



# LESSONS IN LEARNING

Parents' role in their  
children's homework

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The 2007 Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning recently revealed that 72% of Canadian parents feel that homework is a frequent source of household stress.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, most Canadian parents believe that homework is a valuable learning tool and this belief is substantiated by the available empirical evidence. The research on parental participation in homework activities provides lessons on how parents can alleviate the stressful aspects of homework while still providing support for their children's homework routines.

### Homework as an effective learning tool

Homework is widely used for teaching and learning all over the world, but it has a controversial history as a learning tool. Over time, public attitudes toward homework have alternately swayed between strong support for homework and deep concern about its value and effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of homework argue that it can help reinforce what students learn in the classroom, prepare them for further learning, support the development of good working habits, help build their sense of independence and personal responsibility,<sup>3</sup> and enhance communication between parents, students and schools.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Opponents question its contribution to student achievement and suggest that, rather than contributing to learning, homework can make students feel overburdened, reduce their access to leisure, promote cheating, and compound the effects of socio-economic inequalities among students.<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>

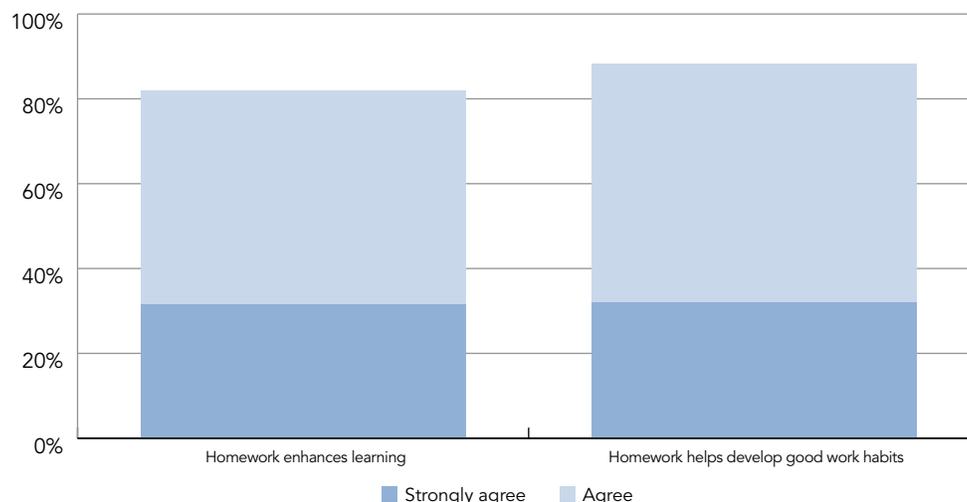
In Canada, parental support for homework is currently very strong. In the 2007 Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, over 80% of parents indicated that homework enhances learning and helps children develop good work habits (see Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> The empirical evidence on the effectiveness of homework has frequently pointed to conflicting conclusions, with some studies demonstrating

**The Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning**  
 In your experience as a student or a parent, homework has often been a source of household stress. Do you...?

Strongly disagree:	4%
Disagree:	23%
Agree:	48%
Strongly Agree:	24%

\*Responses for parents of children aged 5–24.

**Figure 1:**  
 Parents and non-parents' attitudes toward homework



the beneficial effects of homework and others finding no evidence that homework supports learning or achievement.<sup>12</sup> Overall, the balance of evidence suggests that homework is a valuable learning tool. Students who are assigned homework tend to outperform those who are not, and the amount of time students dedicate to homework is positively correlated with academic outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

## Homework as a source of household stress

While parents and researchers generally agree that homework is a valuable learning tool, homework is nonetheless a frequent source of stress in Canadian households. What causes this stress? Parental involvement in their children's homework activities is beneficial to children: proper parental involvement can increase the value of homework for children and it contributes significantly to better student outcomes, including higher achievement, fewer discipline problems, more positive attitudes toward school, and more regular homework habits.<sup>14,15,16,17,18</sup> However, parental involvement becomes stressful when parents feel they lack the knowledge, time, and guidance to support their children's homework efforts.

