

KJ DELL'ANTONIA

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homework
or
is it your
kid?

HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR
YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL
SUCCESSS

IS IT THE HOMEWORK, OR IS IT YOUR KID?

HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD'S
SCHOOL SUCCESS

KJ DELL'ANTONIA

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Chapter One



WHEN HOMEWORK GOES WRONG

HOMEWORK. Teacher of time-management skills and independent learning? Or Family-destroying, soul-sucking instrument of doom? Your perspective depends on your kid, your school and sometimes, the day. Whatever you think of it, if your kid has it, you know it. Too often, it's the first thing we ask our kids about after school and the first point of conflict on almost any afternoon.

HOMEWORK INTERFERES WITH FAMILY ACTIVITIES, sibling play and outdoor time, and you can't plan anything on a weeknight without considering the ramifications for the

worksheets, the projects and the essays. It's a burden for many families, and a stress point for kids and parents alike.

AT SOME POINT during a child's school years, many parents find ourselves surveying our child's homework load and asking if what she's doing is really working for her. Whether she's a kindergartener bringing home a "packet" every week or a high schooler with a heavy work load, sometimes we get the sense that something's not right. It might be the homework, or it might be your child's approach, but things aren't going well. She's frustrated, and so are you.

What's next?

If you're beginning to feel like homework is more of a problem at your house than it should be, it's important to step back before you rush to the phone or your email, or worse, your social media account. Many parents give in to the urge to vent first, ask questions later. *The math homework is crazy! Who came up with this state fair project?! My kid is in tears!*

"WHEN PARENTS GET on social media and then they start texting each other, everything gets blown out of proportion fast," a teacher with twenty years of experience told me. "Suddenly the principal is involved and it's this big enormous problem," when reaching out directly to the teacher could have led to a simple resolution.

SIMILARLY, your kitchen table complaints aren't going unheard, even if you didn't press "post." "First and second graders are very honest," the teacher said. "They come in the next day and they say, 'Mommy said this homework was stupid and I don't have to do it.'"

HELPING your child forward to a more successful homework experience is a multi-step process. Rush to judgment, and you're likely to be judged "one of those" parents by exactly the people whose help you need to make change on any level. You may want to advocate for change. Or you may want to help your child change her approach, or advocate for herself.

BEFORE YOU DO anything at all, do this:

UNDERSTAND WHAT THE HOMEWORK IS, and what it's for.

OBSERVE WHAT'S HAPPENING, and know how to describe the problem in neutral terms.

THEN, and only then, move to action.

REACH out to someone who will hear your concerns.

BE open to what comes next.

HERE'S HOW.

Chapter Two



UNDERSTANDING THE HOMEWORK

Sometimes, changing the homework is easy. When my oldest son was in third grade, his school considered having the children complete their homework online. There were many problems with this scenario (our dubious rural Internet connection at the time; the trouble it caused with his younger siblings, for whom just touching the keyboard was a coveted privilege), but the largest was that he could not type, and the assignments took him forever.

WE GAVE IT SOME TIME, in the hopes the bugs would be worked out, but after a long night of hunting and pecking to meet the requirement that he copy (by typing them into the homework program) sentences including his spelling and vocabulary words, I finally got in touch with the

teacher.

“Oh,” she said. “It would be fine if you typed the sentences for him.”

“BUT THE ASSIGNMENT is to copy the sentences. That’s the whole assignment.”

“YES, but it’s fine if you do the typing.”

“IF THE ASSIGNMENT is to copy the sentences by typing, and I do the typing, whose homework is it?”

TO HER CREDIT, she laughed. That was the last such assignment, and the homework program itself only lasted a few more weeks. It wasn’t effective for the kids at that age, and it took parents and teachers working together to figure it out.

IT’S RARELY THAT SIMPLE. In general, whether you wish there were less homework, or more homework, or different homework, giving things a little time to shake themselves out before you take action is a good plan, especially at the beginning of anything new. But what if, after a little time has passed, you feel like the homework is a problem overall? Or what if one assignment, one class or one teacher has your child (and you) all tied up in knots? It is possible for you, or an older child, to make

some changes in homework—sometimes immediately, sometimes in the long run—if you approach it right.

