



Shut the book on primary homework



**WENDY
TUOHY**

AS WE strive to do world's best practice parenting and make childhood's every minute count, the most researched-up Australian parents in our history have opened a new battle front: homework.

From the huge response to a *Herald Sun* story about one family's homework stand-off with a strict local primary school, it seems more than a few are mad as hell at the futility of homework for younger children and keen not to take any more. After all, we often end up doing half of it.

It may sound precious to mount a stand about something earlier generations hardly noticed, but I think parents who believe the homework primary students have to do is not worth the pain have a point. Today's children are wading through our most crowded curriculum yet, being tested more and earlier (NAPLAN anyone?), doing more "enrichment" activities at and after school and seem to have less precious downtime than we did at their age.

Parents are so eager for tips about what we can do to give kids the best start, we even read reports

such as last year's Parliamentary inquiry into homework in Victorian primary schools that found no evidence that homework is beneficial academically.

We need to look no further than our own time-poor lives to realise how valuable time to play and dream is for our children — if they can't do it as kids, then when? — and we know from watching kids' creative play that it's hugely beneficial to development and happiness.

Like me, I doubt other parents object to quick and basic tasks such as reading, times tables and some spelling — it's stuff like pointless worksheets and complex "projects" that become competitions (between parents) where we draw the line. That work is boring and causes angst as the open-ended "projects" hang over children and parents who are often unable to disguise the fact that they took over just to get it done.

In the case of the Williamstown mother who told her child's principal the family would choose which homework they would make their nine year-old do, it was a project about the history of the suburb that was the last straw. Lara Wood argued applied learning from her child doing household tasks, caring for her dog, reading and playing would be more useful than assignments that have "little or no value". She was supported by Monash University education lecturer David Zyngier, who said most primary homework is "irrelevant and a waste of time unless linked to home tasks such

as doing the shopping, counting out, making a cake".

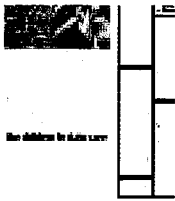
The 2014 Victorian Parliamentary inquiry agreed, finding: "It is not possible to say with any confidence that homework overall has positive academic impacts. There is ... little

evidence to suggest it has any discernible effect on academic results in primary school."

This echoed the 2012 book *Reforming Homework: Practices, Learning and Policy* by Australian academics Mike Horsley and Richard Walker. They wrote: "In terms of academic achievement, homework has no benefit for children in the early years of primary school, negligible benefits for children in the later years of primary school, weak benefits for junior high school students and reasonable benefits for senior high school students. Sound research has demonstrated that spending more time on homework is associated with lower student achievement; this finding is complemented by research showing that in countries with high homework demands, student performance on international tests of achievement is poor."

Writing for an Australian university website last month, US professor Gerald LeTendre said: "Worldwide, homework is not associated with high national levels of academic achievement."

Although in the Netherlands nearly 20 per cent of fourth graders do no homework on an average night, "Dutch fourth



graders put their country in the top 10 in terms of average math scores". Yet some schools here keep children who don't complete homework in at lunchtime and their parents are told their grades may be marked down.

SURE, there is evidence some homework encourages time-management skills and boosts self-managed learning, but there are plenty of ways to teach a child those skills without making a body programmed to move sit down and do more of the same after school.

Right now VCE students and their parents are grappling with final exams. The kids I know are dedicated, prepared and working hard to do their best. They've had the importance of VCE drummed into them since about year 8.

They will get through it, then head in to tertiary education or a job as adulthood sets in. Then they'll have their working lives to meet deadlines, sit at desks as the sun shines outside and struggle to enforce borders between "work" and "downtime" like the rest of us.

Given junior school homework has been proved to be a bust, why should we rush them into that?

WENDY TUOHY IS A HERALD SUN COLUMNIST.

wendy.tuohy@news.com.au
@wtuohy