

Homework

A Conversation with Sara Bennett

Kate McReynolds

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A noted author discusses the insights she gained as she protected her children's free time, enthusiasm for learning, and family relationships against burdensome homework.

When criminal defense attorney, Sara Bennett, took up the cause against homework, children and families everywhere gained a valuable advocate. Sara, a veteran activist, was the first director of the Wrongful Convictions Project of New York City's Legal Aid Society and is an expert on the post-conviction representation of battered women and the wrongly convicted.

*Her 2006 book, *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (co-authored by Nancy Kalish), draws upon empirical research and personal accounts to show that excessive homework hurts children's wellbeing and full development. But in keeping with Sara's activist philosophy, *The Case Against Homework* goes further — it presents valuable and practical advice on how parents can work with teachers and schools to bring about meaningful change.*



SARA BENNETT, the co-author of *The Case Against Homework*, is the founder of Stop Homework, a project devoted to changing homework policy and practice. Her website is <www.stophomework.com>. She lives in Brooklyn, with her husband and two children.



KATE McREYNOLDS is the Associate Editor of *Encounter* and a clinical child psychologist in New York City.

Kate McReynolds: How did you come to write *The Case Against Homework*?

Sara Bennett: In 2004, I left the Legal Aid Society, where I had worked for almost 20 years, most recently heading the Wrongful Convictions Project. I didn't know what I was going to do next, but the issue of homework was on my mind. I had been talking to my kids' teachers and to heads of the school about homework for almost eight years and I was frustrated that homework issues seemed to dominate so much of our family time.

I decided to organize parents at my kids' school to do something about homework. I started a small group of about 6 to 8 parents and, at the same time, I started to read everything I could find on homework. I had read Etta Kralovec's book, *The End of Homework*, when it came out in 2000, so I knew that there was at least one educator who didn't think homework was a good idea.

Every time I'd read something interesting, I'd bring it to the group, but no one else seemed too interested in the reading — it was pretty academic and dry. So I started looking for the book I thought parents would read. When I couldn't find it, that's when I decided I'd try to write it myself.

Kate: Is there a single homework issue that stands out in your mind that caused you to become an activist?

Sara: It started with my first child's very first homework assignment — a reading log. Julian was six years old. Every night, he was supposed to read for ten minutes and fill in what he had read — the book title, name of author, and the number of pages he had read.

Honestly, I didn't know young kids got homework, so I was taken aback just by the very idea of it. Julian could barely write. And we had been reading to him from the time he was born — and certainly much much longer than 10 minutes a day — so we weren't interested in turning our family routine into a school-imposed chore. So, my husband or I would just fill in that log every day and Julian wasn't even aware of it.

But at the first parent-teacher conference, the teacher told us that Julian was supposed to fill in the reading log himself. We said, "But he can't write!" and she told us he should get in the habit of writing and that she needed to know that he was reading, even though we'd already told her we read to him every day.

Kate: What was the teacher's reaction when you pointed out that Julian couldn't write?

Sara: She said it'd be good practice! We told her we disagreed, that he was only six, and that when he came home from school he was tired of school work and had a lot of pent up energy that he needed to get out. The teacher was very young, around 23 years old. I don't think she had any sense of what children need at the end of the day.

The work that came home after that was even sillier. None of it was interesting; most of it was rote busywork. But since there hadn't been much written about homework at that time, my husband and I had only an intuitive feeling that homework was a waste of time.

By the time Julian was in fourth grade, he'd bring home a big packet, and he would sit at this table and sit there and sit there, and talk and fidget, but he wouldn't do it. Finally, I set a timer and told him, "This looks like it should take about ten minutes, so why don't you see what you can get done in ten minutes and then you'll be done." He really wanted to please the teacher at that point so he did it. If I had a kid now, I wouldn't do that, and I didn't do it with Sophia. By the time Sophia came along I had learned a little more and I was simply not interested in having her do it.

Kate: Sophia had the choice from the start whether to do homework?