What is this homework, really?

The first thing we as parents need to do is to assess our child's experience of the homework against, well, reality. Does 64 math problems sound like madness? Ask your child to reach out to a classmate and be sure she got the assignment right before you join her in freaking out. (We have more than once discovered, after much drama, that only the even-numbered problems had been assigned.) Of course it's crazy that she's expected to write five researched pages on a given topic by tomorrow morning—but is she really quite sure that this assignment was given out this afternoon?

KIDS MAKE MISTAKES. They also procrastinate, and some are prone to adjusting the truth to make themselves look better (at least one of mine frequently “kinda” knew about the reading).

PARENTS ALSO NEED to consider the idiosyncrasies of a particular child. A given assignment may also take your child longer than it does her peers. My oldest son typically spent at least twice the time with his homework as he spent actually working on it—twirling his pencil, contemplating the dust mites floating in the sunlight, sometimes laying on the floor of the room to get a fresh perspective. There was nothing wrong with the homework he was given; he just had to learn how to get it done

(which remained a challenge for him for many years). His style made it harder to evaluate whether the amount of homework really was a problem.

WHEN HE WAS YOUNGER, we reached out to other parents to ask how much time their children were spending on homework over all, or in certain areas. We stayed nearby while he worked to try to assess actual work time, think time and, of course, staring into space time. Now that he's in high school, we ask him to try to figure that out himself—is a given course unusually hard for him? Is he (as has turned out to be the case at least once) spending too much time on elements of the assignment that are meant to be completed in less detail? How much of the last hour does he think he really spent working? Is he spending time trying to re-learn what his teacher expected him to have learned in class?

ONE MORE THING TO consider as you try to evaluate the work your child has been assigned is whether he's more capable than you (or he) thinks. That may look like a huge page of math problems, but a kid who has been practicing addition facts in class may be able to knock them out in less than two minutes (in fact, that may be the goal).

MORE COMPLEX ENDEAVORS may be well within your child's grasp, perhaps combining the things he has been learning in the classroom in new ways that will stretch and challenge him, but truly are do-able—do-able, that

is, in a manner suited to his age and experience, not yours. The right question isn't "can she do this the way I'd do it," but "can she do this at all," and your child (and you) might be wrong about the answer.

WHEN MY TWO youngest children were in fourth grade, they were assigned to prepare a five-minute-long speech from a biography, to be delivered, not read, from notes on index cards, in costume and in character and with at least one prop. I thought it was impossible, particularly for my daughter, who can have trouble telling the important facts or events in a book from the details.

I EXPECTED (and dreaded) being pretty involved in the projects. But things happened. I had to travel for work and deal with issues involving their older brother and sister. My husband was tied up as well. We offered little guidance and even less assistance, but we didn't stop worrying, and we didn't stop soothing and apologizing to two children who didn't think they could do it on their own, either.

WE WERE ALL WRONG. They did fine—because they were, in fact, ready for this project, and their teacher knew it. Madeline Levine, a clinical psychologist and the author, most recently, of "[Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success](#)," suggests that if, as a parent, you find yourself classifying an assignment as impossible rather than challenging, and getting ready to don your superhero cape and leap in, you stop and look more

closely. It may be out of your child's comfort zone, she said, but if you break it down into chunks, is it within their "capacity zone?"

A CHILD who can read and write reasonably successfully, Levine said, is probably ready for the next step of a book report; a child who has written book reports, as mine had, is probably ready to add the speaking component.

"IT DOES MEAN TOLERATING NOT ONLY your own anxiety, but your kid's anxiety," she points out. That's all the more reason not to cry foul to the teacher, or take over. When we do, we're confirming our child's worst fears—not only does she think she might not be able to handle it, but Mom or Dad does, too!

SO TAKE A SECOND (AND A THIRD, and even a fourth) look before declaring a particular homework assignment too difficult, and remember that your child's teacher should be expecting your child's best effort—not the equivalent of yours. Or, for that matter, really yours. (For more on how you *can* help a child with a challenging project, see [How to Help a Child with a Project](http://kjdellantonia.com) at kjdellantonia.com.)

