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The Homework Ate My Family

By Romesh Ratnesar; Michele Donley and Sheila Gribben/Chicago, Deborah Fowler/Houston, Laird Harrison/San Francisco, Jodie Morse/Boston and Todd Murphy/Portland, Ore.

It's a typical Tuesday afternoon in early January for 11-year-old Molly Benedict, a sixth-grader at Presidio Middle School in San Francisco. When she gets home from school at 3:30, she heads straight for the basement of her family's two-story house, flips on her computer and bangs out a one-page book report on J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. After half an hour of work, Molly takes the paper upstairs and gives it to her mother Libby for proofreading. As Molly nibbles a snack of a bagel and orange-spice tea, Mom jots some corrections. "Why don't you say, 'This is the best book I ever read,'" Libby suggests. "Teachers really like strong opinions like that."

Time to kick back, call a few friends and get ready for Felicity, right? Not even close. Next Molly pulls out her math assignment: more than 100 fraction and long-division problems. Once she slogs through those, Molly labels all the countries and bodies of water on a map of the Middle East. And she's not through yet: she then reviews a semester's worth of science, including the ins and outs of the circulatory system.

By 5:30, after doing two hours of homework, Molly sits down at the piano and practices for an hour. She'll barely have enough time to eat dinner and touch up that book report before crashing. "With less work I think we could learn what we're learning now," Molly says. "But I don't think it's too overwhelming." The strain of homework weighs more heavily on her mother. "I didn't feel [stressed] until I was in my 30s," says Libby, 43. "It hurts my feelings that my daughter feels that way at 11."

Most of us remember homework, if we remember it at all, as one of the minor annoyances of growing up. Sure, we dreaded the multiplication tables and those ridiculous shoe-box dioramas. But let's admit it: we finished most of our assignments on the bus ride to school--and who even bothered with the stuff until after the requisite hours had been spent alphabetizing baseball cards, gabbing on the phone or watching reruns of *Gilligan's Island*?

Kids today have scant time for such indulgences. Saddled with an out-of-school curriculum chock-full of Taekwondo lessons, ceramics workshops and bassoon practice, America's youngsters barely have time to check

their e-mail before hunkering down with homework. On the whole, U.S. students come home with more schoolwork than ever before--and at a younger age. According to researchers at the University of Michigan, 6-to-9-year-olds in 1981 spent 44 min. a week on homework; in 1997 they did more than two hours' worth. The amount of time that 9-to-11-year-olds devoted to homework each week increased from 2 hr. 49 min. to more than 3 1/2 hr.

After some historical ups and downs, homework in this country is at a high-water mark. In the early decades of the century progressive educators in many school districts banned homework in primary school in an effort to discourage rote learning. The cold war--specifically, the launch of Sputnik in 1957--put an end to that, as lawmakers scrambled to bolster math and science education in the U.S. to counter the threat of Soviet whiz kids. Students frolicked in the late 1960s and '70s, as homework declined to near World War II levels. But fears about U.S. economic competitiveness and the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 government report that focused attention on the failings of American schools, ratcheted up the pressure to get tough again. Other forces have kept the trend heading upward: increasing competition to get into the best colleges and the batteries of statewide standardized tests--starting in grade school in a growing number of states--for which teachers must prepare their pupils.

The homework crunch is heard loudest in the country's better middle-class school districts, where parents push their kids hard and demand that teachers deliver enough academic rigor to get students into top secondary schools and colleges. Now there's a blowback: the sheer quantity of nightly homework and the difficulty of the assignments can turn ordinary weeknights into four-hour library-research excursions, leave kids in tears and parents with migraines, and generally transform the placid refuge of home life into a tense war zone. "The atmosphere in the house gets very frustrated," says Lynne O'Callaghan, a mom in Portland, Ore., whose daughter Maeve, 8, does two hours of homework a night. "Some days it's just a struggle. Who wants it that way?" Laura Mandel, a mother of three in Warren, N.J., feels similarly embattled. "It's ironic that politicians talk so much about family values," says Mandel, "when you can't have any family time anymore because the kids are so busy keeping their nose to the grindstone."

While kids grow more frazzled, parents are increasingly torn. Just how involved should they be? Should they help a son or daughter finish that geography assignment, or stay aloof and risk having a frustrated, sleep-deprived child? Should they complain to teachers about the heavy workload or be thankful that their kids are being pushed toward higher achievement? Battles over homework have become so intense that some school districts have decided to formally prescribe the amount of homework kids at each grade level should receive. All of which leaves open the questions of just how much and what kind of homework is best. Though there's evidence that homework does improve academic performance, at least in the junior high and high school years, its true value may be more subtle. It encourages good study habits and acclimates students to self-directed work--but only when it's not so oppressive that it turns them off school altogether.

