

tools of the trade
for family improvement



by Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., LPC

HOMework: HELPFUL OR HURTFUL?

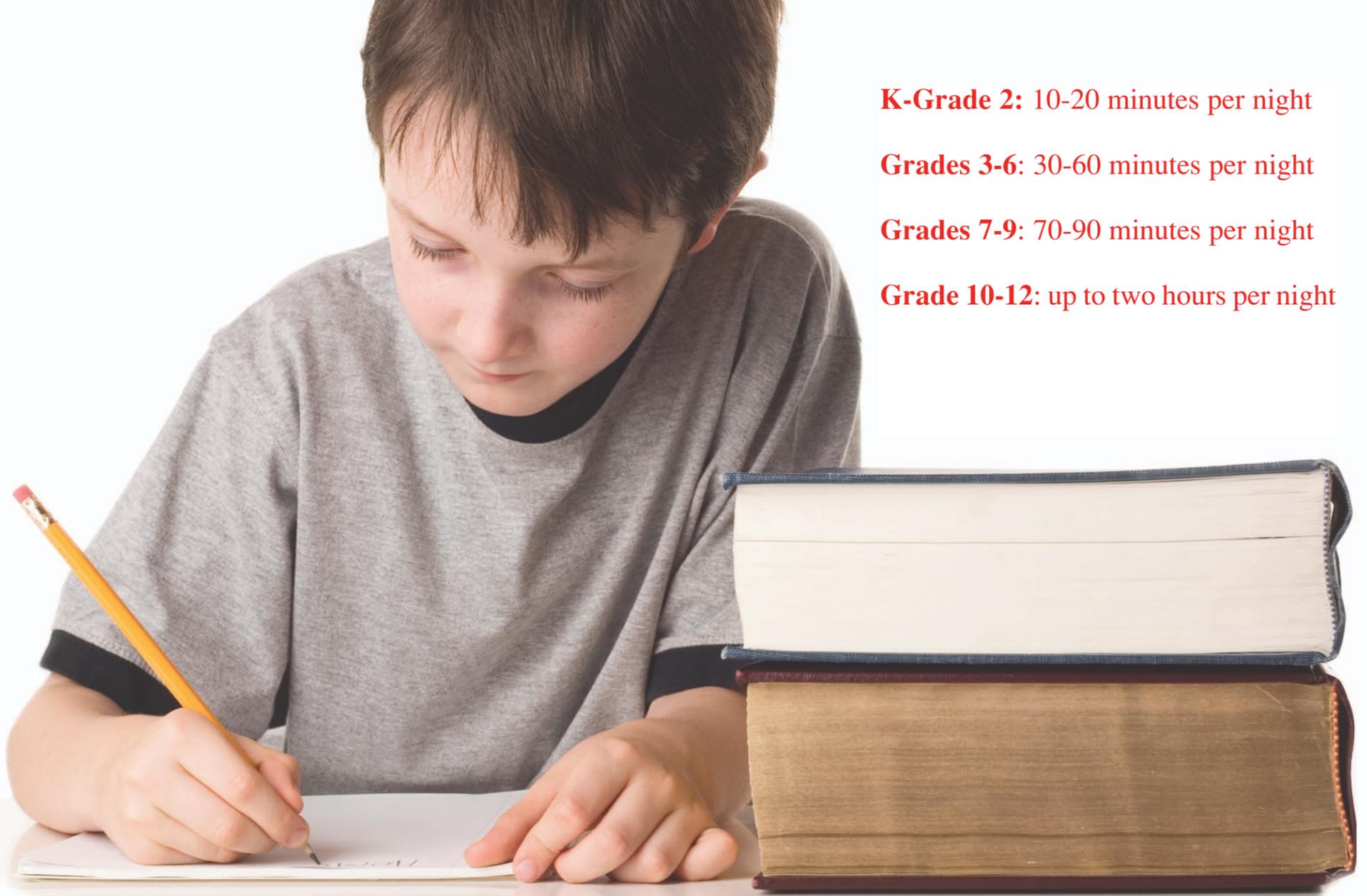
The lazy, relaxing days of summer have come to an end. School has started and the urgency to get things done is upon us once again. We've shopped for school supplies, and backpacks – or should I say rolling luggage, as this is what many children today are using to transport their school work to and from home. Why is it that grade school children have so much homework that they can't physically carry it on their backs, and must drag it down the street and off the bus?

