a number of steps you can take, including entering into a dialogue with the school and 'contracts' that you can set up with your children.

For more information about turning homework into a positive factor in your children's education, as well as lots of other free tips on how to increase academic success and tighten family unity, visit [www.brainsarefun.com](http://www.brainsarefun.com).

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