What is this homework for, and why don't I think it's working?

Once you're sure you know what the homework is, and whether it's within your child's "capacity zone," the next

step is to consider what the teacher hopes the homework will accomplish is, what it is about it you think isn't working, and why. Often, the homework's objective is simple. For younger children, in math, it's usually practice. Teachers want those simple facts to become automatic. The same goes for spelling. Sometimes an assignment that seems like busy work, like copying the spelling words out four times each, is actually an effective, if not particularly inspiring, learning tool.

WITH PROJECTS, book reports and similar homework, the goal—along with the more obvious educational content—might be learning to manage time, or to plan ahead or divide a big project into smaller pieces. Teachers might assign reading at home to allow the teacher to move faster, or to be ready for class discussion.

AS THEY GET OLDER, math and science homework might involve practicing a concept learned in class, and this is where homework can get tricky. If a child hasn't understood, they're practicing wrong. Some math and science teachers are now “flipping” the classroom to avoid that, assigning children to watch lectures at home, then do the practice in class (that might be why your child is suddenly watching a lot of videos as homework).

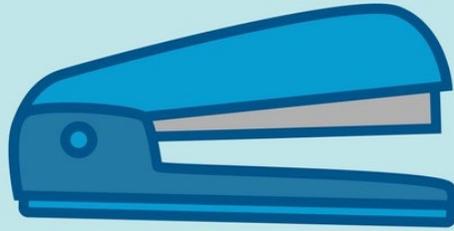
STUDENTS MIGHT ALSO BE PRACTICING a particular method for solving a type of problem, which can present a real difficulty for parents who learned differently when a child needs help. That can make the homework feel harder

and more frustrating to you than it is in reality. Short term solutions to this—and it's usually a short term problem, although it never feels like it—include finding and watching a video on the method together, consulting an older child or a classmate, and, regardless of whether you are ultimately able to help the child with the math, letting the teacher know it was an issue—because one goal of homework is always to help the teacher evaluate whether the child has understood a concept well enough to apply it on her own.

UNDERSTANDING what the homework is meant to accomplish can be key to working with a teacher towards an individual, short-term change if it's one particular kind of homework that's creating a problem. If, for example, the goal is for a child to read every night but your child finds the reading logs daunting, maybe hers could be a check list, or maybe she could read a chapter of a book every night. If the teacher has asked that you set a timer so that a child can work towards speed on a page of math facts, but your child is made frantic (as one of mine was) by the ticking away of the seconds, maybe she could use an app or flashcards to practice.

YOU DON'T, of course, want to make your child the special snowflake. Sometimes tests are timed, sometimes homework is no fun. But especially in the lower grades, teachers are often willing to work with parents if a particular type of work is causing an issue.

Chapter Three



OBSERVE, DESCRIBE AND REACH OUT

Your next step (or a concurrent one) is to observe what's happening with the homework for your child. This allows you to take a specific, but non-confrontational approach. One Los Angeles parent suggests that regardless of whether you think you'll be advocating only for your child, or seeking larger changes, you start by talking to the teacher about what you've observed, not what you think is wrong.

"DESCRIBE WHAT IS HAPPENING with your child," she suggests, and don't put the teacher on the defensive with phrases like "he loves your class, but ..." Work from the assumption that you and the teacher both want what's best for your child—but don't assume anything else. When she described her daughter's concerns over a

packet of homework that came home every week in kindergarten, the teacher quickly told her not to let the child worry about it—that the real goal was just to take something home at the beginning of the week, then bring it back at the end. “She can do as much or as little of the work as she wants.”

“THERE’S TOO MUCH HOMEWORK” isn’t constructive. “The word problems take my son over an hour a night,” could lead to a conversation about why, and what might make the biggest difference.

Reach out to someone who will hear your concerns.

Your first stop is always the teacher, even if you’re not certain she’ll be open to listening. For an immediate problem, sending an email is a good start. You may be explaining that because your child became frustrated on one occasion, or because of some family situation, she won’t have her work done. Most teachers will understand if you had your child set aside an assignment for more help the next day.