As a parent of two grade school children, as well as one entering middle school, I often have days when I think the homework seems a bit much. Or is it just that we have so much going on that the homework gets in the way? We have all heard the controversial media reports about schools that are doing away with recess so more time can be devoted to preparing for standardized testing. What impact is all of this having on our children?

Homework is defined by Jocelyn A. Butler, School Improvement Research Series (SIRS), as "out-of-class tasks assigned to students to extend or enhance their classroom work/studies." Every 15 years or so, a new public attitude emerges towards homework. In the 1950's, the US grew nervous over Russia's launching of Sputnik; as a result of the competitive anxieties, our nation's kids saw an upsurge in homework to prepare them for complex technologies. As the 1970's approached, the tenor of the times begged that less pressure and stress be placed on children. By the mid 1980's the National Commission on Excellence

in Education report, "Nation At Risk," alerted us that kids were not reading at expected levels. Concerns about staying competitive with the Japanese caused homework to increase once again. The 1990's was the decade of a roller coaster stock market, presidential philandering, single parenting, college costs spiraling out of control- and more and more homework. As history continues to repeat itself I am compelled to ask: **Does excess homework really render increased intelligence and competency, or is it adding stress and interfering with our kids' development?**

Many studies have been conducted over the years that have provided conflicting results. According to research conducted by Dr. Harris M. Cooper at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and author of "The Battle Over Homework," it appears that homework has the greatest effect on the academic performance of high school students. It is most significant in the areas of science and social studies, and least effective in the subject of math. Dr. Cooper reviewed more than



K-Grade 2: 10-20 minutes per night

Grades 3-6: 30-60 minutes per night

Grades 7-9: 70-90 minutes per night

Grade 10-12: up to two hours per night

120 studies on homework, and concluded that young children have a limit to the amount they can learn through self-study. For youngsters, according to Dr. Cooper, homework should exist “to teach them proper study skills” and review material learned in the class. Unfortunately, today’s educators are getting pressure from state school boards to cover more material in greater depths. In some cases, competition-driven parents are also placing homework pressures on teachers to ensure their children will get into the best colleges when they graduate. Without lengthening the school day or year, this work spills over to home, and is the reason many schools around the country are now without recess time.

The most obvious benefit of recess is that it constitutes a break from the day’s routine. Breaks are considered essential for satisfaction and alertness for all people in all fields. For children, recess is a critical time for free thinking and social skill development through “unstructured free play.” Many classrooms allow very little interaction, so recess may be the only opportunity for some children to engage in social interactions with other children. Much of what children do during recess, including the sharing of folk culture (Bishop & Curtis, 2001), making choices, and developing rules for play, involves the development of social skills.

In 2004 the Alliance for Childhood, with help from Olga Jarrett at Georgia State University, interviewed experienced kindergarten teachers in Atlanta. These teachers described how play had disappeared from their curricula over the preceding ten years, and reported that when they gave children time to play, the children “didn’t know what to do” and had “no ideas of their own.” How can a democracy thrive if its citizens have no ideas of their own?

Unfortunately, our educational system is failing to look at the bigger picture; measurable intelligence is only one facet of “success.” Social, emotional and creative experiences are critical to the healthy, successful development of an individual, and to the future of our nation, for that matter. Many of our most significant inventors would not have measured well on our standardized tests, but without their creativity and “outside the box” thinking, we would still be in the dark, without

phones or modes of transportation.

So how do we address this growing epidemic of homework and lost childhood? Parents need to communicate with their local government officials, schools and teachers so to make their beliefs heard. Join school boards and ensure that the proper policies are being enforced. The National PTA and National Education Association have established guidelines for homework which are realistic, in my opinion. The guidelines state that on average, children should receive 10 minutes of homework per night per grade.

Keep your own focus on what you value for your children. Be involved in their homework to let them know you value education, but do not lose sight of the other important facets of a well rounded, successful childhood - friends, play time, physical activity, arts, social service and family time. Call it pressure. Call it great expectations. Whatever its name, the result is the same: school stress. It can start as early as kindergarten. It can turn play into competitive sport. It can turn the joy of learning into a struggle to excel. It can turn friends into social connections and charitable acts into a line on a resume. Being challenged makes you learn new things and keeps your brain functioning. In all the major theories of learning, there is stress. But if stress is really interfering with development, it becomes a problem. If a child is negatively impacted by stress, it may be necessary for the family to seek professional help from a counselor. With stress as with so much else, prevention is the key. The bottom line is: soccer practice, playtime, and homework are all important. Our children need to lead well balanced, meaningful lives.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some “tools” that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article, please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iecounseling.com