

About the Reading

You are about to read an article that looks at homework and asks the question, “How much is enough and how much is too much?” As you read the article, think about your own experiences with homework. How much work do you think kids your age should do each week to really learn the skills they will need in the future?

American kids spend more time than ever on homework.

Will their hard work pay off?

-taken from an article by Tim Herloff

Time For Kids Magazine

It's a typical day for Molly Benedict, a 5th-grader from Presidio Elementary School in San Francisco, California. When she gets home from school, she does not break for a snack; she does not phone a friend. She even walks right past the TV. Molly heads straight for the computer in her room and starts writing a page-long book report.

After half an hour of work, Molly has a quick snack and starts on her math problems – multiplying two digit numbers. She moves on to social studies—drawing a map of the route Lewis and Clark followed. Then it's time for science. She studies the water cycle for an upcoming science test. All that's left is practicing the piano and—finally—sleep.

Does Molly's schedule sound familiar? The amount of time American students spend on homework each week is at an all-time high. In 1981, 9-year-olds to 11-year-olds spent an average of 2 hours on homework each week. By 1997, kids that age were doing more than 3 hours and forty minutes of homework a week. In 1999, the amount had risen to almost 5 and a half hours.

What's up with piling on homework? Is it an evil plot that teachers cooked up on their summer vacations? Of course not. Parents and teachers want U.S. students to keep up with kids in other countries. In a recent test called the TIMS (Third International Mathematics Study) comparing the math skills of students in different countries, children in the United States scored far behind students in Japan, China, and many European countries.

Parents, business people, and lawmakers are afraid that US students will not be prepared for jobs when they leave school. Business people say that today's high school graduates are less well prepared in reading, writing, and math than high school graduates were 25 years ago.

So kids need to do better in school but **how** will they do better? In sports, it takes practice to improve. And in school, the practice school kids have to go through is called homework. But when is there too much homework?

Researchers say that children also need time to be children — to play. They need time to learn to get along with their friends. Some parents complain that today's busy children are unable to take part in after-school activities such as sports, youth groups, and church activities. They say that since the homework load has increased so much in recent years that their children don't have enough time for these other parts of their lives. Back in the 1920's and 1930's, schools rarely assigned homework because everyone believed that children needed to spend several hours a day outdoors to be healthy.

Apparently some scientists still agree with this. Their research suggests that physical activity might even raise children's level of learning. In 1995, Dr. Richard Hannafor studied the effect of physical activity such as play on student reading. He compared two groups of third graders' reading test scores. The first group received reading instruction in class with no additional help. The second group received the same reading instruction in class, but also had physical activities mixed in with their reading lessons. Surprisingly, the students who had the additional play activities out scored the other group by 1.3% on reading achievement tests.

But there is also evidence about the powerful benefit of homework. Dr. Julian Betts, a professor at the University of California at San Diego, studied the effects of homework on test scores. He found that a student who did 15 minutes of math homework a night from the 7th grade through the 11th grade scored 65% higher on national math tests than students who didn't do regular homework.

But when is there too much of a good thing? Parents complain that homework is causing their children so much stress that they sometimes become sick. Holly Manges, a high-achieving fifth grader at Easter Elementary School in Lexington, Ohio, recently asked her mother if it would be OK to get B's instead of A's this year. She said she was just too tired anymore to keep up the pace. Her mother says that homework has erased family time completely. "We used to do family reading at night, but not any more. Now we do math facts and label rivers on maps."

A few schools have answered homework complaints by making new rules. In the Poway Unified School District, school leaders came up with an official homework policy defining how much work kids in each grade should be expected to do each night. That way families aren't surprised by the workload. The current Poway policy says students in 4th and 5th grades should expect to bring home at least sixty minutes of homework per night, at least four times per week. This is still below the national average of nearly 5 and a half hours of homework that most fourth and fifth graders across the US are doing.

If you ask most kids, they won't disagree that they need to do well in school.

Molly and other students like her realize that although their assignments can be too long, too hard or too boring, homework is here to stay. They just wonder when homework becomes too much.

Go on to the next page.

Writing Directions

Pretend that the Poway Unified School District Board of Education is considering changing its homework policy to increase the amount of homework for fifth graders. They want to raise the minimum amount of time you spend on homework from the current minimum of four hours a week to meet the national average of five and a half hours.

Should the School Board raise the amount of time you spend on homework or should they leave it the same as it is now? Write a letter to the Board stating your opinion. Look back at any notes you took in the margins of the news article and at your brainstorming ideas. Be sure you give reasons and examples to persuade the School Board that your opinion is right. You may use information from the article **but you may not copy the words unless you use quotation marks**. You must put the information in your own words. Students who copy the words of the article may not pass the writing test.

Be sure your letter includes:

- Good persuasive writing
- Complete sentences
- Correct capitalization and punctuation
- Correct spelling
- Clear handwriting or printing

You may have as much time as you need to complete your writing. If you are not sure of the spelling of a word, you may use a dictionary. You do not need to recopy your paper; just make all the corrections on your paper so that the teacher who reads it can understand them.