Homework: which side of the fence do you sit on?

To assign homework or not to assign homework, that is the question!

Homework is the name given to many of the tasks given to students to be done at home. The purpose of giving this task is all very sane (according to some teachers) but the shape this sanity has taken by now is almost verging on the fringes of insanity (according to some parents). There were many points and counterpoints made in favour of and against homework.

Many children today have to spend hours every evening doing homework. Some people seem to believe that this will help the children in their academic career, is necessary and helpful, designed so students can practise the concepts taught in class, build good study habits and reflect on their own learning. Others feel that homework is mostly useless, can overwhelm students and cause them to disengage.

Some studies in the United States conclude that there is no benefit to giving homework and that there is no correlation between academic achievement and homework. Other experts suggest that homework is a good tool when used in the correct manner; that there is a body of research that shows homework to be quite beneficial if approached as part of a focused strategy for increasing understanding, not as an afterthought to the school day.

Here in Australia Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, a child and adolescent psychologist, is a passionate critic of homework. He says the best thing parents can do is love their children, provide a safe environment for them and be there - all difficult to manage if there is constant arguing about getting homework done. Carr-Gregg says homework interrupts a child’s sleep, adds to oversized bags young children are forced to carry to and from school and is often completed - or at least corrected by - a parent. It is also possibly more difficult for parents to accept red-pen corrections on a page than their child. Time-consuming school projects also often become an opportunity to showcase the skills of parents, not students. He laments that some parents equate the worth of a school with the amount of homework it prescribes.

Where do we sit as staff in the Senior School at All Saints’?

Heads of Department have grappled with this debate. Over a number of sessions we have outlined our philosophy on homework. We believe that tasks should be manageable given the time allowed and longer tasks such as ongoing assignments should be scaffolded (broken down) into clearly defined and manageable parts. Homework should be flexible enough so it fits in with the myriad of family activities including sports, clubs and family functions. The College also believes that students need “downtime” to just be children. To this end it is important for students to have “unorganised time” for them to learn to be “organised”. Talking with grandparents, playing with other children, time with pets, watching TV, online time, doing household chores, listening to music are seen as inherently valuable. The setting of weekly, fortnightly or even term tasks is preferred over a number of tasks due on a daily basis. This approach seems more in tune with modern family life.

Parents can and should support the homework policy of the school by providing a quiet TV free work space; helping students develop a realistic homework schedule; conveying a positive impression that children can do the job; offering help if required to complete the task; helping students divide a homework task into manageable steps; monitoring homework and conveying to their children that homework and its completion is valued.