The great homework debate: Too much, too little or busy work?

By Kelly Wallace, CNN
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There is a sharp debate among parents about homework
The National PTA recommends 10 minutes of homework per night per grade level
The research on the benefits of homework is mixed
Giving students homework time at the end of school day helps, say students

Ask parents how they feel about homework, as we did on CNN's Facebook page, and the response is immediate and intense. So many parents from all over the country sounded off passionately, saying we expect too much, too little or the wrong things from young students.

As children go back to school and parents negotiate balancing family time and take-home assignments, parents shared that their children are stressed out and exhausted by the volume of homework they receive (so, too, are parents who say they’ve had to become drill sergeants in their own home to get it all done).

Other parents said their kids aren’t getting enough or any homework at all and they’ve had to create their own to keep their kids challenged. Some parents complained that their kids' homework is more busy work than helpful work to improve academic performance, while others said their kids' homework is just right -- and critical to competing in a global economy.

Lisa Morguess, a mom of seven in Fullerton, California, who is against any homework in elementary school, started a blog called Hometown Homework Chronicles. It chronicles her dealings with her children’s school and school district to limit the amount of homework.

"I feel that, especially in elementary school, spending six to seven hours a day in school is enough," said Morguess in an interview via e-mail. "Kids are tired after that and need to unwind and engage in nonacademic activities -- many of which are just as valuable in creating a well-rounded person as academics are."

That said, Morguess concedes it’s next to impossible to get her children’s school or any school to begin a no-homework policy.

"The concept of homework is so ingrained in our culture that people can't and won't think about what it might be like if we just stopped making our kids do homework," said
Morguess. "So I've put my foot down and refused to enforce more than 10 minutes of homework per grade level for each of my elementary school kids, which is the guideline recommended by both the National PTA and the National Education Association." (Her kids' teachers this year so far seem accepting of her policy.)

On the other side of the debate is Ann Gunty, a mom of four in Flagstaff, Arizona, who doesn't understand -- or support -- the notion that children should have less homework or no homework at all.

"I just don't think it's the right thing to say, 'Oh, they don't need any homework. It's just too much. They should be out playing. They should only go to school,' " Gunty told me. "Making it less and less and less is contributing to us being less competitive worldwide."

Gunty's kids, who attend a school that runs from grade 5 through 12, get between one to two hours of homework, including 30 math problems every night, which she feels is appropriate, beneficial (her kids' school enjoys high test scores and strong college placement) and not intrusive on their ability to still be kids or enjoy family time.

Mozart Saint Cyr, a father or two in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, takes it bit further: He doesn't think kids today get enough homework and are so distracted by video games and social media that they're going downhill. He says parents should demand more from their kids: "If the school provided extra homework, some parents would force their kids to do (it)."

For many parents, the beef about homework is not whether it's too much or too little but the type of work the kids are bringing home.

"I am not an advocate for homework for the sake of homework," said Francesca Price, a pregnant mom of two sons who aren't yet school-age. "This does nothing but waste time for the student who has yet to complete it, as well as for the teacher who has to grade it, giving both of them what everyone calls 'busy work.' "

Dr. Tish Howard, a newly retired elementary school principal who continues to work with ailing schools as CEO of Edu-Linx Consulting, has never been a proponent of what she calls "tedious homework."

"If a child is struggling, homework is not the key to improvement," she said, noting how few children have parents at home to help them if they're having trouble with their homework. "Our schools need to embed intervention time at the end of each day to support the learning of that day and ensure conceptual understanding before new learning is added the next day."

Rachel Dueker, now a college sophomore in Ottawa, Kansas, says she benefited from a high school seminar class at the end of the day where she could do her homework in school -- a tremendous stress reliever.
"I always did my math homework during my seminar class and went to my math teacher and sat side by side with her and got that help, and I didn't have to put in any extra time. It was given to me," Dueker said during an interview.

Rhonda Lochiatto, a 16-year teaching veteran who currently teaches fourth grade in Volusia County, Florida, came up with a unique homework policy after she realized as a parent herself how little time there is for homework once you factor in after-school activities and life in general.

"I don't require homework. In my class, I see homework as my opportunity to provide guidance to parents and offer ways for them to help their children at home," said the mom of two, who gives her students a "suggestion calendar" with optional interactive activities such as read-aloud time and topics to discuss.

"If a child has mastered a skill, there is no reason to waste time drilling it over and over, especially when they are struggling in other areas," said Lochiatto.

One thing I heard repeatedly from parents on both sides of the debate is the impact homework has -- or does not have -- on academic performance.

Allie Eleuther, a single mom of two in Hilton Head, South Carolina, said it has been proven there is little value in homework. "More is not always better and does not result in kids getting a better education and doing better on standardized tests."

Shay Hardin, a single mother of two, believes the movement away from homework is hurting our children's performance and the United States overall. "This is why many countries are already beginning to exceed the U.S. in terms of educational rank," she said.

Who's right?

If only it were a black and white issue, but it's not.

A 2012 study found no relationship between the amount of time spent on homework and grades, but did find a positive link between homework and performance on standardized tests. A 2006 analysis of homework studies found a link between time spent on homework and achievement, but found it was much stronger in secondary school versus elementary school. That analysis also found that for junior high school students, homework reaches the point of diminishing return at around 90 minutes, and between 90 minutes and 2.5 hours for high schoolers.

"We just need to figure out what the right dosage is," said Erik Entrikin, a father of three whose girls sometimes get up earlier than their normal 5:30 a.m. wake-up time just to finish their homework. "Currently, it is much too high."