



Society for Research in Child Development

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Hard-Working at School, Sluggish at Home: What Motivates Students of Different Ages to Complete Their Math Homework Assignments?

A study published in the July/August issue of the journal *Child Development* sheds new light on the age-old issue of homework, finding that students' general level of conscientiousness predicts how much effort they put into their homework.

The study, from researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, Germany, the Leibniz Institute for Science Education in Kiel, Germany, and Humboldt University in Berlin, also found that students' beliefs about how well they will perform on their homework, their interest in the subject and their beliefs about the relevance of the assignments predicts their homework behavior.

The researchers set out to understand why homework, a potentially powerful instructional device, is also often a "battlefield" for students, parents, teachers and administrators. Among the key questions they explored: Why do some students work hard on their homework while others don't?

They used two questionnaires to collect self-reports from students about their math homework and classwork. In the first questionnaire, they asked 2,712 students in grades five, seven and nine about the effort and time they invested in their homework, as well as their own perceptions of their ability and interest in mathematics. In the second questionnaire, 571 students in grades eight and nine answered questions about their homework effort, motivation and the homework assigned by their teacher.

The researchers found that age plays a role in homework, with children in lower grades showing greater effort and motivation. One possible explanation for this finding, said lead author Ulrich Trautwein, PhD., of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, is that studiousness may conflict with both female and male gender identities in adolescence. However, he noted, a key component in older students was interest in the topic.

Generally, students reported less effort and motivation for homework than for classwork. However, one exception to this finding is that while highly conscientious students reported an equal amount of effort on homework and classwork, less conscientious students reported putting less effort into their homework than into their classwork.

"We also found that the time students spend on homework was nearly uncorrelated with homework effort and motivation," Trautwein said. In other words: "Homework time should not be equated with effort on homework."

The findings suggest that parents and teachers could intervene to improve students' homework effort by improving students' beliefs that they can do well, increasing their interest in the subject and providing a sense that the assignments are useful, he concluded.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Vol. 77, Issue 4, *Effort on homework in grades 5 through 9: Development, motivational antecedents, and the relationship with effort on classwork* by Trautwein U and Lüdtke O (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin), Kastens C (Leibniz Institute for Science Education, Kiel) and Köller O (Institute for Educational Progress, Berlin). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.