

I'm a weary veteran of homework wars

The good, bad and ugly assignments are now parents' responsibility

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The Grade 5 assignment seemed straightforward. The aim: to build a structure. The tools: a bag of marshmallows and a box of toothpicks. The challenge: It had to be strong enough to support a tin of tomatoes.

But these are 10-year-olds we're talking about. You don't need a B.Ed to predict possible outcomes. In our house this included multiple meltdowns, mounds of wasted marshmallows and toothpicks, and a harried drive to school to transport the collapsing contraption. Enough trauma to turn the whole family off Rice Krispie squares forever.

The biggest lesson learned? Offspring of contractors and architects get the best marks on 3D projects.

I recalled this and other highlights of my unbidden second career as homework cop in the wake of last week's headlines, which proclaimed homework is "a home-wrecker." In case you hadn't noticed.

A Canadian study of more than 1,000 parents concluded that knapsacks full of exercise sheets and book reports are a big source of family conflict and stress. Homework turns a lot of kids off school. And the authors, University of Toronto professors Linda Cameron and Lee Bartel, noted that for kids up to Grade 6, there's not even any academic benefit.

Most families don't need another report to tell them that. The subject has been bemoaned and studied for years, since globalization got North Americans obsessing over whether their kids were falling behind.

But before we trash homework altogether and lament our children's academic hardships, let's consider a few things.

First, there's good homework and bad homework. There is homework kids can do by themselves because it's relevant, assigned sparingly and they have learned the basics at school. And there's the kind parents grind their teeth over every step of the way.

Reading aloud the borrow-a-book your 5-year-old has brought home from S.K. doesn't constitute a homework burden. Nor does helping your Grade 3 child compose a list of things in the kitchen cupboards that are shaped like cylinders, cubes and cones.

The problem comes when you are expected to hover while junior languishes over six extra pages of grammar he has already mastered. Or to teach him the process of converting fractions to decimals when you can't decipher his textbook.

Many parents are still baffled by the fact that homework has gradually morphed from being a Kid Problem to a Family Affair. Unlike those who hearken back to their own days of no homework, I do recall weekly spelling lists, multiplication tables, memorizing poems and the odd project on Magellan or bees.

What I don't recall is my parents having anything whatsoever to do with it. Nor were they expected to.

But today homework is a family issue. For many of us, this is not a good thing. Some kids will rise to the occasion. Lots won't. And when the onus is on parents to make sure the job is done, it relieves kids of

responsibility and sets the stage for family standoffs.

Officially, school boards and teachers tell us all we have to do is promote a homework routine, set aside a quiet space for study and be on hand in case of questions.

Sometimes that isn't enough. Sometimes just getting a weary 9-year-old into that quiet space takes longer than the homework itself. So then what? Because another resounding message from teachers and schools is kids do better in school when parents are involved. In other words, if you love your children, tough it out.

You can take the advice of many parenting experts and back off. But we all know the result can be a child quietly slipping through the cracks.

Technology is also big factor. Cameron's and Bartel's recent survey found the most frequently used resource for homework was the Internet. If kids are in grade school, that means adult supervision and help with typing or searches.

In high school and middle school, it means that suddenly instant messaging, Facebook and iTunes are part of the homework routine. Can we trust studies of "time spent on homework" when all that other stuff is going on at the same time?

In the end, the best answer to family strife may be outsourcing. Homework stress has sparked a growing network of after-school homework clubs. The best solution we ever stumbled upon was a high school student eager for volunteer hours. He came to the elementary school homework club twice a week and jollied his young charge through geometry, grammar and the zebra project. The 11-year-old's performance improved dramatically. But most important, family relations took a decided turn for the better. And shouldn't that be at least as important as the marks?