

## STAY TUNED

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### **Homework Myths: Battling the Worksheet Blues**

Over the years, I have observed the homework of my children, and now my grandchildren.

There is a significant difference in the quantity and quality that passes as something students should spend time on. (In retrospect, schools did not have big, expensive copy machines when my children were in school.)

In most cases, the work a child now brings home in elementary and middle school is busy work — not the kind of assignments that ask them to think, reflect, inquire or discuss something of value. This year, I have watched my young friend let go of some of his curiosity because his unending pages of worksheets have to be completed, checked by parents and turned in the next day. These single-sided papers have random work in arithmetic, enough problems to fill up three pages — then paragraphs (lacking context) to read. I wonder if the teacher goes over the work and helps students develop a sense of what they have read.

The first question parents usually ask upon seeing their children at the end of the day: “Do you have homework?” The questions should be “Did you learn something interesting today? Did you do any experiments? Did you learn something of consequence?” Amazingly enough, if they have done something interesting, they can’t wait to tell you.

Once it is determined that homework is necessary, a variety of directives will follow all evening and into the morning by parents who are now the “homework monitors.” This is after parents have worked all day at their jobs and students have done a fair number of assignments in class.

I wonder whatever happened to having hobbies (beyond texting), riding bikes, going on hikes, engaging in board games, or using your brain in other ways to spend time on something that interests you. When there is a professional development day, my young friend spends the day at my office. Just this past Friday, he built an amazing robot out of a cardboard box and figured out how to wear it comfortably. He figured out where the arms should be, and how to attach pockets! It took several hours, and he was able to do it because he didn’t have “homework.” I supplied a hard hat and the extended grabber to pick things up. Then he used his imagination to develop scenarios for his creation.

#### **Worksheet blues**

An interesting fact regarding worksheets is that no country in the world gives their students the vast number of worksheets we give our children.

If worksheets made us smarter, we would have the most intelligent students in the world. Check with your school principal and ask the cost of producing these one-sided sheets for a

day, a week or a month. Certainly in the time of budget cuts, this would be the first place to cut, as their usefulness is in question. Given the years I have been in education and the number of schools I have visited, there is a direct relationship between worksheets and underperformance. The bright students become bored and the struggling student is reminded each day how difficult monotonous learning is.

From a brain-compatible point of view, the brain is looking for meaning and usefulness. Learning happens quickly when students are engaged in something of interest. When they can ask questions about what they are learning, and they can't wait to tell you about the amazing day they had at school, then you know learning is taking place.

Then there are our high school students. They work long into the night and early morning doing assignments that may or may not connect to their range of courses, may or may not build conceptual understanding across disciplines — or even make a connection between their courses and what is happening in the world.

Some districts' report cards even have a "check box" for tracking homework. Students can flunk a class if they haven't turned in their homework, even if they pass every test with high marks. Interesting that busy work supersedes knowledge.

I recommend the book "The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing," by Alfie Kohn. Ask your children about what they are learning from the papers they bring home. Stay tuned.

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