

The Importance and Benefits of Homework  
North Hills Classical Academy Parent Academy  
March 6, 2006  
Peter Vande Brake, M.Div., Ph.D.

Most of the information in this handout comes from the fourth chapter (“Dealing with Homework”) of Janine Bempechat’s book, *Getting Our Kids Back on Track*.<sup>1</sup> Bempechat is an assistant professor of education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

**I. A brief history of homework since 1900:**

- Early in this century, educators believed that homework was absolutely necessary to train the mind. Rote memorization was considered to be essential for children’s intellectual development.

- By the 1940's educators shed this idea in favor of the growing belief that schooling was to develop children’s abilities. Homework was viewed as counterproductive.

- The launch of *Sputnik* reversed this trend. Educational public policy turned its emphasis to math and science instruction and achievement. Homework was seen as a key to the nation’s competitive survival.

- The 1960's and 1970's educational philosophy became more liberal and easygoing. This contributed to a backlash against competition in the classroom and the pressure on children to excel academically.

- In the 1980's some educational observers believed that public opinion looked more favorably on homework. Perhaps this was because the American economy was doing poorly compared to the Japanese economy and data emerged that manifested the underachievement of American students as compared to Japanese students.

As we sit at the cusp of the millennium, I am witness to a trend in which parents seem to reject homework and simultaneously demand higher academic standards in our public schools. At best, many parents today, especially children of the baby-boom era, are terribly ambivalent about homework for their children. They want their children to do well in school, but they also want them to “have a life outside of school.” They bristle at the thought that their children are not being challenged enough in their classrooms, but at the same time they do not want their children to have homework that could challenge them even more. Many of them envision their children as successful adults, both materially and professionally. Naturally, they want their children to lead happy and comfortable lives, and they know full well that this kind of future will not fall out of the sky and into their laps.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bempechat, Janine. *Getting Our Kids Back on Track, Educating Children for the Future*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Bempechat, *Getting Our Kids Back on Track*, 61-62.

Essentially, there seems to be an ambivalence toward challenging academic experiences and toward homework in particular even though the parents of these children worked hard in school and had to make sacrifices. In spite of their own experiences, many parents “seem determined to shield their children from pressures they themselves experienced.”<sup>3</sup>

“If we are genuine about wanting our children to have the best chance at a good future, we need to start embracing the very ideas we are so quick to reject: that children need to try hard, sacrifice more pleasant pastimes for their schooling, and endure the normal frustrations and hardships that are a natural part of learning. This is where homework comes in.”<sup>4</sup>

## II. Facts about homework according to recent educational research

Overall, homework has a positive influence on academic achievement, but beyond this general statement lie several complex relationships:

- Homework is beneficial when it focuses on simple tasks that require practice rather than on more complex tasks that involve higher-order skills.
- The greatest benefits are seen at the *high school level*, especially when students do at least five to ten hours of homework per week. Any more time spent on homework has a continued positive influence on learning.
- At the *middle or junior high school level*, achievement is enhanced by an optimal range of five to ten hours per week. Anything more demanding does not result in children learning more.
- Homework in the *later elementary school* years has relatively little effect on academic achievement.
- Homework has no effect whatsoever on academic achievement in the *early elementary school years*.
- Homework can undermine the intrinsic desire of children to learn; it can make them focus on grades (the *outcome* of learning) rather than on discovery (the *process* of learning), and lead to an overall disillusionment with schooling. In other words, homework, especially in the younger grades, can damage children’s natural motivation to learn.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 63.

<sup>4</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 65-66.

<sup>5</sup> Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 66-67.

“In light of these findings, those of us in the educational community have done what we are so good at doing: we have adopted a very narrow and shortsighted view of the benefits of homework, much to the detriment of our children’s ability to become resilient in the face of difficulty or setbacks.”<sup>6</sup>

The educational research on homework’s limited benefits have led many parents and educators to believe that a child’s emotional and social development is hampered by homework, and the solution to this problem is to eliminate homework until the later grades.

#### WHAT IS BEING OVERLOOKED IN THIS RESEARCH?

This research focuses on the academic/educational benefits (or lack of them) in the short term, but it does not look at the necessary habits for academic achievement and scholarship that are formed by the practice of doing homework at younger ages.

- The assignment of homework in early elementary school and beyond serves to foster qualities, over time, that are essential to learning:

- PERSISTENCE
- DILIGENCE
- THE ABILITY TO DELAY GRATIFICATION

“These qualities become increasingly necessary features of school success as students graduate to higher levels of scholarship in middle school, high school, and beyond.”<sup>7</sup>

“Children need the years between first and fifth grade to develop all manner of skills and strategies to help them cope with the demands that teachers place on them. Over the years, these demands become increasingly complex, as do the problem solving strategies that students must develop in order to meet the teacher’s expectations.”<sup>8</sup>

“The ability to do well in school is predicted less by children’s IQ scores and more by their motivational qualities, such as their willingness to tackle new and challenging assignments, to be persistent even when setbacks occur, and to trust that effort can enhance their abilities.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 67.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 68.

