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The Big Question: Are children set too much homework, and does it hinder their education?

BY **RICHARD GARNER**, **EDUCATION EDITOR** | Tuesday 30 January 2007



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A new study to be published in the UK this spring claims that too much study after school turns children off education and sparks family rows. The book, *The Homework Myth*, by American academic Alfie Kohn, also claims that it does not help them to do well in tests, either.

Is he right about homework?

There is international evidence to suggest Alfie Kohn may have a point on the test scores, if children are set too much homework. The Third International Maths and Science Survey, published in 1998, found that children who did a moderate amount of homework did a little better than those who do a lot or very little. For instance, the Finns, who do less homework than the British, score considerably better in international tests -

coming top of almost every table for maths and science achievement through the ages of compulsory schooling. The Italians, who do more homework than the British, do less well.

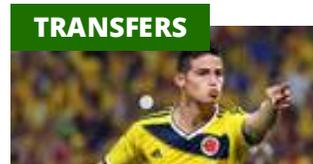
However, Kohn, a lecturer and writer about education, psychology and parenting from Belmont, Massachusetts, would argue there



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should be no homework set at all. "Kids should have the chance to relax after a full day at school," he says. Primary school children should do no more than read for pleasure once they get home, he adds.

Should teachers not set homework, then?

If you had asked that question of David Blunkett when he was Education Secretary, you would have got very short shrift indeed. He was the first UK Education Secretary to draw up homework guidelines for every single age group. His blueprint, which is still in force today, recommends that four- and five-year-olds should have 20 minutes homework a night - 10 minutes reading with parents and 10 minutes' reading alone or doing sums with their parents.

By age six and seven, this should be increased to 30 minutes - 20 minutes reading with parents and 10 minutes reading alone and practising sums. For eight- and nine-year-olds, this should be increased to 40 minutes - split 20/20 between reading with parents and homework. The amount should increase until 15- and 16-year-olds studying for their GCSEs are doing between one-and-a-half and two hours a night. He described critics of his homework policy as revealing "blatant elitism dressed up as well-intentioned liberalism".

His argument was: "Surely it is not a lot to ask an 11-year-old who spends three hours in front of the TV to work for half an hour?" The verdict given in Homework: The Evidence by Sue Hallam of London University's Institute of Education - considered by many people to be the most detailed study of homework - is: "Studies comparing homework with supervised study have generally found homework to be superior in increasing attainment but there are exceptions - particularly at elementary school level." Maths is the subject children



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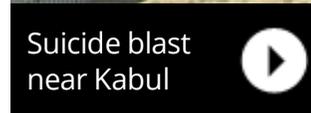
are most likely to improve in through homework, she adds.

Have homework guidelines worked?

Mr Blunkett's decision to produce the guidelines was based on research which showed that only 5 per cent of schools in the UK set maths homework three days a week for nine-to-ten-year-olds, compared to more than 80 per cent in other countries such as France, Hungary, Switzerland and the United States. The comparison was more even in secondary schools, although the UK still set less maths homework than other countries.

There is evidence that more homework is now being set - although that first emerged even before the blueprint was published. In 1983, figures from the Schools' Health Education Unit at Exeter University showed that just over half of boys aged 14 and 15 said they had done some homework the previous evening - compared to 68.7 per cent in 1998.

Increasingly, in schools in England, homework clubs are being set up so pupils can finish their work before they go home. Marlowe Academy in Ramsgate, Kent - set up to replace the worst-performing secondary school in the country, Ramsgate, where less than 5 per cent of pupils got five A* to C grade passes at GCSE - has initiated this as a recognition that pupils from poorer homes may not have anywhere suitable to study at home. Results have improved dramatically. In addition, growing numbers of inner-city schools have set up clubs at their local football club - all the Premier League clubs are taking part in this initiative. As an incentive to do the homework, the pupils are allowed a kick-around on their team's hallowed turf afterwards. These initiatives have mainly focused on helping struggling pupils catch up in class and, according to the



