Homework: Helpful or Hurtful?

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As adults with jobs, children, and endless responsibilities, we often think back to our childhoods, the “good old days,” when everything was easy and carefree. We played in the park, played with our friends, played sports, and played imaginative games with our siblings. We didn’t have to worry about feeding our families, paying bills, staying up with our babies at night, and then trying to be functional the next day! We just had to be kids!

Now, being a parent myself, I often wonder how carefree our children feel today. Young children attending Day Schools have long days full of learning both General Studies and Judaic Studies. The day starts at approximately 8:00 A.M. and can go as long as 4:30 P.M. The children practice and learn new skills that enable them to become articulate, educated, and successful adults. There is no greater gift then seeing your child read for the first time, write a creative book about dinosaurs, and translate a biblical verse better than you can yourself. We owe this to the great schools our children attend, and to the wonderful teachers who are dedicated to giving our children these amazing skills. However, what exactly is the role of homework?

Educators agree that homework increases a child’s learning—as long as it isn’t busy work and is kept within certain time boundaries. However, if given too much, the results, I believe, could be detrimental to both child and parent. When school-aged children get home from a long day of learning, they need time to turn off their brains for a while. Just as we all need “down time” at the end of the day, to watch television or read the paper or

a good novel, so do our children. Not only do they need down time, but they can use this time to develop other important hobbies and skills. Whether curling up with a book or a magazine, playing sports, taking a musical instrument lesson, having a playdate with a friend, playing board games with their siblings, or even just having a chat with their parents unrelated to school or homework—down time like this is valuable for growing up, building self-esteem, and developing good conversational and social skills.

The amount of homework continues to grow year by year. As children get older, more is expected of them. Thirty minutes of homework becomes an hour, an hour becomes two… When does it stop?

As I wrote before,the work not only affects the children, but the parents as well. As my oldest
child began getting homework, afternoons became battles. It is clear to me now why it took my son a seemingly endless time to do his homework! He needed to shut his brain down for a while! But back then, we used to fight. A lot. I would tell him if he would finish quickly that he would have a chunk of free time. I would offer rewards. I would sit with him. I would stay in the other room, then come back to check in.

My afternoons became so stressful; not only were my nerves shot, but it obviously affected my son and my other children. I strongly resented the idea that I was ignoring my other children, yet I wasn't spending quality time with my son and his homework!

As much as I understand the need to review the day's work, I did not understand the need for more than that. Our kids do as they are supposed to, just as we did as kids. There may be groaning and moaning about it, but it does become routine, and complaints aren't as strong as they were. But does that mean it's acceptable? Does that mean that our kids don't need periods of time to choose activities that interest them?

Some parents I know have no problem with the amount of homework given, and wouldn't
mind if there was even more! They feel that not only is it enhancing their children's learning, but provides educational structure for the evening. They think that learning, as all of us would agree, is more productive than playing video games or other mindless activities. However, with some monitoring of duration, playing such games is a good way to

tune out for a bit. In excess, video game playing is probably not the best idea! But there are so many ways that kids could have down time other than video games. It is up to us as parents to give our children good choices and guidance.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are parents who struggle, as I do, with the evening juggling act of balancing our housework, tending to younger children, helping more than one child with homework, cooking dinner, and so forth. I know many people who have to hire tutors or homework helpers just to physically have someone there to sit with their child, because they are either working parents, or just don't have the time or the patience! Some kids can sit down to do their own work, but there are many others who need help with the content of the work given, or help focusing into the work after a long day at school.

If homework is such an important aid for our children, why does it create such havoc in our
homes? Why should our children be sitting doing work at home after sitting for the majority of the school day? Our children need to move, to be silly, to choose their nightly activities after working all day. Our children just need time to be.

There has to be some type of happy medium, where children have some time to review what they have learned over the course of the day, but it shouldn't take over the whole evening! Homework is given over the weekend; homework is given over summer vacation! They never get a period of time without it!

The problem is that, unfortunately, I do not think this will change much.

I just hope for the sanity of children and parents
everywhere, homework will be more review and less busywork. I wish there would be more creative assignments, something that might be less repetitive than what they have been working on in school. School is the place for going through the basic drills and building on them. Afterschool time should be time for opportunities for other, very important
skills to be learned, practiced, and enjoyed. We want our children to know their ABC's and 123's, but at what expense? Will my child not get into college or find a job without doing two hours of long division every night?
Are seven hours of school not enough?

Maybe my tuition is so highbecause it accounts for the two hours of extra work at home! Kids need
time to be kids, and parents need time to be parents. If children cannot do
their homework in a reasonable time, then it should not be done at home.
There is still something called schoolwork, right?