Elementary-school students shouldn't do homework. By Emily Bazelon...

Forget Homework

IT'S A WASTE OF TIME FOR ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL STUDENTS.

By Emily Bazelon

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Over the last decade, Japanese schools have been scrapping homework while American elementary schools have been assigning more of it. What gives—are they supposed to be the model achievers while we're the slackers? No doubt our eagerness to shed the slacker mantle has helped feed the American homework maw. But it may be the Japanese, once again, who know what they're doing.

Such is my conclusion after reading three new books on the subject: The Case Against Homework by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish; The Homework Myth by Alfie Kohn; and the third edition of The Battle Over Homework by Duke psychology professor Harris Cooper. If you already despise homework, Bennett and Kalish provide advice on how to plead with teachers and schools for mercy. If you're agnostic, as I was, Kohn is the meatier read. Kohn is the author of several rebellious books about education, and he exposes the lack of evidence for many of the standard arguments in favor of homework: that it boosts achievement, that it inculcates good study habits, that it teaches kids to take the initiative, that it's better than video games or whatever else kids do in their free time.

Cooper is one of Kohn's main foils and a leading scholar on the subject, so I picked up his book expecting to find a convincing counterargument defending homework. I didn't. Cooper's research shows that, much of the time, take-home assignments in elementary school are an act of faith. No one really knows whether all those math sheets and spelling drills add up to anything. If there's little or no evidence that younger students benefit from homework, why assign it at all? Or, to adopt Kohn's less extreme position in The Homework Myth, why make homework the rule rather than the rare and thought-through exception?

In The Battle Over Homework, Cooper has crunched the numbers on dozens of studies of homework for students of all ages. Looking across all the studies is supposed to offer a fairly accurate picture even though the science behind some of them is sketchy. For elementary-school students, Cooper found that "the average correlation between time spent on homework and achievement ... hovered around zero." In Kohn's book, he highlights a 1998 study that Cooper and his colleagues did with second- through 12th-graders. For younger students, the amount of homework completed had no effect on test scores and bore a negative relationship to grades. (The results weren't quite so grim for older students. Their grades rose in relation to the amount of...
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