Sara: She was a different kind of kid. She's very dreamy. With Julian, once we set that timer, he'd do it incredibly quickly and easily. It wasn't interesting, he wasn't learning anything, but he did it. Sophia would get distracted — she'd start and then she'd end up drawing all over the page or decorating one of the letters. She wasn't learning anything and it would have taken her forever to get it done. As soon as we found ourselves battling with her over it, we stopped. We refused to ruin a wonderful, close relationship for no good reason.

Kate: Parents have a lot of knowledge about their children and how they learn. What do you say to teachers who don't seem interested in engaging in a dialogue about your child, when they persist in saying that the homework has value?

Sara: Ask them to show you the value of an assignment. When I was talking to my children's teachers and the school heads, I didn't have much knowledge, only a very strong gut feeling that the work wasn't valuable. But, after doing the

research for the book, I learned that homework pretty much has no value. Everything I learned about homework is in my book, so now parents can have the benefit of that knowledge when they talk to teachers.

When I was in the midst of writing the book, we became much more radical. Before that, we had just told the teachers that the homework was taking too long and that we were going to stop our kids after they had worked for a certain amount of time — generally ten minutes per grade, since I knew that's what Harris Cooper, the NEA, and the national PTA all recommended.

But when I was working on the book, it was really hard for me to say nothing when they'd come home with the exact kind of assignment a top educator had just told me in an interview was a complete waste of time. By that time, Sophia was in 6th grade and Julian was in 9th. We didn't feel the need to talk to Julian's teachers about specific assignments, since he was doing that very well himself. But we did go in and talk to Sophia's teacher about all of the assignments. We ended up feeling sorry for the teacher because she couldn't justify them other than to say they were "fun." We told her that they weren't fun for Sophia and we wouldn't make Sophia do them any more because we wanted her to have time to do all the things she loved — playing, reading, writing music and poetry, singing, etc. Soon after that, we switched Sophia to a democratic free school. And, the following year, Julian decided to attend the free school as well.

Kate: Can we ask teachers to rethink what they're doing in the classroom?

Sara: You hope that your conversations with them will make them rethink, but you have to be very careful about how you approach them.

I have a background as an appellate advocate, so I spent many many years immersed in an adversarial process. As I became a more experienced lawyer, I learned that the more I approached my opponent in a nonconfrontational way, the more success I would have. So I tried to be as nonadversarial as possible with the school.

I think that's how you have to approach the teacher, not as an adversary, but more like, "We're in this together. We both love kids, that's why you're teaching. These are my children. Let's figure out what's best for my particular child."

One of the things I advocate in the book is to tell the teacher it's not working for your child. Even if the teacher says it's working for the other 25 kids in the class, you can say, but let's look at *my* child. The work is no fun for her, or she doesn't learn like this, or you've been doing this particular thing all year long but she's not getting it. Doing more of the same is not going to help her. Or, she gets it perfectly so it's a waste of time.

Kate: You describe saying things like, "We're on the same side and let's talk about what's best for my child." In my mind that automatically constitutes rethinking what's going in the classroom because it's focusing on an individual child. It's already a dialogue.

Sara: That's what we are hoping. With things like spelling and vocabulary it's pretty easy. There's so much research about how kids learn spelling and vocabulary and it's not through rote memorization. So, if parents arm themselves with that knowledge, I can easily imagine teachers changing their practices in those areas.

It's harder when you get into how reading or English or social studies is taught, and it's even harder when you're talking about high school. You've probably read many of the same books I have and know that you'll ruin a love of literature if you make students respond to questions at the end of every chapter and underline and look up the definition of every unfamiliar word. But that's how teachers teach, and very few are going to want to examine what they've been doing.

And, by the time your kids are in high school, you really don't want to be going in and talking to the teachers about their assignments. Kids should be able to talk to the teachers themselves and the parents have to take on the school at a different level.