The war over homework is about even larger issues. Schools in the 1990s are expected to fill so many roles--and do so with often paltry resources and ill-qualified teachers--that it's no surprise more work gets sent home. For baby-boomer parents homework has become both a status gauge--the nightly load indicates the toughness of their

child's school--and an outlet for nervy overbearance, so that each homework assignment is practically theirs to complete too. Yet the growth in dual-income families means less energy and shorter fuses for assisting the kids. And all the swirling arguments over homework underscore the bigger questions that confound American teachers, parents and policymakers: What should we expect from our children? What do we want them to learn? How much is enough?

Erica Astrove is pretty sure she knows. She's just seven--a loquacious, blue-eyed second-grader at the public Hunnewell School in Wellesley, Mass. She plays the piano, takes skating lessons and plans to add pottery and chorus. For fun Erica reads almanacs; her parents gave her a book of world maps and flags for Christmas. "My little researcher," her mother Christina says. There's not much Erica shies away from--except homework. Recently, she told her mother she doesn't want to go to middle school, high school or college because of homework. Asked if she might have a bit more tolerance for homework once she enters third grade, Erica shakes her head. "I'm going to keep on crying," she says.

Erica's mom has experience drying tears. Her homework agonies began when her eldest daughter Kate was in second grade. In addition to nightly spelling and reading assignments, Kate sometimes came home with math problems so vexing that Christina wondered whether algebra was required to solve them. Mother and daughter pored over some problems for two hours. They once scattered 200 pennies on the kitchen table in a vain attempt to get a solution. "The [problems] would be so hard," Christina says, "that I would leave them for my husband to solve when he got home from work late." Those were not happy times. "It made all our time together negative," Christina says. "It was painful for all of us."

The pain caused by homework isn't just emotional. Carl Glassman, father of two girls who attend public school in New York City, reports that last year his eldest daughter missed much of her first semester in sixth grade because of pneumonia, "due to the fact that she was doing homework until 11 every night." Laura Mandel, the New Jersey mother of three, found her son Jeffrey, 6, suffering homework-related nightmares this month when she tried gently to rouse him for school. "Oh, Mom," he pleaded, half asleep, "don't tell me there's another homework sheet."

The steady flood of homework can cause chronic weariness. Holly Manges, a high-achieving fifth-grader at the public Eastern elementary school in Lexington, Ohio, approached her mother earlier this school year close to tears. "Is it O.K. if I don't get all A's?" she asked. "I don't care anymore. I'm just too tired." Over time, that homework fatigue can pull at the fabric of families. As early as third grade, Rachel Heckelman, now 11, came home every day from her elementary school in Houston with three hours' worth of homework. The assignments were often so dizzyingly complex--one asked her to design an entire magazine--that Rachel looked for any way to procrastinate. Her mother Lissa tried banning TV for the night. When that didn't work, Lissa pleaded with increasing impatience. "I would get red in the face, and she would get defensive," Lissa says. Rachel's father typically removed himself from the fracas by repairing to the bedroom and shutting the door.

The frustrations that homework visits upon kids can irk their parents to the point of revolt. David Kooyman, of

Covina, Calif., was so incensed about his three grade-schoolers' homework load that he exacted a pledge from their teachers not to lower his kids' grades if they didn't do assignments. When the kids found themselves lost in class discussions, Kooyman reluctantly allowed them to do the homework, but he is planning to sue the school district for violating his civil rights. "They have us hostage to homework," he grumbles. "I'm 47, and I have 25-year-old teachers telling me what to do with my home life."

Other parents are ambivalent. Many resent teachers for piling on projects that cut into unstructured family time. And yet the drive of middle- and upper-middle-class Americans to keep their children at the head of the class has never been more intense. The teachers who assign mountains of homework often believe they are bowing to the wishes of demanding parents. Says Jeana Considine, a fifth-grade teacher at Elm Elementary School in Hinsdale, Ill.: "The same parents who are complaining that they don't have enough family time would be really upset if their child didn't score well." Pepperdine University president David Davenport, father of a fourth-grader who clocks two hours of homework a night, sees a chain reaction: "The pressure to get into highly selective colleges and universities backs up into high school advanced-placement courses, which backs up to elementary schools." Anxious parents can rail about what teachers do in the classroom, but homework is still one area where parents can directly improve their child's chances.

