

**family****Forget Homework**

It's a waste of time for elementary-school students.

By Emily Bazelon

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Over the last decade, Japanese schools have been scrapping homework while American elementary schools have been assigning more of it. What gives—aren't they supposed to be the model achievers while we're the slackers? No doubt our eagerness to shed the slacker mantle has helped feed the American homework maw. But it may be the Japanese, once again, who know what they're doing.

Such is my conclusion after reading three new books on the subject: [The Case Against Homework](#) by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish; [The Homework Myth](#) by Alfie Kohn; and the third edition of [The Battle Over Homework](#) by Duke psychology professor Harris Cooper. If you already despise homework, Bennett and Kalish provide advice on how to plead with teachers and schools for mercy. If you're agnostic, as I was, Kohn is the meatier read. Kohn is the author of several rebellious books about education, and he exposes the lack of evidence for many of the standard arguments in favor of homework: that it boosts achievement, that it inculcates good study habits, that it teaches kids to take the initiative, that it's better than video games or whatever else kids do in their free time.

Cooper is one of Kohn's main foils and a leading scholar on the subject, so I picked up his book expecting to find a convincing counterargument defending homework. I didn't. Cooper's research shows that, much of the time, take-home assignments in elementary school are an act of faith. No one really knows whether all those math sheets and spelling drills add up to anything. If there's little or no evidence that younger students benefit from homework, why assign it at all? Or, to adopt Kohn's less extreme position in *The Homework Myth*, why make homework the rule rather than the rare and thought-through exception?

In *The Battle Over Homework*, Cooper has crunched the numbers on dozens of studies of homework for students of all ages. Looking across all the studies is supposed to offer a fairly accurate picture even though the science behind some of them is sketchy. For elementary-school students, Cooper found that "the average correlation between time spent on homework and achievement ... hovered around zero." In Kohn's book, he highlights a 1998 study that Cooper and his colleagues did with second- through 12<sup>th</sup>-graders. For younger students, the amount of homework completed had no effect on test scores and bore a negative relationship to grades. (The results weren't quite so grim for older students. Their grades rose in relation to the amount of homework they completed, though their test scores did not.) Kohn looks at these findings and concludes that most homework is at best a waste of time and at worst a source of tedious vexation.

Cooper, despite his findings, continues to back the "10-minute rule"—10 minutes of homework in kindergarten and first grade, with 10 more minutes for each additional grade level. For support, he zeroes in on six studies conducted between 1987 and 2003. These included third- through fifth-graders, and they compared kids who did homework with kids who didn't. (In a rare moment of good science in this field, the kids were assigned randomly to one group or the other in four of the studies.) The homework kids performed better, but only on a "unit test"—a test of the material they'd been sent home to study. Which means that Cooper's best evidence doesn't refute one of Kohn's central claims—that the measurable benefits of homework diminish the longer students are tracked for. Take a snapshot of a math quiz on fractions after kids drill fractions at night and homework looks good. Take a longer view and the shine comes off.

Cooper's support for the 10-minute rule actually makes him a voice of homework moderation in light of [evil-homework](#) tales of kindergartners slogging through 130-word lists. But as Kohn writes, "We sometimes forget that not everything that's destructive when done to excess is innocuous when done in moderation." In response, homework advocates emphasize the inviting notion that homework in elementary school fosters good study habits. "Before you can build a house, you need to build the scaffolding," Cooper says. Giving young kids briefer take-home assignments "is like learning to add single-digit numbers before you can add double digits."

This claim seems to make intuitive sense to a lot of people, but there is no research to either support or debunk it—the association between early homework and study habits simply hasn't been studied. And to me, it makes no sense at all. Time management and a general notion of discipline are not refined and specific and cumulative skills like playing tennis or baseball. So, why should we think that practicing homework in first grade will make you better at doing it in middle school? Doesn't the opposite seem equally plausible: that it's counterproductive to ask children to sit down and work at night before they're developmentally ready because you'll just make them tired and cross? "Most twelve-year-olds are better [at time management] than most seven-year-olds regardless of how much homework they've been assigned," Kohn writes. "It's both naive and unhelpful to expect younger children to defer gratification or know how to engage in long-term planning."

Nor does most homework teach kids to take the initiative and make learning their own. Instead, it's about following directions. In *The Homework Myth*, Kohn muses that the real purpose may be to foster uncritical obedience so that when kids grow up they'll accept the long hours Americans are expected to work. I'm not sure I'm ready to join that conspiracy theory, but I do resent the lemminglike nature of homework and its incursion on my kid's time. Eli is at school for 6.5 hours a day already—that seems like plenty of opportunity to get across what they want to teach him.

Kohn makes one major exception to his skepticism about homework—the encouragement of reading for pleasure. But he counsels that schools should take care lest their prodding turn books from a joy into a chore. Eli and his classmates are supposed to write down the books that they've read or had read to them. I'm willing to try this, but wary. It's only the first month of school, and a friend's daughter has already pretended to have read books that clearly haven't left her shelf. Homework as temptation to fib: not the lesson that schools intend to teach, but probably one that a lot of students learn.

When I shopped around the arguments against homework, I discovered that how you feel about it depends a lot on what you think kids will do if they don't have any. Eli's homework seems like an imposition when I measure it against running around the playground or playing card games or building with blocks or talking to his little brother.

In response to this, Cooper delicately suggested that my idea of a childhood afternoon well-spent is idealized and elitist. Maybe so. But the argument that homework is a net benefit for most kids has a big weakness. When homework boosts achievement, it mostly boosts the achievement of affluent students. They're the ones whose parents are most likely to make them do the assignments, and who have the education to explain and help. "If we sat around and deliberately tried to come up with a way to further enlarge the achievement gap, we might just invent homework," New York educator Deborah Meier told Kohn.

I e-mailed the principal of Eli's public elementary school, Scott Cartland, to ask about homework, and he emphasized the value of encouraging reading and making room for long-term projects. But he also fell back on logic that he admits is not, well, logical. "It has been drilled into our collective psyche that rigorous schools assign rigorous homework," Cartland wrote. "I recognize that this is a ridiculous thought process, particularly since your research suggests otherwise, but it's hard to break the thinking

on this one. How could we be a high-achieving school and not assign homework?" How indeed. I hope the education establishment begins to wrestle with this question. If not, maybe it's time to move to Japan.

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