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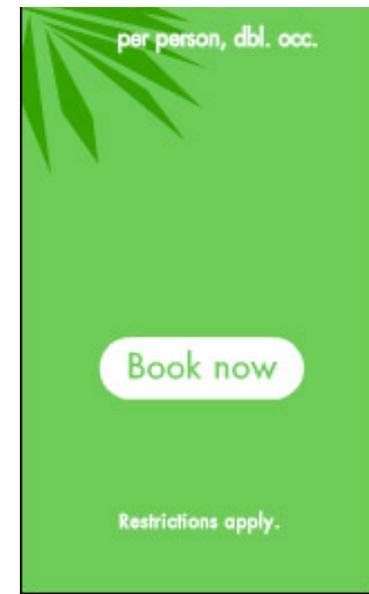


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National Foundation for Educational Research (one of the most respected research organisations in the country), have had a marked effect in improving literacy and numeracy standards amongst slow learners.

Are teachers setting the right kind of homework?

There is evidence that a number of schools in the UK are moving away from traditional homework to more "fun"-based educational activities - such as organising out-of-school trips to museums, theatres etc. This goes hand in glove with a change of climate in educational thinking, which has recognised that new Labour's regime of compulsory reading hours and maths lessons and tests may have been a little too rigorous.

Ms Hallam argues that homework needs to be "meaningful", adding: "Homework, if taken to the extreme, can completely disrupt family life." Kohn would go much further than this - arguing children should engage in things like creating their own work of art using recycled materials, design a poster with their parents about their favourite toy and devise a maths quiz to play with other pupils. He would outlaw exercises such as learning times tables, lists of spellings and completing a set of sums from a textbook out of school.

Will Kohn's book change anything?

Whether there will be more lasting change is debatable. Experts have disagreed over the value of homework for more than a century. In 1883, after "payment by results" for teachers was introduced, time spent on homework rose sharply until social reformers campaigned for a reduction. In 1929, a leading educational journal was asking "is homework necessary?" after a survey found that 11-year-olds were



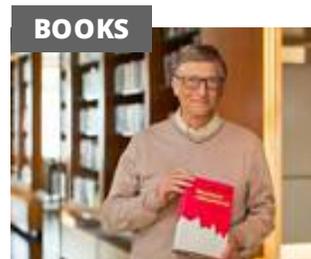
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doing up to 12 hours a week. By 1935 school inspectors were recommending a reduction for the under-12's.

The climate had changed again by the mid 1990's - hence Labour's commitment to rote learning and the introduction of the homework charter. However, the Government's guidelines still only recommend a maximum of 7.5 hours a week for 12 and 13-year-olds.

Should schools continue to set homework?

Yes...

- * Homework helps pupils develop independent learning skills - which they need for secondary school exams and higher education
- * Well thought-out assignments have been shown to improve performance - particularly in maths
- * Homework, particularly during the school holidays, ensures pupils do not forget what they have learned

No...

- * Homework can increase tension between children and parents, leading to family rows
- * Homework turns children off education - they should relax with more "fun"-based activities
- * Too much homework can do positive harm, as has been noted in a subsequent fall-off of scores of in test performance



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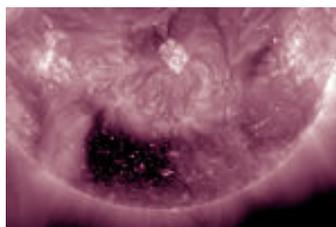


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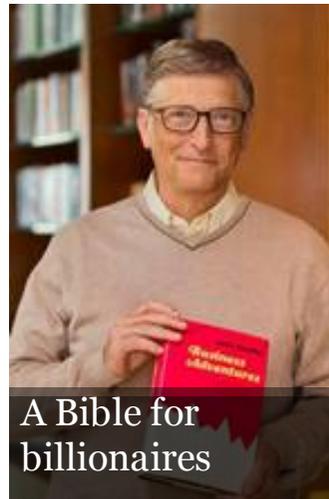
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