So even those determined to remain passive observers while their kids labor over essays and science-fair projects can find themselves getting sucked in. "It's something I never wanted to do. I hated doing homework when I was a kid," says Lizanne Merrill, a New York City artist whose daughter Gracie is in second grade. But Gracie often trudges home with elaborate assignments that all but demand Merrill's involvement. A research paper assigned to be done over Christmas vacation required Gracie, 8, to do some fieldwork on sea turtles at the American Museum of Natural History. Mom went along: "I just tell myself, if I don't help out on her homework, what kind of deadbeat mother would I be?"

It's hard to blame parents like Alexis Rasley of Oak Park, Ill., if they occasionally get too involved. Last fall a homework assignment for fifth-graders at the public Horace Mann School was to build a mini-space station that accounted for food, water, waste treatment, radiation shielding and zero gravity. Rasley's son Taylor, 10, spent countless maddening hours toiling at a basement countertop surrounded by cut-open soda bottles. "He just kept sitting there saying, 'I don't know what to do,'" Rasley says. "When the frustration level gets that high, you say, 'O.K., I'm going to help,' because the situation has become so hurtful."

Being an attentive, empathetic parent is one thing; acting as a surrogate student is another. But when pressures mount, the line can get blurred. When Susan Solomon of San Francisco saw her son bogged down last year with a language-arts paper that would help his application to an elite high school, she took matters into her own hands: she did his math homework. He later copied his mother's calculations in his own handwriting. "He knew how to do it," Solomon shrugs. "It was just busywork." In the affluent Boston suburb of Sherborn, Mass., parents at the public Pine Hill School tend to talk about homework in the first-person plural; and they sometimes become more than equal partners in carrying out such third-grade projects as writing up the ownership history of their house, complete with a sketch of the floor plan. Homework has been known to arrive at school two hours after the child

does.

"So much of this is about parents wanting their kids to look good," admits psychologist Kim Gatof, mother of third-grader Jake. For an "invention convention," members of Jake's class are building contraptions of their devising. Jake wants to build a better mousetrap. "I can say, 'Just build it yourself,'" says Kim. "Or we can help with it, and it can be on the same level as the others." Jake may have a hard time topping Tucker Carter, another third-grader, who has already made his presentation. Tucker whipped up a fully functioning battery-operated alarm clock that uses a windshield pump to squirt cold water at the sleeper. The kids whooped at this bit of ingenuity, but even they were suspicious. Either Tucker is a prodigiously gifted engineer, or his dad built the clock for him. Sighed David Nihill, the school's principal: "It looks like Alexander Graham Bell made it himself."

Is all this homework really doing any good? Julian Betts, an associate professor of economics at the University of California, San Diego, examined surveys on the homework habits of 6,000 students over five years and found that students who did an extra 30 min. of nightly math homework beginning in seventh grade would, by 11th grade, see their achievement level soar by the equivalent of two grades. Betts argues that the amount of homework is a better indicator of how students perform than the size of class or the quality of teachers. But his study was limited to students in junior high and high school. What about younger children? In 1989 University of Missouri psychology professor Harris Cooper reviewed more than 100 studies on homework and concluded that while benefits from homework can be measured starting in junior high, the effect of home assignments on standardized test scores in the lower grades is negligible or nonexistent. "Piling on massive amounts of homework will not lead to gains," Cooper says, "and may be detrimental by leading children to question their abilities."

Still, some researchers make a case for elementary school homework. Carol Huntsinger, an education professor at the College of Lake County, near Chicago, compared the academic performance of local Chinese-American children with that of European-American kids. In the early grades, the Chinese-American students outperformed their white counterparts in math and mastery of vocabulary words. After examining a host of other factors, Huntsinger concluded that homework made the critical difference. In first grade the Chinese-American children were doing more than 20 min. of math homework a night, some of it formally assigned by their parents, while their white classmates averaged just 5 min.

It may be unwise to make too much of Huntsinger's study, which focused on a small group of families. All experts agree that weighing second-graders down with hours of homework is pointless and probably damaging to their self-esteem and desire to learn. But in reasonable amounts, homework has value for students at all grade levels. "Homework has benefits that go well beyond its immediate direct impact on what's going on in school," says Cooper. Doing homework is important for honing organizational skills, learning how to manage time and developing the ability to learn autonomously.