Kate: I found that in elementary school it was much easier to work with the teachers and with the school. For example, when my kids first started getting holiday homework, which didn't happen until my son was in the second or third grade, I was shocked that we'd have to do homework over the holidays, which had always been such a wonderful break. It finally dawned on me that I could say no. I was prepared for an argument, but the school was great. They said, okay, don't do it.

Sara: It is easier in elementary school. I never came up against a teacher in elementary school who wasn't reasonable. I did have a conversation with one of the school principals, though, who told us, "Well I bring home my work every night, so these kids should." But that's a choice she'd made. That doesn't mean that it's appropriate for 6-, 7-, or 8- year-olds. We shouldn't be treating kids like adults. We should treat them like kids.

Kate: What's a good approach with high school kids?

Sara: In high school, kids seem to have no problem telling their teachers that another teacher already gave them an hour's worth of work, or that they already have two projects or tests on that same day. Of course, that doesn't mean the teachers listen to them. So parents need to get together with other parents, meet with administrators and school counselors, and tell them that the workload is unacceptable.

Kate: One of the problems that I've faced with my high schoolers is their own reluctance to challenge the system, particularly my daughter, who routinely did three to five hours of homework a night. She was exhausted and overwhelmed, but she didn't want to take a stand with her teachers and didn't want me to get involved.

Sara: I think that's a tough position and true for many kids. A lot of teenagers want their parents to butt out, which I understand. If your kid doesn't want you to intervene, you have to respect that. You can take on the system at a different level — the Board, for instance — but not within her school.

Kate: I agree. But I found myself doing other things, like letting them sleep late if they'd been up very late doing homework. Then I'd write them a note so they wouldn't have an unexcused absence. It was a way of helping them maintain some kind of balance and sanity.

Sara: From the time my kids entered school, we'd give them "personal" days. We got those at work, and we thought the kids should also be allowed a few days a year where they stayed home for no particular reason.

People always ask me, “Aren’t you teaching your children that they’re special, that they don’t have to follow rules?” My answer is “No.” What we’re trying to teach them is that you don’t have to blindly follow rules, nor do you blindly follow your peers. You can change things you don’t like and you can fight for what you believe in. You might not be popular, though. I don’t know why homework has become this thing that we’re not allowed to stand up against. It doesn’t make sense to me that the school can send something home that makes your kid miserable, that interferes with your family time, and that interferes with your child’s developing into a whole, complex person. And, to top it off, they can’t even show that homework has any value. They can make up a reason — responsibility, self-discipline, motivation — but that doesn’t mean that it has any basis in fact.

Kate: I often hear the catch phrase, which I’ve grown to hate: “If I make an exception for your child, then I have to make an exception for all the children or it wouldn’t be fair.”

Sara: But that’s a good idea. We should make exceptions. If you have more than one child, you know all about exceptions. You can’t parent each of your children the exact same way because you have to take into account their different temperaments, needs, and abilities.

Kate: And teachers do make exceptions all the time, but I’d like to find a way to expand the scope of the exceptions, like taking into account the child’s unique circumstances, or their learning style.

Sara: Well it's getting harder and harder. The more standardized testing there is and the more that funding is tied to performance on the tests, the less leeway teachers feel that have. That's part of a very big problem.

Kate: How *should* we be evaluating children's achievement?

Sara: What I'd like to see us measure is how well kids are prepared to be happy, successful, ethical adults. But instead, all we measure is how well the students do on the teacher-created test, course grades, or standardized tests. That's very narrow.

I came into this because I really hated homework, but the more I learned, the more I had to start thinking about what was going on in the school day as well. If the homework was of such poor quality, and it was supposedly linked to the school day, then what was going on in school?

And now, let's hope that the rest of the country doesn't follow New York City's newest idea to pay students for grades. It's a new initiative that's coming into effect this fall in a few New York City schools — the idea being that if you pay students for good grades, they'll study harder, do their homework, etc. I find this horrifying for so many reasons I could probably write a book just on that. But here are just a few: I don't believe in bribery. What about internal motivation? What about the child who isn't a good test-taker so can't get a perfect grade?

Kate: Should we abolish the grading system?