<sup>9</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 69

Homework assignments represent some of a child's first experiences with **responsibility** and **obligation**. "With the onset of homework, they learn that they too have an obligation to their parents and teachers to do what is expected of them. In assigning homework, teachers communicate that they both know and expect that their children can do the work." Doing homework also develops responsibility by means of a routine that includes understanding and writing down the assignment, asking for help if needed, and turning the assignment in on time.<sup>10</sup>

"We do them no favors by feeling sorry for making them work hard. On that contrary, when we assign homework, we are **giving them a gift** on which they will be able to draw throughout their lives: **the gift of our belief that they can accomplish thing that seem, even to them, to be beyond their reach.**"<sup>11</sup>

## MYTHS ABOUT HOMEWORK

### *Myth 1: Homework robs children of their childhoods.*

"Clearly, no one would advocate loading children up with duties beyond their years. At the same time, daily homework is not such a burden that children fall apart at its mere sight. There is no reason why we cannot expect a minimal amount of responsible behavior from our children at an early age, and increase their responsibilities reasonably as they grow. **This is how we let our children know that we believe in them and their abilities.** In other words, there is a middle ground: we can both recognize that children should be given the freedom to grow and express themselves and at the same time expect them to learn that they too are accountable to others—their parents and teachers. Despite what some educators believe, it is not a bad thing for children to learn responsibility and know that life cannot always be fun."<sup>12</sup>

The two do not have to be mutually exclusive: "Children can have homework and enjoy their childhoods. Our expecting anything less robs them of opportunities to grow into mature learners."<sup>13</sup>

### *Myth 2: Homework undermines children's love of learning.*

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<sup>10</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 69. (Emphasis is mine).

<sup>11</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 60. (Emphasis is mine).

<sup>12</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 70. (Emphasis is mine).

<sup>13</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 71.

Essentially, this lament is misplaced. School naturally gets more difficult and less fun as students move up through the grades. “Instead of blaming homework and grading (and by association, teachers), we should focus on how to teach our children to maintain their interest in learning, even when school is not so interesting anymore. *This* is where we stand to gain the greatest payoff for all our efforts. I can pretty much guarantee that as our children progress from elementary school through the high school years they will have to enroll in courses that are exceedingly dull or difficult (or both) for them. They will gradually enter the realm of ‘not having any choice,’ the bane of many high schoolers (and adults). The ability to tolerate boredom, difficulty, or utter disinterest is critical to children’s development into mature learners. After all, when was the last time *you* experienced a year in which every event in every single day was fun? Why is it that we think our children’s daily lives should be like this?”<sup>14</sup>

“They are much better off learning to cope with disappointment and frustration in the relatively safe environment of their elementary schools than years later in their places of work, where no one will tolerate what will then be labeled ‘bellyaching.’”<sup>15</sup>

### ***Myth 3: Homework intrudes on family and leisure time.***

Why make the sharp distinction between “leisure time” and “family time”? Why can’t homework be built into the time that we spend with our children as a family?

“Our approach as parents makes all the difference. If we resent the amount of homework our children are assigned or the fact that they are assigned any at all, our children will pick up on our attitude and act on it, and we will all pay the price . . . We sabotage our own efforts to instill the importance of education when we complain openly and bitterly about homework. We cannot expect our children to take school seriously when we are dismissive of the school’s means to educate them.”<sup>16</sup>

## HELPING YOUR CHILDREN WITH HOMEWORK

- Know that different children need different kinds of support.
- Strike the balance between too much and too little and provide an *appropriate* amount of support.
- Let your children struggle with confusion.

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<sup>14</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 72.

<sup>15</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 73.

<sup>16</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 74-75.

- Do not give unsolicited help.
- *Never* do your children's homework for them.
- *Never* pity your children for the work they have to do.<sup>17</sup>
- Do use time in the car to and from school.
- Use shaving cream in the tub to do spelling words or pudding on the kitchen table.

#### BE CONSISTENT IN YOUR APPROACH

- Set a pattern for yourself and your children from the very beginning. Plan a routine—any routine—as long as it is a consistent one.
- Select a time that works well for everyone—after school, before dinner, after dinner—it does not matter.
- Have a place to do homework that is comfortable for your children—kitchen table, their own desk, on the living room floor.
- Be as matter-of-fact and as “mean” as you like—homework has to get done, and no one has a choice about it.
- Prepare yourself for all manner of tantrums; eventually, your children will calm down and accept the bitter pill of responsibility.<sup>18</sup>

“Homework is not about intellectual development. It is about motivational development. It is about helping your children become mature learners—students who will see homework as a daily obligation they have to fulfill, students who will be able to resist taking time off when they have a lot of work to do, students who will know how to seek and not avoid help when they are struggling. As school gets increasingly difficult and courses become more complex, your children need to be persistent when the going gets tough. Homework, as much as you and they may hate it, will foster these strengths of character.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 79.

<sup>18</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 83.

<sup>19</sup>Bempechat, *Getting our Kids Back on Track*, 83-84.

## OTHER PURPOSES

- Students need extra practice in specific new concepts, skills, or facts. (Languages)
- Repeated short periods of practice or study of new information is often a better way to learn than one long period of study.
- Since NHCA recognizes that parental involvement is critical to a child's education, homework can be used as an opportunity for parents to actively assist their child in his or her studies. This will also keep the parents informed as to the current topics of study in the class.
- Homework also benefits students by helping them to learn how to discipline themselves through budgeting their time and prioritizing activities.
- Homework forces children to become organized.
- Self-learning/teaching through reading, comprehending, and problem solving.
- Tenacity