

Too Much Homework?

It's a typical day for Molly Benedict. The 6th-grader gets home from Presidio Middle School in San Francisco, California. She does not break for cookies; she does not phone a friend. She even walks right past the TV. Molly heads straight for the computer in the basement and starts writing a page-long book report on *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling.

After half an hour of work and some helpful suggestions from her mother for improving the report, Molly has a quick snack and starts chipping away at more than 100 math problems. She moves on to social studies—labeling all the countries and bodies of water on a map of the Middle East. Then it's time for science. She studies the way blood circulates through the human body for an upcoming test. All that's left is practicing the piano, a little fine-tuning on that book report, dinner and—finally!—sleep.

Does Molly's schedule sound familiar? The amount of time American students spend on homework each week is at an all-time high. In 1981, 9-year-olds to 11-year-olds spent an average of 2 hours and 49 minutes on homework each week. By 1997, kids that age were doing more than 3½ hours of homework a week. Kids 6 to 8 years old had an even bigger increase, from 44 minutes a week to more than two hours!

"I don't have a lot of time to do just whatever," says Molly. "My friends and I think it's a lot of work."

THE LOAD IS SO HEAVY, AND MY BACKPACK IS SO SMALL

What's up with piling on homework? Is it an evil plot that teachers cooked up on their summer vacations? Of course not. Parents and teachers want U.S. students to keep up with kids in other countries. They want them to be pre-

pared for high school, college and a career.

Part of the homework load is aimed at getting kids ready for tests. Students today face many more achievement tests than students in the past, including new statewide tests in many subjects.

But even parents who believe their kids should study hard think homework can get out of hand. Kids are burned out, they say, and parents are

But overall, the older kids get, the more time they spend on homework.

WHOSE HOMEWORK IS IT, ANYWAY?

Homework can be as big a struggle for parents as for kids, especially when parents do the work! Most teachers like it when parents help out but not when they take over the whole job. That's not the point of homework assignments.

America's parents—and kids—weren't always so involved in schoolwork. In the early part of this century, many school districts declared a total ban on homework for younger students! Experts thought homework would make younger kids hate to study. But in the 1950s, as the U.S. struggled to keep up with other countries in science and math, teachers increased the workload. Homework became a way of life.

WHY HOMEWORK IS HERE TO STAY

For all the frustration it caused, homework really does help students learn. In the upper grades (7th and above), doing extra homework has been shown to help kids score better on tests.

"Homework has benefits that go well beyond what's going on in school," says Harris Cooper, a University of Missouri psychology professor who has studied homework's effect on test scores. Kids learn to be organized, manage their time and master new skills without a teacher's help.

The real experts are the kids who do their homework every night. They realize that although their assignments can be too long, too hard or too boring, homework is here to stay. "With less work, I think we could learn what we're learning now," Molly says. "But I don't think it's too overwhelming."

American kids
spend more time
than ever on
homework. Will
their hard work
pay off?

exhausted from trying to help them.

"Some days it's just a struggle," says Lynne O'Callaghan, a working mom in Portland, Oregon. Her daughter Maeve is 8 and has two hours of homework every night.

A few schools have answered homework complaints by making new rules. In Hinsdale and Burr Ridge, Illinois, school officials came up with an official homework policy defining how much work kids in each grade should bring home. That way families aren't surprised by the workload. Other schools assign all the week's homework on Monday, so that kids have the whole week to complete it at their own pace.