

Swings and roundabouts in homework

Comment

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I don't remember homework in my primary school days, though that doesn't mean there wasn't any. There certainly was at high school, and there got to be more and more of it as we progressed up the years.

By the time we were facing the exit examinations life seemed to be little more than school and homework.

How much is too much? No one seems to know. Too much, according to an American educator, Alfie Kohn, puts kids off education. I have some sympathy with his position.

I did a major in English literature at university, and I was nearly 40 before I could read any of it for pleasure.

The Brits issued a paper a few years ago that recommended 20 minutes a day for four- to five-year-olds, with up to two hours a day for those facing exit examinations. You'll be reassured to know that homework for four-year-olds was to involve parents reading to them, plus a few minutes practising sums or reading a primer.

Education is full of intractable problems, and one of them is that the best time to learn skills is when you are young.

Foreign languages, music, sports of all kinds, not to mention good habits, are all much better acquired

things, especially hanging around with their mates.

They usually also want quick results, so that the piano, for example, fast loses its appeal when children realise that they can't do on it any of the things they would like to do, and that what lies ahead is nothing but scales.

Getting them to persevere with anything is a hard ask unless it is what they want to do.

Painters and musicians and the

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best sports people often tell of an attraction to the task from an early age, so that practising was never dull or boring.

It is no different in formal education. Every teacher has heard more times than anyone will want to remember the cry, "why are we doing this?"

Every parent has heard the same query, though not as often. It is hard to answer in any satisfying way.

What I wrote a moment ago about skills and the development of the body and mind is hard to put across to someone who isn't fully formed.

Why we learn algebra or chemistry or physics or a foreign language is only partly because it may come in useful later on.

Two other good reasons are that it helps to train the mind, so that we can reason well in any domain, and it helps to broaden our perspective, so that we can see the world in all its diversity and potential.

Alas, these two are also hard to get across to a young listener.

We can even tell the young listener that there is no perfect curriculum, because we do not know exactly what kind of knowledge we will need in what are becoming longer and longer lives.

My university experience began with the first lecture in my favourite subject, and the lecturer spoke as though we had been there last week — straight into his subject.

We took notes furiously. But what was it about? Why was it important? We never learned.

When a university teacher myself, some years later, I remembered this episode, and would begin every unit I taught with an explanation of what it was, why I thought it was important, and what I thought the students might get out of it. I hope my introduction had some effect.

Homework to me is a bit like scales on the piano. It is practice. The more you do of it, the better you'll get at whatever it is.

Too much of it, and you'll come to hate whatever it is, and that will be a pity.

It helps — at least I think it helps — for teachers and parents to keep on explaining what it is for and why it is important.



Photo: ERIN JOMASSON

Too much puts kids off, but some opens up and trains the mind.

when we are young and developing our minds and bodies. Learn to ride a bike at a young age or hold a cricket bat correctly or breathe properly when singing or swimming, let alone play the piano

or any other musical instrument, and you'll always be able to do it. Start later in life and you'll always wish that you had started earlier. Why is it a problem? Well, kids are more interested in doing other