IF THE PROBLEM is bigger than a single assignment, suggest a meeting, either with an explanation of what you’ve observed, or with nothing more than *Claire’s been having a hard time with the math homework—can we find a time to talk about it?* Then, find a delicate balance—going into the meeting with possible solutions, but also with an open mind.

WHEN YOU START with what you've observed about your child and the homework, rather than accusations or conclusions about what you want to change, you leave more room for a variety of solutions. One mother of twin daughters now in high school, first contacted a teacher about homework when one, then a fourth grader who normally loved school, began to really be "dragged down" by her homework.

"I OBSERVED FOR NEARLY TWO WEEKS," she said. "I made sure I had good data, and then I went to [the teacher], and I just said, this is what's happening. This is how long it's taking." The teacher's response was to suggest a reduction in homework in an area (vocabulary) where her daughter already had strong skills. That didn't eliminate the most challenging parts of the homework, but did lessen the amount of time spent on it.

SOMETIMES, teachers genuinely don't know how long an assignment takes a student. Your suspicion that a younger teacher, particularly one without a family of her own, might not have thought about the homework in the same way as a teacher with more experience or a family does, is often correct.

ONE 7TH GRADE teacher wrote me an email saying that when she first started, at age 21, she never really thought about how homework would impact a family. "My

understanding was that I should assign homework every night. I did that until last year, when a parent made me see things differently. I just was following what I thought I “should” do as a “rigorous teacher.” I thought I would get in trouble if I didn’t assign homework each night.”

IF THE AMOUNT of time it takes to really do the work is at the core of your problem, observation, non-confrontational communication and a willingness to be patient as you and the teacher work through possible solutions can result in an improved relationship as well as easier evenings, whether the teacher is working to reduce the workload for all students or just trying to strike the right balance for your child.

A GOOD SOLUTION might not work immediately, which means the lines of communication need to stay open. After one mother described her daughter’s homework problems—nightly anxiety, homework that seems to expand to fit the amount of free time she had—the teacher suggested a “homework diet.” The daughter (along with several other students in the class) would have a smaller amount of work, and her parents were to set a timer, and stop the homework after some agreed-upon amount of time passed.

BUT WHEN THE timer went off, the result was tears, yelling and a night of anxious misery. It wasn’t until the teacher sat down with the child and talked about the need for a time limit, then made a plan for how work that wasn’t

finished would be managed, that the daughter was able to stop working when the timer went off.

WORKLOAD IS PROBABLY the most common homework complaint, but sometimes it's the style of homework that's at the root of the problem, or your child's ability to do the work. Years after the fourth grade homework incident, the mother of twins I described earlier realized that each of her daughters was spending 8 hours a weekend outlining a chapter in a particularly dense textbook for an advanced placement course.

AGAIN, she observed, again, she got in touch with the teacher, this time with a question as well as a description of what was happening. *How long should the outlines take?* 2 hours. Eight hours was, indeed a problem.

"TO HER CREDIT," says the mother, "the teacher asked around," and found that some students were able to get it done in two hours, while others were not. Her daughters and some of their classmates needed to develop more of the skills needed to do the task; the teacher worked with the students, suggesting strategies for doing the work as well as managing the time involved.

It's important to remember that the solution may not lead to perfection—the twins still spend more than 2 hours on this assignment—but it might still be enough. Some

students have to stretch to achieve something that might be easier for others. Some assignments take some students more time than others; some classes are designed to require more, or more challenging, work at home; sometimes students take on a course load that's more work than they realized. Sometimes the right course is just to accept the homework, and move on to managing it and helping your child to find her way to success with it. Sometimes, you'll want to take your advocacy further.

Who else can I talk to?

Most teachers really are receptive to a parent approach about the homework, but some aren't—and some genuinely aren't able to make the changes you were hoping for because they're working within a set curriculum or with a school- or district-wide policy. That means your next stop is with school administrators, and maybe beyond.