The question of the day, of course, is what is the right amount? Cooper recommends 10 to 20 min. nightly in first grade and an increase of 10 min. a night for each grade after that. But the point is not simply to fill up a set amount of time. For preoccupied teachers, admits Michelann Ortloff, a Portland school official and former

elementary school teacher, "it's always easy to pull a few things out of the workbook, give them to students and say, 'This is your homework.'" Too many teachers send kids home with mind-numbing math worksheets that are not even reviewed the next day. Too many are enamored of those unwieldy "projects" that seem to exasperate kids more than they instruct them and that lead to excessive parent involvement. For young students, the optimal arrangement would mix skill-building drills with creative tasks closely tied to what's being taught in the classroom--such as interviewing grandparents as a social-studies lesson or using soccer standings to teach rudimentary statistics.

Educators agree that parents should be vigilant about making sure such a healthy blend is maintained. Everyone frowns on parents' doing homework for their kids, but most agree that parents should monitor homework; offer guidance, not answers, when asked for help; and give teachers regular reports on how their kids are handling it all. Gail Block, a fifth-grade language-arts instructor in San Francisco who feels that homework helps overcome the limits of time in the classroom, was nonetheless surprised to hear that her student Molly Benedict takes close to three hours a night to finish. Pepperdine president Davenport notes the amount of time his daughter spends on each assignment at the bottom of her work sheet. "Sometimes," he says, "teachers are not aware of how much time is being spent."

Parents could benefit from a little perspective too. American students on the whole still work less, play more and perform worse than many of their counterparts around the world. As Harold Stevenson and James Stigler point out in their book *The Learning Gap*, Japanese and Chinese elementary school students spend significantly more time on homework than do children in the U.S. A first-grader in Taipei does seven times as much homework as a first-grader in Minneapolis--and scores higher on tests of knowledge and skills.

But American parents should worry less about the precise number of minutes their students devote to homework and more about the uneven and poorly conceived way in which it is assigned. "What defines the homework problem in the U.S. today is variation," Cooper says. Less than one-third of U.S. school districts provide any guidelines to parents and teachers on how much homework children should receive and what purpose it's supposed to serve. In places that have instituted formal homework policies, a semblance of sanity has arrived. In Hinsdale, Ill., parents often complained that their children got too much homework from some teachers and too little from others. So a committee of teachers, parents and administrators spent several months devising a formal policy that requires "meaningful and purposeful" homework at all grade levels but limits the load according to age and mandates that some of it be optional. Besides helping students build their homework appetite over time, the policy aims to persuade the academically more eager parents that it's safe to back off.

The need for a more rational approach to homework may be one argument for establishing national standards for what all U.S. students should know. If such standards existed, teachers might assign homework with a more precise goal in mind, and parents might spend fewer nights agonizing about whether their children were overburdened or understimulated by homework. Of course, the debate over national standards is a complex one, and cramming for a national test could mean more mindless at-home drudgery for kids. But not necessarily. When Taylor Hoss, 10, of Vancouver, Wash., came home last year with packets of extra homework assigned in

preparation for the state's new mandatory assessment exams, his parents shuddered. But as they worked through the test-prep material, the Hosses were pleased with the degree of critical thinking the questions required. "I was very impressed," says Taylor's dad Schuyler. "It makes you connect the dots."

There are other ways of soothing nerves. Both parents and students must be willing to embrace the "work" component of homework--to recognize the quiet satisfaction that comes from practice and drill, the steady application of concepts and the mastery of skills. It's a tough thing to ask of many American parents. "You want your children to be happy, and you pray for their success in the future," says Laura Mandel. "But does homework bring either of those goals? I don't think more homework will make a more successful adult." Maybe not, but wisely assigned homework may help make a more successful, well, child. "It is all about learning responsibility," says Janine Bempechat, an assistant professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. "When you have homework on a regular basis, you learn persistence, diligence and delayed gratification."

Molly Benedict, for one, seems to be swallowing the bad medicine with surprising equanimity. "I don't have a lot of time to do just whatever," she admits. "My friends and I think it's a lot of work. But we've adapted well." Kids like Molly have learned it's a rough world, and homework is only part of it. But who knows? If teachers and parents start approaching homework with a little less heat and a little more care, kids may still have time left to be kids. Or whatever.

--With reporting by Michele Donley and Sheila Gribben/Chicago, Deborah Fowler/Houston, Laird Harrison/San Francisco, Jodie Morse/Boston and Todd Murphy/Portland, Ore.

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