### Knowledge

The 2006 Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning revealed that 64% of Canadian parents feel they do not have enough knowledge to help with their children's homework.<sup>19</sup> This is consistent with the results from a 2005 Ipsos-Reid survey conducted on behalf of High Road Communications and Microsoft Canada: lack of knowledge was the most frequently cited barrier parents reported facing during their involvement with their children's homework.<sup>20</sup> In the United Kingdom, the BBC surveyed 1,200 parents with children aged 10 to 16 and found that 54% of the parents could not understand their children's homework—particularly in math and science.<sup>21</sup> Lack of knowledge becomes a source of stress when parents feel thwarted in their efforts to help with their children's homework.

### Interpreting the Research on Homework

While there is good evidence that students benefit in a number of ways from doing homework, the research findings carry some important caveats. In particular, it is clear that high school students benefit from working on homework assignments, but the available data do not support clear conclusions regarding the effectiveness of homework for younger students. Furthermore, there is no clear evidence regarding optimal amounts of homework, but the research does suggest that too much homework can be counterproductive. For example, one study found that, among senior high school students, doing 7–12 hours of homework per week was associated with higher achievement than doing 13–20 hours per week.<sup>i</sup>

Optimal amounts of homework vary significantly as a function of several factors, including age, skill level and subject matter; however, researchers generally agree that early elementary school students should not do any more than 20–30 minutes of homework per night and students in grades 3 to 6 should not do more than 30–60 minutes per night.<sup>ii</sup> For older students, recommended amounts are more variable.

i Lam, 1996

ii Van Voorhis, F. (2004). Reflecting on the homework ritual: Assignments and designs. *Theory into Practice*, 43 (3).

### Time

In the Ipsos-Reid survey described above, lack of time was the second most frequently cited barrier for parents trying to help with their children's homework.<sup>22</sup> In the 2007 Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 46% of parents indicated they do not spend enough time helping with high-school-age children's homework.<sup>23</sup> Parents who report they do not spend enough time helping with their children's homework are more likely to report that homework is a frequent source of household stress, compared with parents who report that they spend enough time helping with homework. For parents trying to balance the various demands of jobs and families, homework duties can pose a burden on leisure time and become a source of stress.<sup>24</sup>

### Guidance

Parental involvement in homework activities has been shown to be beneficial to children, but inappropriate parental involvement can interfere with student learning rather than sustaining it.<sup>25</sup> Parents require guidance from teachers on how their efforts can best be directed, but parents do not always find this support or know that it is available. For example, some research has shown that half of the high-school teachers report very little contact with parents about student learning.<sup>26</sup> This lack of communication becomes a source of stress when parents encounter difficulties in their homework involvement.

## Lessons in learning: Effective parental involvement in homework activities

In general, parents should not become directly involved in their children's homework. Parents can facilitate successful homework practices without becoming directly involved in the completion of assignments by providing a quiet, well-lit study space and ensuring that all required materials (books, paper, pencils, etc.) are available. Parents can help with time management to ensure that children set aside time for homework and that the work is not put off until the last minute. Parents can also help with workload management by encouraging their children to start with more difficult homework tasks, leaving easier tasks for the end of homework sessions when children are more fatigued. Parents can also model attitudes and behaviours by expressing positive attitudes toward homework and doing homework at the same time as their children (e.g., reading, paying bills, doing other paperwork).<sup>27</sup>

For many parents, the most difficult lesson is to learn how to avoid interfering with their children's independent completion of assignments and how to provide guidance without giving answers. Too much interference from parents can eliminate the beneficial effects of homework: learning how to work independently is an important lifelong learning skill that all children need to develop. However, most children encounter difficulties and will often ask for parental assistance. When children ask for help, parents can be most effective by helping children find answers for themselves rather than actually providing the answers. When parents notice their children experiencing undue difficulty, parents should communicate with the child's teacher: teachers can provide the best advice on how parents can help and on what other sources of help (e.g.,

tutoring) are available. Even when children are not struggling, it is important for parents to engage in effective and regular communication with their children's schools in order to remain informed about the contributions they can make to their children's homework activities.<sup>28,29,30</sup>

While parental involvement in homework activities is important, parents need to ensure that their level of involvement is appropriate. To alleviate some of the stressful aspects of homework, parents can play a supportive role that does not require content expertise and does not place excessive demands on parents' scarce time resources.

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