HOW DO YOU DO THIS? With as much grace and readiness as you can muster, along with large doses of determination and the kind of conviction that enables us to persuade and stand our ground without becoming so invested in one goal that we can't be open to other possibilities. Add in a willingness not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good and you're ready for a career in diplomacy or a seat on the school board.

BUT BEFORE YOU even get started down that road, it's

worth considering whether you really want to invest additional time in trying to change the homework as opposed to working with it—and why. Here's one common scenario: you've met with the teacher, and the result wasn't satisfying. In fact, it was infuriating. You left declaring your intention not to let this drop—but you still could. Not every teacher is a great match for every student. Not every teacher communicates well with parents. And not every parent handles a meeting with a teacher gracefully, especially under challenging circumstances. And sometimes we just accept it and move on.

IF YOU JUST DON'T LIKE the homework, if the worksheets are silly or the book choices all boring, this might not be a battle you want to fight. Similarly, if the homework that isn't working is outside of the teacher's control, and it's either not too onerous for your child or the teacher is willing to let your family make an adjustment, maybe you want to work with that.

YOU DON'T HAVE to fix everything. You can tell your child that this isn't going to be fun, but it's just got to be done. You can write the teacher a note (even the teacher who infuriated you) and thank the teacher for meeting, and say you've decided to just see how this works going forward. You could just shift into a different gear of doing the best you can with the situation you've got.

OR YOU COULD SET up that meeting with the principal,

head of the department or head of school, and see where it leads. I interviewed the principal of one Manhattan school where parent advocacy led to a change in homework policy.

“IT STARTED WITH A CONCERN OVER INCONSISTENCY,” she said. Some teachers in the upper grades gave a lot, others relatively little. At a meeting of the leadership team formed among teachers, administrators and parents, one parent with experience in the area offered to present the research around homework. What he told them was that ‘homework in elementary school doesn’t really have a proven impact on academic emotional or social growth,” she said.

“WHAT HE SAID WAS consistent with experiences I had had. Some of the homework we sent home seemed to have no purpose, yet parents were fighting with their kids to get it done.”

IF SOME PARENTS weren’t happy, many teachers weren’t happy, either. “Homework is busy work for teachers,” she said. They have to show that they’re looking at it, yet it’s often not useful as a way to evaluate students. “If it isn’t done in class under the right conditions, you don’t really know where they are independently.”

IN 2016, the school moved to what they call “home-based

learning' rather than "homework:" projects, practice or curriculums designed by students in consultation with their teachers to enhance or deepen their learning. The principal ticked off an enviable list of the qualities the teachers hope the home-based learning will develop: creativity, curiosity, perseverance, independence, problem solving, responsibility, collaboration, self-direction." Home-based learning, she said, "allows kids to reflect on their work and create their goals, and to make that connection at home."

BUT WORKING towards that kind of big change isn't easy, and it isn't fast. Here's one final thing worth remembering, even if all of your actions seem to be leading nowhere—sometimes change is gradual, and sometimes we're contributing to it even if we can't see it. The parent who brought in the research about the homework did so after his daughter had a particularly difficult fifth grade year—but by the time the new program was implemented, she had graduated.

MY OLDEST CHILD had a particularly challenging (but useful) form of math homework weekly ("math journals," in which you both solve a problem and explain, in language, how you did it). Each one took hours for him. We described the problem, we talked to teacher, we helped him through the work.

NOT MUCH CHANGED THAT YEAR, but as my other three children have progressed through the same math class,

I've seen them do the math journals far less frequently, and seen the specifics of the requirements become less time-consuming as well. I (and, I suspect, other parents as well) never said it wasn't useful, thought-provoking work, but for many of us, it was a thing our children dreaded, procrastinated and found ways to suffer over, and I conveyed that to their teachers (and asked my child to convey it, as well). Change resulted—but if your youngest child was the age of my oldest, you might not have realized it.

Chapter Four



SOMETIMES CHILDREN SHOULD
ADVOCATE FOR THEMSELVES

So far, we've focused on how parents should advocate for our children around homework—but there does come a point when our children should advocate for themselves. They can use time-honored strategies—making an appointment, going to talk to the teacher—but there are also routes open to the young, naive and enthusiastic that aren't open to their elders.