Sara: I would definitely abolish grades. Once you abolish grades then you can get down to teaching. For example, if you have to grade a written piece of work, then

you have to compare students' work to assign a grade. But imagine two students. One can write an essay that has perfect grammar and spelling and is structurally sound, but the student takes no risks with the ideas. The second student takes lots of risks with the ideas, but the grammar, spelling, and structure all need work. In the typical grading system, the first student would get an A and the second would get a C. But, as soon as you decide not to grade, you can work with each student on her particular problem areas and both will have learned more, improved their work, and not felt superior or inferior during the process.

Also, grading in general punishes the student who has a slow start. Imagine the student who gets Ds on all of the tests throughout the semester and gets a B on the final. That student made a lot of progress — probably more than the one who got As from start to finish — but that progress and hard work isn't reflected in his final grade. It can be very discouraging.

Kate: In your research, did you identify when that trend — teaching to a single standard — started becoming most noticeable?

Sara: What I heard over and over again from educators was that the public education system in our country hasn't changed much in more than 125 years. We've learned a lot about how people learn and about brain development, but school still follows the old factory model on which it was based.

Homework in kindergarten, though, is new. And the emphasis on learning skills at a younger age is also new. Kindergarten is the new first grade and pre-kindergarten is the new kindergarten. A lot of that shift has been because of NCLB and some of the increased homework is because of NCLB.

You'll read reports that say that kids aren't doing any more homework than they've ever done. I don't think the research has caught up with that trend yet. When a study is published in 2004, they're looking at figures from the 1990s. We really won't know the effect on children for a few more years.

Kate: You mention that we've learned a lot about brain development, but I've been very disturbed by the expectation that as children enter high school, at 13 or 14, they should have the ability to manage their time, plan ahead, and be responsible in the way that adults are responsible. There's no recognition of the developmental process.

Sara: Yes, we give them a label now. It's called executive function disorder and it means that the child can't keep track of everything she's supposed to do. But brain research tells us that these organizational skills don't usually kick in until a person is in their early 20s. So the school's expectations are inappropriate. The "disorder" is creating a booming business for therapists and tutors, though.

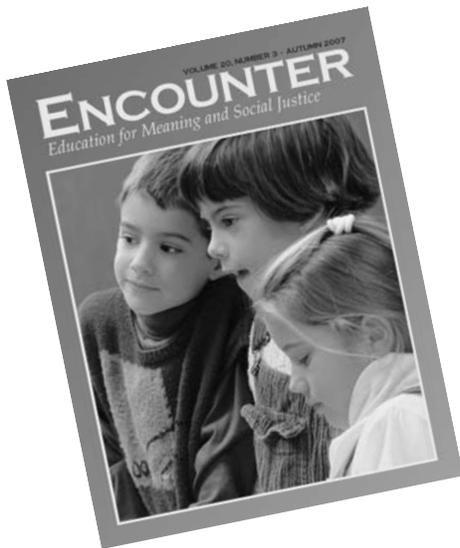
Kate: Have we lost track of what children need at different stages? Are we too reliant on scientific evidence?

Sara: Even I fall into that trap. Publicly, I can say there's no reason to have homework because there's no proof that it works. But what I'd really like to say is: There's no reason to have homework because after spending the day in school kids should be able to come home and do something else.

Kate: I think it's important to approach the issue from an informed, scientific perspective, but how can we reconnect with the needs of children on an intuitive, feeling basis? Can we do more of that?

Sara: That's my hope. I read this funny essay by Nora Ephron, who pointed out that 20 years ago the term "parenting" didn't even exist. It was just moms and dads. But now "parenting" is a science and parents have lost faith in themselves and what they know. If we could get back in touch with what we know — that our children need to eat and sleep or they get cranky, that they need to let off steam, that they need lots of love, affection, support, and downtime — then we'd also know, without anyone telling us, that it's unhealthy for our children to come home from school and spend hours doing school work. And we would step up and tell the schools that we won't allow them to interfere with our children's health and well being.

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