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THE  TIMES

Homework for parents

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Once upon a time, homework was for schoolchildren – now parents spend up to seven hours a week helping with their kids' study, cookery and craftwork. Is this right, asks Leah Hardy

Once homework kicked off at secondary school, and there was a special name for parental involvement – cheating. Now things are very different. Government targets mean that children as young as 5 are given homework, and more is being deliberately targeted not at our children, but at we parents. It may not look like homework – it's not spelling tests and sums but craft projects, costume-making or cooking – designed to be “fun” and to create happy family bonds. But for many parents, the pressure is anything but enjoyable.

A good friend of mine – I'll call her Anna – regaled me with her tale of woe. It was World Book Day at her son's London state primary. Children were instructed to “come dressed as their favourite character in a book”.

Anna says: “Clearly this instruction was aimed at me, not at Joel, who is 5 and in Year One.” Joel insisted that his favourite character was an Iguanodon from his dinosaur book. Anna, who works in the theatre, was undaunted.

“I bought a dishcloth roll from Halfords and Joel and I painted it brown and green. I got up at 5.30am feeling tetchy after a late work meeting and struggled to sew it all together: tubular body, sleeves with cardboard claws, tail stuffed with slightly inflated Tesco bags to give bulk without drag-it-down weight. I ruched the tail up by sewing along it, giving it a pleasing upward curl.” Then Joel came down for breakfast, put on the outfit “which looked much better than I imagined it could” and announced: “I don't like it. I'm going as Peter or Edmund from Narnia,” and put on his Ikea knight outfit. “I was appalled!” says Anna. “I was exhausted, furious with Joel, out of pocket and now nobody was even going to see my wretched costume.”

Homework provides quality time

Yes, I laughed, but there is definitely something afoot in our education system. When homework is given to young children, they are simply incapable of managing it on their own. And, they aren't supposed to. The Department for Education and Skills: “Homework is a fantastic way for you to get more involved in your child's education and find out what they're doing all day.” The department's website suggests that schools should set homework that children cannot manage alone, claiming that this offers “the opportunity to provide parents with a significant amount of quality time with their children. Parents and children talk, work and spend time together as homework activities are discussed and completed”.

Some parents are less than enthusiastic about this “opportunity”. The message boards of the parenting website www.Mumsnet.com are crammed with desperate pleas from mothers saddled with demanding homework. Not just the regular howls of despair from women who cannot understand their seven-year-old's maths homework (“We never did multiplication like this!”) but women who pluck a photocopied note from their child's school bag to discover they have to produce a model pheasant (I kid you not), a “mad scientist outfit” and Easter bonnet or a Viking longship – ideally out of recycled materials and by tomorrow morning.

While some mothers relish the challenge, swapping tips on the best places to buy feathers or tips on bonnet construction, others are resentful. “I'm too old to do homework,” wails one. “I'm a grown-up. I went to university. I have a job, for God's sake.”

Part of the problem is that many schools know that they must meet official homework targets to sail through their Ofsted inspections, but dislike setting formal homework for young children. So teachers may issue instructions to make models, cook together, or visit a museum at the weekend and fill in worksheets.

“I absolutely hate it,” says Louise, 38, “Recently I have had to make a Tudor costume at 10pm for an assembly the next day, a tree, an ancient Roman costume; again the night before. And I was told off by the class rep for not making homemade cakes for the cake stall. I bought them from Waitrose, for heaven's sake. I have a job and three children. I do the best I can.”

“Parents should be free to parent”

Last year, Kevin Rooney, head of department at the comprehensive Queens' School in Bushey, Hertfordshire, and a parent himself, published an essay, *Sending Parents Back to the Classroom*, on the Institute of Ideas website. It was inspired by his being asked to contribute more and more by his children's school. “I found myself getting a bit annoyed at the tenor of the letters home. They were quite patronising, telling us how we were expected to help,” he says.

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His argument is that not only is much of what parents are asked to do pointless and annoying, it is harming our family life and even eroding respect for teachers. "Is a good parent one who is prepared to immerse him or herself in every detail of their child's education and life?" he writes. "What if parents prefer to spend their home life playing with their kids or simply relaxing after a hard day's work? And what of those who dare to think (or even worse voice) the unthinkable, that teachers should be free to teach and parents to parent? Should the latter view be seen as outdated and irresponsible or treated with respect and honoured?" As he points out: "Surveys indicate that, on average, parents spend about seven hours a week on homework duties. The message today seems to be that your children's performance in school is regarded as a direct reflection of the quality of support they receive at home. The parents of those children who are performing badly at school must thus share, or indeed even shoulder the blame for, their child's underachievement."

As a result, says Rooney, the distinction between "helping" and "cheating" is being eroded. "It seems fairly certain that the growing pressures on parents to deliver will tempt more of them into availing themselves of the variety of opportunities for cheating."

Louise, the mother of a four-year-old and six-year-old, agrees. "You should see some of the creations being taken into my son's primary school! I'm certain half of them have had no in-put from the children at all. My son's glue-spattered, wonky efforts look rubbish next to them, and I really resent it."

"The pushy parents who are happy to spend hours making things after the kids have gone to bed make the rest of us look bad. I try not to get sucked in, but it's hard not to find yourself snapping at the children to stop being so messy, and taking over."

Annoying, time-consuming and frustrating this stuff may be, but surely it is worth it if our little darlings gain an academic advantage from it? Perhaps, but while it is certainly true that having interested, involved parents helps children to succeed at school, it is much less certain than having our time at home dictated by schools is remotely useful.

A study by the University of London's Institute of Education found that helping children with homework "can exacerbate or create family tensions", and Ofsted research found that homework for primary school children does not necessarily improve their performance.

No academic benefit to early homework

Alfie Kohn is an American academic whose latest book, *The Homework Myth*, is fiercely critical about imposing homework on young children and parents. "What surprised me is there appears to be no upside," said Kohn. "No study has ever shown an academic benefit to homework before high school. Kids should have the chance to relax after a full day at school." He believes that primary school-children should do no more than read for pleasure when they get home. Clive Dorman, the director and co-founder of The Children's Project, co-author of *The Social Toddler* and father of three, backs Kohn. "Children have had a long day at school and, if their parents both work, have often been in childcare too. When they come back home, I think the family should have a chance to just be a family together. I find this kind of forced interaction deeply intrusive into family life. When parents and children are tired, compulsory projects are just likely to lead to bad temper."

Of course not all parents dislike homework. One teacher confides that when her school stopped the traditional children's Easter bonnet competition because few children were involved, pushy parents kicked up a fuss and the school was forced to start a decorate-an-Easter-egg competition – for parents only.

How much homework?

The Government suggests how much you and your child should be doing:

Primary school Years 1 and 2: 1 hour a week Years 3 and 4: 1½ hours a week Years 5 and 6: 30 minutes a day

Secondary school Years 7 and 8: 45-90 minutes a day Year 9: 1-2 hours a day Years 10 and 11: 1½-2½ hours a day

What's the alternative? Even the most committed antihomework campaigners agree that **daily reading** with your children is hugely important. A daily **bedtime story**, encouraging your child to read by visiting the library, providing a **range of books** and comics at home, and listening to your children read to you, will help their progress, as will providing a **role model** by showing your children that you enjoy reading by, for example, reading this newspaper.

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