WHEN MY OLDEST son was in 8th grade, he and a group of friends entered the Verizon App Competition, which invited students to develop a smartphone app that would help other students. Their app would have allowed to teachers to evaluate how much homework was being assigned to a given student overall, rather than focusing

on only a single class.

AS THEY SAID in their presentation, “if a teacher says you’ll have half an hour to an hour of homework a night, that sounds reasonable. But if you have 6 classes, that’s 3-6 hours of homework.” Their idea won the state and regional rounds, although it was not one of the two apps selected to be developed in the national competition.

THE EFFECT on the school of having five of their students win national honors (and a check for the school’s science education department) for an app that attempted to make their homework more manageable, though, was dramatic. My son and his classmates, who graduated that year, only saw a slight benefit. His younger sister is now in the same middle school, with many of the same teachers. Although she’s a very different student, it’s clear that those teachers are making more of an effort to coordinate large assignments and even nightly work.

THE BIG PLAY—CREATING a committee, doing a large data-gathering project, making a funny video about homework or even engaging in protest—is an option for kids. But usually, you’re going to need to help them start exactly where you would start—in a meeting with the teacher—whether the problem is that they’re not understanding classroom lectures enough to do the homework, want to talk about why the homework is what it is and what it’s for, or just want to convey how challenged they’re feeling.

HELPING your child do this is a little different than getting ready to do it yourself. For starters, an email—the first recourse at nearly every age—is unlikely to be an effective tool for children and teens, for one simple reason: it's too easy. It's easy for a child to dash off, and easy for a teacher to disregard—or say “no.”

It's much harder to look a teacher right in the face, describe a problem, and wait for a response—and much more likely to lead to a positive result. Most children need pushing to do this, and some might even want to write down a few notes about what they want to say. If your child is open to it, talk to him about how the teacher might respond, and how he might feel and the respond himself.

CHILDREN WHO ARE REALLY FRUSTRATED in a class might fear tears, and that's understandable. You can practice saying something like “it's ok that I'm crying, it's just because I care about this. But we can still talk and figure something out.” That would be difficult even for an adult, but being prepared for it might help a child cope.

Chapter Five



WHAT IF I'VE DONE EVERYTHING I'M
WILLING TO DO, AND IT'S STILL A
PROBLEM?

Parents with a choice in schools do take homework into consideration when making that choice—and some even switch schools, or homeschool, if the homework and their family aren't a good match.

AFTER FOUR YEARS in a public school with homework expectations that consistently made her son miserable, one parent described moving him (and subsequently his siblings) to a school with a different philosophy. His first school expected parents to have high nightly involvement in the homework, handling things like “grammar and punctuation and spelling” at home, and the homework began in kindergarten with weekly packets and just kept increasing from year to year.

“I WAS A WORKING PARENT, with three little kids,” she said. “I tried to sit with him. I tried to be patient, but I couldn’t always do it.” Then, when her son was in third grade, she found him struggling with an assignment that probably needed her help, “and he hit himself, and he said ‘I’m so stupid,’ and something just snapped in me,” she said. “I thought, ‘what am I doing, trying to force him into this?’” It just wasn’t working for any of them.

AFTER SOME SEARCHING, the family transitioned to a private school, where the expectations around homework are very different. “The first assignment they give the kids is to buy a notebook,” she says. “And they tell you, of course we know your child can’t do this alone. But don’t set out to help. Wait for your child to come to you and ask for your help. If they don’t—and they won’t—they’ll be late,” and the school will help them figure out what to do next.

“THE SCHOOL IS REALLY about giving responsibility to children,” she says. “They’re supposed to make the call if they will be absent or late. The school tells parents, stay out of the homework unless the child asks. Don’t say did you do it, don’t say when will you do it, don’t ask if it’s done. They take all those lessons out of the sphere of the parent.”

PRIVATE SCHOOL TUITION may be out of most parents' reach, but school choice, magnet schools or other opportunities might offer ways to transition to a school that better fits your family or child's homework needs. Homework is a big issue for many families, and finding a way to make it better can have a huge impact. It's worth taking the time to try to get it right.