



What Do You Mean My Kid Doesn't Have Homework?

By **Samantha Hulsman**

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While sitting down at my computer to commence a brain dump on all the things I want to say about this topic, I'm simultaneously fussing at my middle schooler to start his homework on the last of our days off from Hurricane Matthew. It wasn't always this way. He used to come home right after school, get right to work, and be finished within 30 minutes. And then seven classes started assigning homework. Now, my kid, who's as academic as he is athletic, says he hates school. I say, "No, darlin'. You just hate homework." [← Back to Story](#)

As a sympathetic educator, I used to listen to parents share stories about how homework that should take 30 minutes was instead a three-hour fight. On a case-by-case basis, we'd adjust the homework to make it less stressful on the family. And then I started wondering, what about the parents who aren't coming in for conferences? What's going on in the families of kids who never do their homework?

Becoming a connected educator has shifted my thinking on a variety of educational issues, including the topic of homework. A blog post by educator Justin Tarte in November 2014, "[5 Alternatives to Traditional Homework](#)," catapulted me in the direction of changing my homework practices forever. It was a few weeks before Thanksgiving, so when I read about assigning *alternative* homework over the holiday break, I jumped at the chance to try it. Students and families were happy with the shift, as you can see in this photo and testimonial:

"Thanks to Samantha Hulsman's super cool HW, my son is the happiest camper. He's watching his first documentary on the history of video games. Really I don't think I've ever seen him so interested in something. Another part of Evan's HW was to try something that he's never tried before, food/drink-wise. Now this was hard as he's a pretty adventurous eater but with some help we came up with [Laverne and Shirley's](#) specialty ... Pepsi and milk (we used Vanilla Coke). He loved it!!!" —Yasmin Ramos, mother of three.

Although homework assignments for my students have been more meaningful since that Thanksgiving, it is still difficult to help people see the benefits of not assigning mundane practice pages each night. After considering all the elements that feed into this age-old

habit, I've been able to consolidate my thinking into three categories.

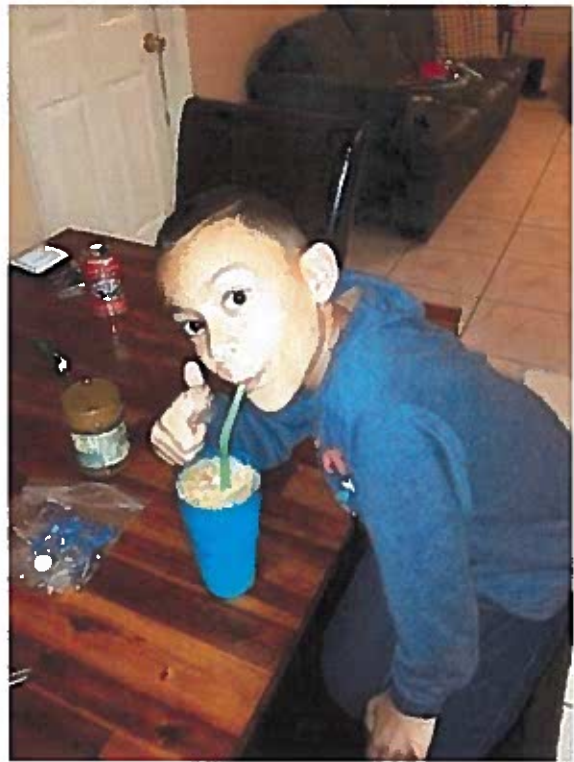
Expectations

I think parents expect their children to have homework nightly, and teachers assign daily homework because it's what we've always done. Even though the shift in 21st-century learning has created a global marketplace in which the learning game has completely changed, we still hold true to old habits and traditions. Students don't need to know the same things we did because they now have access to the entire world with one click. We're preparing them for jobs that haven't even been invented yet. Kids need to learn how to think instead of what to think. We have to help parents (and other educators) see that it's OK to not have homework.

How It Should Be

Synthesizing the knowledge I've gained from renowned educators **Jo Boaler** and **Ron Clark** has helped me form a strong opinion on how the concept of homework should be handled—if it is conducive to a child's learning or simply requested by parents. Not all children find it easy to sit and do paperwork. They should be playing outside, talking, creating, helping, and learning about the world around them. Today's learning is about collaborating, problem solving, and persevering in the face of adversity. Here's what I tell my students and parents when they come to me with expectations about homework:

- *Does my child have homework?* Not necessarily. I am helping your child learn to be an independent problem solver who works on concepts and ideas at home because he knows that is something he needs to achieve a current goal or reach a new level of understanding.
- *Doesn't my child need homework to learn the material?* The human brain is amazing! If there's a math concept she needs to master, spending just six minutes a day practicing can change the wiring in her brain and help her reach that goal. Thankfully, there is no math gene that can be broken in her body.
- *Why can't my child just do a worksheet?* The standards are very different now than when you and I were students. You may not be able to help him using the conceptual, procedural, or applicative methods that we're working on in class, and that's OK. This "new math" really is going to make your child college and career ready, and it's something I strongly support.
- *How can I help my child with math?* I'm going to show your child ways she can practice at home that will give her instant feedback and allow me to see how she is progressing to standard mastery. I can then help her in class the next day with the information gleaned from her report. If you want to help as a parent, give her a quiet place to study in the evenings when she is ready to work towards her goals. Don't project your feelings about math onto her, and support her productive struggle. Encourage her when the going gets tough, and discuss how she can help herself.



What to Do Instead

How should we fill the time previously spent toiling over hours of homework? As I share with my classroom parents, let's get back to doing something that's sadly turned into a novelty: Eat dinner together! It sounds so crazy to think that we have to be told to eat dinner with our children, but I know from personal experience that we all need that reminder from time to time. **Research** has found that there is a major decline in children's health and wellness, coupled with an increase in drug use and problems among teens, because families don't sit down together and share their days over a meal. The hustle and bustle of today's world is hurrying our well-being right out the door. Interested in making a change like our family did? The founders of **TakeBacktheTable.org** make it really easy to get started. Simply talking to your children about their day and learning about their hopes, dreams, challenges, and changes is infinitely more important than any worksheet we can send home.

*A member of the **Center for Teaching Quality Collaboratory**, Samantha Hulsman is currently a 5th grade math teacher for Volusia County Schools in Florida. With a degree in teacher leadership for school improvement from the University of Florida, she's passionate about connecting with educators to make school and the world a great place for all our children. Connect with her via Twitter ([@srhulsman](#)) and continue the conversation.*

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