

The Homework Squabbles

By BRUCE FEILERSEPT.

Homework has a branding problem. Or, to be a little less pointy-headed about it, everybody hates homework.

Scan through the parenting shelves, and the frustration is palpable: “The Case Against Homework,” “The Homework Trap,” “The End of Homework.” Glance through glossy magazines, and the enmity is ubiquitous: “The Homework Wars” (The Atlantic), “The Myth About Homework” (Time), “Do Kids Have Too Much Homework?” (Smithsonian).

Heck, just drop the word into any conversation with families and watch the temperature rise. Some of this is cyclical, of course. Homework goes back to the onset of formal schooling in America and was popular in an era when the brain was viewed as a muscle to be strengthened.

The first backlash began in the early 20th century as repetitive drilling came under attack, and by the '40s, homework had lost favor. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 generated hysteria that we were losing ground to the Soviet Union, and more homework was one response, but the practice again waned in the 1960s. Homework came roaring back after “A Nation at Risk” in the 1980s as Americans again feared their children were falling behind.

Today’s tension echoes this back and forth. “The Chinese do six hours of homework before breakfast — we have to keep up” versus “Play is more important than make-work. Google wants people who are ‘creative’.”

So I get all of this, I really do. And to a certain extent it makes me feel better. Parents and teachers have been having these battles since before electric lighting.

But truth be told, my struggles with homework are far less grand. In my house, it’s not homework wars as much as homework squabbles, little questions and doubts that build up and start to nag. Do my children need dedicated space for their homework, or is it O.K. to do it in the kitchen? What about listening to music, is that smart? Should I correct my children’s errors or let their teachers discover where they need help? Can I do anything to encourage self-reliance?

To find some answers, I turned to a team of homework experts. I asked them each a speed round of questions.

Do children need their own desks, or is the kitchen table acceptable?

Eva Pomerantz is a psychology professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and a specialist in parent involvement in children’s learning. She’s also the mother of a 13-year-old daughter who loves homework and an 8-year-old boy who doesn’t. She said that on homework days, both the children and the parents are more stressed. “It can be a real time of connection with your child, or it can be totally dysfunctional,” she said.

Ms. Pomerantz believes in the kitchen table. “I think it depends on your house,” she said. “If you have a crazy, noisy kitchen, that’s probably not the place for your kids to be doing homework unless they have amazing concentration.” But if the kitchen is a place where there’s some activity but it’s generally quiet, it can have advantages.

“The thing about the kitchen,” she said, “is the parent is usually in there doing something, like making dinner, and they’re there if the child needs them, but they’re not sitting next to the child the whole time, which discourages self-reliance.”

Is it O.K. to do homework on your bed?

A friend’s son was struggling with grades in high school, and my friend asked his teacher for advice. “Tell him to stop doing homework on his bed,” she said. “All the kids do it these days, and it’s bad.” Is that true?

Erika Patall is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin who studies motivation and achievement. She said research shows that children vary significantly in their preferences for doing homework. Some like bright lights, others dim. Some prefer sitting up, others lying down. “It’s not about the kid being on their bed while they do their homework,” she said. “It’s about the extent to which they’re really engaged and attentive to their work.” If the child is falling asleep, staring out the window or cradling a phone, that’s a problem.

“If your child is having trouble staying focused, it’s probably time to have a conversation about switching to a different location,” Ms. Patall said.

Is it acceptable to listen to music or FaceTime with friends while doing homework?

Ms. Patall said research is growing that multitasking is a bad idea. “People tend to be very bad multitaskers,” she said, “even people who say, ‘I’m a great multitasker.’ I would say to my child that other kinds of activities, like texting, Internet searches unrelated to homework, and shopping, need to be minimized. One way to phrase it is that the more time they spend doing other things, the longer the homework is taking, which makes them even less happy.”

Should parents review homework or let children make mistakes?

Ms. Pomerantz said she always checks over her children’s homework “even though I think that’s probably not the best thing.” She noted that research suggests that reviewing your child’s homework even when they don’t ask helps them do better in school. The problem, she said, is when parents start correcting the homework themselves or worrying that sloppy homework reflects poorly on them.

“The way I try to frame it to myself is that it’s important to help them identify mistakes or maybe realize that they didn’t give it their best so the process is a learning experience,” she said. “If you’re concerned that imperfect homework makes you look bad, that’s problematic.”

Is criticizing your child’s work acceptable, or should you simply offer encouragement?

Rose Chavez is a court transcriber in Albuquerque, who with her husband raised five children in their modest three-bedroom home. (The parents actually gave up the master bedroom for the three boys to share.) All five children went to Harvard, making Ms. Chavez something of a celebrity in education circles.

She told me that she made homework a priority, emphasizing quiet concentration and no play until schoolwork was done. But she didn’t hesitate to criticize her children. “These days everyone says self-esteem is important and you should tell your kids they’re doing really well,” she said. “I don’t agree. We didn’t give praise where it wasn’t due. We pushed them.”

Ms. Patall concurs. "You don't always have to be upbeat," she said. "You don't want to deliver critical messages that imply things can't be fixed. So you never want to say things like, 'You're stupid.' But pointing out a situation where they should try harder would certainly be justified."

Is there anything I can do to make my children more self-motivated?

Ms. Pomerantz said the key is to give them as much control over homework as possible, advice she sometimes finds hard to follow. Her instincts, she said, are to read over an assignment, then sit down with her children and make a rigorous plan of attack. "I do that because I'm naturally a controlling person," she said. "Then I always have to remember that the child is the one who needs to be in the chair doing the strategizing."

Ms. Chavez's approach may be characterized as lead by example. "In our situation, our children saw how hard we were working," she said. "Our philosophy was, 'We are going to work hard, but we expect you to work hard.' They knew we couldn't do more for them than what we were already doing, so the rest was completely up to them. That's a big motivator. If you give them space to be self-reliant, they usually will take it."

Source; <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/fashion/the-homework-squabbles.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias:r,{%22%22:%22RI:9%22}&r=0>