

Motherlode - Adventures in Parenting
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I Hate Homework. I Assign It Anyway.
By JESSICA LAHEY

I hate — hate — homework.

I hated homework when I was a student, I hate the battle of wills I have with my second-grader and I hate seeing my middle-school-age son miss out on the afternoons of his childhood.

But most of all, I hate being a hypocrite. So it's time to come clean: I am a teacher, and I assign homework.

I have always assigned homework because that is what teachers do; if I didn't, word would get around that I am a pushover, or don't care enough about my students to engage their every waking moment with academics. When I first started teaching, I assigned homework liberally and without question, and scoffed at my students' complaints about their workload. I expected them to keep quiet, buck up and let me do my job.

But 13 years later, I find myself at a crossroads. My son Ben is in middle school, and homework is no longer an abstract concept. I can't just assign it and forget it, and I will no longer sacrifice my students' right to their childhood so easily.

I am not the only parent — or teacher, for that matter — questioning the value of homework. It's the subject of heated debate in school meetings and Internet chat rooms across the country. Even elite private schools in New York City are vowing to lighten their homework load.

The popular media tempest surrounding homework formed in 2006 with the publication of two books on the subject: "The Homework Myth," by Alfie Kohn, and "The Case Against Homework," by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, followed by Time Magazine's *The Myth About Homework* by Claudia Wallis. Last year, Vicki Abeles's documentary "Race to Nowhere" joined the fray. In her film, Ms. Abeles claims that today's untenable and increasing homework load drives students to cheating, mental illness and suicide.

So is homework worth it or not? I went directly to the source. I asked my students whether, if homework were to completely disappear, they would be able achieve the same mastery of the material. The answer was a unanimous — if reluctant — "No."

Most echoed my son Ben's sentiments: "If I didn't have homework, I don't think I'd do very well. It's practice for what we learn in school." But, they all stressed, that's only true of some homework. "Bad" homework — busy work and assignments that

don't do anything but eat up precious evening hours, is (as one of my more opinionated students put it) "a stupid waste of my time."

Fair enough. If my students feel that quality homework is worth the effort, I'm keeping it. With one caveat. All assignments must pass the "Ben" test. If an assignment is not worthy of my own son's time, I'm dumping it. Based on a quick look at my assignment book from last year, about a quarter of my assignments won't make the cut.

Children need time to be quiet, play, read and imagine. Teachers who sacrifice these vital elements of childhood for anything less than the most valuable homework assignments are being derelict in their duty to their students and the teaching profession.