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## THE EDUCATION REVIEW

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### **Hit the Books**

By Jay Mathews

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MY MOST VIVID HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT MEMORY is the log cabin my fourth-grade daughter made out of Tootsie Rolls. Okay, okay. I hear you other parents snorting in disbelief. She didn't make the log cabin. All those tears and recriminations and toothpicks broken trying to hold the cursed thing together were mine, not hers. I made the log cabin. At least, I tried.

I remember many elementary school assignments. There was the bird cage fashioned out of Pop-sicle sticks, and the incomprehensible collages of magazine clippings, and the map-coloring, book-reporting, spelling-list-memorizing and other things I have repressed.

Please don't misunderstand me. I like homework. Among education columnists, I am Mr. Homework. I never pass up an opportunity to skewer anti-homework books and commentators. In middle schools, and particularly high schools, I think students should do more homework. The national homework average in 2003 was 50 minutes a day for 15- to 17-year-olds, leaving plenty of time for the two hours and eight minutes each day they watched TV, according to time diaries collected by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

I think homework's long losing battle against television is one of the reasons we have seen no significant increase in high school reading or math achievement in the past three decades. But here I am talking about homework for elementary school children, not high-schoolers. What most people don't know about elementary school homework is that the research strongly suggests that it is a waste of time, something I began to suspect after my daughter's eighth or ninth collage. Middle-schoolers and high-schoolers who do their homework do better in school than those who don't. But Duke psychologist Harris M. Cooper, a leading expert on homework, has conducted reviews of homework research that conclude that, for elementary school students, the correlation between time spent on homework and achievement is almost zero.

(A few small studies do show a link between studying at home for elementary school tests and better scores on those tests.)

So, let's get rid of elementary school homework. Toss those 50 addition problems in the trash. Stop cutting up your magazines. Forget about flashcards. Instead, let's have children that age sit in a nice comfortable chair, with the television off, and read something they choose for 30 to 60 minutes a day. It can be a classic novel, such as *Charlotte's Web*. It can be a comic book. It can even be -- forgive me for sounding so desperate -- this newspaper.

If they need help with their reading, a parent can sit with them. But we ought to make reading a fun habit, like feeding the ducks or playing Monopoly or having pancakes on Sunday morning.

I was going to suggest that teachers do a spot-check by asking a couple of kids every day what they are reading, to make sure they are not using that time to beat their Game Boy records. But author Alfie Kohn, whose book *The Homework Myth* is coming out in paperback this month, convinced me that this would make it too much of a chore. The goal, he says, should be "to help kids fall in love with the written word." The Michigan data say that elementary school children are doing about 22 minutes of homework a night on average, although both my parental and professional experience tell me that can vary greatly. Some homework critics, such as Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, whose book, *The Case Against Homework*, also will be out in paperback this month, believe the burden on many young children is much greater than that. "Parents are sick of how every night brings another crushing load and another power struggle," they say in their book.

Think of how much we could learn by discarding that weight. Keep in mind there is no research to indicate that anyone's chances at getting into med school would be hurt by holding off on formal homework until middle school.

My new policy will upset many parents who think homework is a good habit to develop in small children, so they can adjust easily when it becomes important in middle school. In some neighborhoods, including mine, kindergartners are eager for homework as a sign that they are big kids now. Cooper says he thinks that my idea is "pretty extreme" and that even the few schools that have banned homework still ask students to prepare at home for tests.

But the anti-homework people are considering a statue in my honor. A ban on homework for young children would be "fantastic," Bennett says.

I wish I could venture back in time with my daughter and sample life in Nohomeworkland. Would it have been a happier, more relaxed place, with families closer together? Instead, I'll imagine an evening with a future grandchild.

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