

Give us a break!



Evenings and weekends are precious to us all. So don't waste children's time, and your own, by setting dull homework that's devoid of purpose, says Kevin Harcombe...

Homework – a compound word that resonates down the chalk dust swirling corridors of all our school days. Home: warmth, security, a place to relax. Work: well, fill this one in yourself, why don't you?

The point is, the two things don't often sit well together and I have always been ambivalent about the value of homework for children under 11. An Ofsted inspector once told me that they'd stopped being critical of schools about parental attitudes to homework, because invariably half of parents thought the school set too little and the other half set too much, so schools couldn't win (no change there, then).

Some parents think homework must be a 'good thing', without being quite sure why. They may have read it in the *Daily Mail*, or they may be of the "I had to do it and it never did me any harm" school of thought, in which case what's wrong with flogging and outside lavatories?

These may well be the same parents who can remember how to do quadratic equations; unlike me whose secondary school child regularly weeps into her calculator at half nine of a Tuesday evening whilst bewailing the fact her parent is a mathematical imbecile. (Watch out, I riposte, it's genetic.)

When homework has a positive impact

Research indicates, however, that the value of homework in developing academic understanding is questionable at best. This may be down to the nature and the quality of the homework set and also down to the nature and quality of the finished product. Both tend to be variable. For every diligent teacher who

sets and marks homework with brow furrowing zeal there is one who sets the first thing that comes into his head at the end of a fraught lesson and marks it cursorily, if at all. For every compliant child (or parent – come on, you know it happens!) who spends hours writing that essay there is one who is still scribbling down a few hasty sentences in his largest, page-filling writing in the school playground.

The nub of the matter is that homework is only useful when meaningful, related to and supporting class based work, well matched to the child, time limited and marked with top notch feedback from the teacher. Sadly, this is only the case in a minority of cases. Having got those long-winded caveats off my chest, here are some suggestions where homework can be manageable (for both the setter and the doer) and have a positive impact.



Level the playing field

SET UP A HOMEWORK CLUB...

For those children who don't have access to books, internet, paper, pencils, scissors, glue at home, you could start a homework club and give those attending use of the school's ICT facilities. For those families who are 'book poor' you need to make sure your own library is well provided for. Last Christmas I asked assembly, "How many of you got some sort of a book as a Christmas present?" Less than half the hands went up. In the People's Republic of Harcombe, when I get round to setting it up, the giving of books as presents would be enforced by presidential decree.

6 creative homework tasks

1. ASK QUESTIONS

Interview a family member about their school days, work, play, food, etc. This develops questioning skills and can be recorded rather than written. Digital dictaphones are available for 20 quid and are within the reach of most schools. Results can be shared and presented in any way from a video presentation to a pie chart.

2. PACK A SUITCASE

Following some input on WWII and the mass evacuation of the young, set the children the task of making their own evacuation suitcase. (Some children will literally make one out of cardboard, but it's the contents that are the key). What five things would they take with them and why? They can write this, or simply talk through their suitcase with the rest of the class. It's the thinking behind this task that is the real learning. The speaking/listening/writing is, as so often, a secondary benefit.

3. FLOUR BABIES

Read Anne Fine's tremendous book of the same name, then provide the children with their very own flour baby (basically a 1 kilo bag of flour they have to look after as if it's a baby). Children will draw faces on theirs, dress it, even push it to school in a toy buggy. Again, the real learning is in the thinking and empathy the activity generates.

4. PARENT PORTRAITS

Sketch a parent in Henry Moore / Lucian Freud style, i.e. unflatteringly. It's great fun, gives the parents a break from the child's "I don't know what to draw" cry and is a chance to look at more recent British artists.

5. SET UP A MUSEUM

Our Y3 and Y4 children were recently given the task of designing their own Egyptian artefact at home. Resourcefulness from children – irrespective of family background – was stunning. We received several hieroglyphic scrolls (rolled up around cotton reels, rubbed with a tea bag to give the ageing effect) a multiplicity of pyramids (made from card, plasticine, lego), sarcophaguses, jewellery and lots of mummified Barbies and Kens. The class

was turned into a museum, with carefully written exhibit cards and children curators on hand to explain the historical background to why the Egyptians valued these things, and opened up to parents and other classes on a Friday afternoon.

6. SERVE BREAKFAST

Sanctions for not having done homework don't work, rewards do. Compare "If you don't hand in homework you'll miss break / lunch / PE / life." With "If you do hand it in regularly you'll be invited to the end of half term Big Breakfast in the hall where your teacher will serve you toast, cereal, yoghurts, juice, etc." Simple really, and a special occasion to look forward to at the end of half term.

Throw the book at them

MAKE READING ROUTINE...

When parents ask about homework for their child I always respond that a) the best thing for a child to do of an evening is have some quality time with family and friends, sit down for a meal together, play a sport, learn a musical instrument or sing and not feel badgered into working all the hours God sends, and b) reading is just about the best homework anyone, adult or child, can do.

Parents don't count reading as homework, see, and we need to educate them (this parent thinks homework is when you have indentations in your finger from holding the pen/tapping the keyboard for three hours, because writing is homework).

Time spent reading is seldom wasted and is either entertaining, thought provoking or informative or – just like this article, hopefully – all three. If you like you can structure what the children read by recommending lists (The Redlands Ten – ten books to read before you're 10) to add a little challenge to the task. Local libraries might be able to help by ordering multiple copies of books for those parents that can't/won't buy them. Children get a certificate (and a book!) when they complete the ten.

