

Rethinking Homework: Best practices that support diverse needs

Greater Edmonton Teachers Conference

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Homework trends

FROM

Every subject, every night, every book

No coordination between teachers

No consistency in % homework counts in grade

Harsh late policies

Zeros for missing assignments

All homework done at home

Vague or non-existent homework policies

TO

Designated nights, more *web work*

Calendars limiting number of tests, projects
Designated days for subject tests

Building-wide policy limiting % of grade or not counting homework in the grade

More lenient late policies

Zeros Aren't Possible programs

Time during the school day
After school Homework Support Programs

Homework policies regarding % in grade, amounts, late penalties, restricting weekend/holiday/summer homework

When we allow students to fail by not doing homework, we short-circuit our long-term goals

***What we want is to develop and refine intellectual skills—**

but when students don't do homework, they may not perfect math skills, may not read as well, or may lack depth of knowledge for future learning.

***What we want is to develop independent learners—**

but when students don't do homework, they may fail to develop independent strategies and may not experience the sense of efficacy that comes from completing work independently.

***What we want is to nurture within students an identity of a successful learner—**

but when students don't do homework they may have trouble keeping up in class, may receive failing grades, and may lose confidence in their ability to learn.

SIX STEPS TO EFFECTIVE HOMEWORK

Designing quality tasks
 Differentiating homework tasks
 Decriminalizing grading
 Moving from grading to checking--Focusing on feedback
 Using completion strategies
 Establishing support programs

MEANINGFUL HOMEWORK IS...

Purposes of homework in the learning process

- Practice
- Checking for understanding
- Processing
- Pre-learning

*Sometimes our tasks are what is easy to give and easy to grade,
not necessarily the best task for learning.*

Homework examples

- Write an op-ed piece defending a war, a theory, a method, a character, an author,
- Create a lesson plan to teach _____ to students in a lower grade.
- Draw a graphic summary of the chapter.
- Have practice problems lag a few days behind to make sure of understanding.
- Design your own method for learning multiplication tables that they then share with others—cards, writing, reading, drawing pictures, creating a song, rap, or poem
- Write a story or newspaper article showing you know the meaning of the 15 vocabulary words for the week.
- Two tiered homework—3 problems to check for understanding of today's lesson, 10 problems to practice what was learned last week.

Typical elementary/middle homework tasks**More meaningful tasks**

<p><i>Write the 10 spelling words 3 times</i></p>	<p><i>Create your own method to practice spelling words or choose one of these—you may write or type them 3 times, spell them out loud, use scrabble tiles to spell the words, trace them with your finger, or create a puzzle using the words</i></p> <p>Is it possible to connect the spellings to a spelling rule (such as "i before e except after c")?</p>
<p><i>Write definitions of the science vocabulary words.</i></p>	<p><i>Show you know the meaning of the science vocabulary words by using them in sentences or in a story.</i></p> <p><i>For each vocabulary word, read the three sentences below it. Choose the sentence that uses the word in the correct way.</i></p> <p>Can vocabulary an application task, <i>after</i> the lesson? For instance, one middle school teacher has students build and launch rockets. After they launched their rockets, they added the definitions of such words as force, speed, acceleration, and momentum to their notebooks. At that point, the definitions had meaning and could be connected to their experience</p>
<p><i>Create a diorama of life during the Reconstruction.</i></p>	<p><i>Write a diary entry as if you were living in the time, discussing daily life, race relations, and laws that affected them.</i></p>
<p><i>Build a model of the solar system.</i></p>	<p><i>Create a poster to show the planets' temperature extremes, periods of rotation in Earth time, and the importance of inertia and gravity to the motion of the planets.</i></p>
<p><i>Write multiplication tables three times</i></p>	<p><i>"What is the best way for you to practice your multiplication tables? Design your own method".</i></p> <p>Some students may learn better by reciting them, creating a table, or setting them to music. The fact that they must think about how they learn best makes the learning more relevant.</p>
<p><i>Practice reading—30 minutes a night</i></p> <p>(The Reading Log) <i>Each night write down the author, title, and number of pages read, how much time was spent and the date. Have your parent sign the log each night</i></p>	<p><i>Try to read an average of 30 minutes a night. Once a week, estimate about how much time you have spent reading. Write a short paragraph about what you have been reading.</i></p>

Typical middle/secondary homework tasks**More meaningful tasks**

<p><i>Write definitions of the science vocabulary words.</i></p>	<p>Make vocabulary an application task, <i>after</i> the lesson.</p> <p>For instance, one middle school teacher has students build and launch rockets. After they launched their rockets, they added the definitions of such words as force, acceleration, and momentum to their notebooks. At that point, the definitions had meaning and could be connected to their experience</p>
<p>For knowledge of steps in a process---</p> <p><i>Complete the worksheet on how a bill becomes a law</i></p>	<p>A YouTube video or game board format (on paper or poster) could be used to demonstrate knowledge of steps in a process, such as digestion, how a bill becomes a law, or steps in solving an algebra problem.</p>
<p><i>Write a report about the history of a European country of your choice. Include facts about government, economy, culture, and geography.</i></p>	<p><i>You may write a traditional research paper, create a PowerPoint presentation, or design a travel brochure that includes the required information.</i></p>
<p><i>Read Chapter Four</i> <i>Complete the worksheet</i></p>	<p><i>List the four most important ideas in Chapter Four.</i></p> <p><i>Keep a journal. After each chapter section, write a reaction to what you read.</i></p> <p><i>During your reading, place post-it notes on the parts of the reading that you had questions about or the parts that you found most interesting to discuss in class.</i></p>
<p><i>Read two chapters in the novel</i></p> <p><i>Find the following vocabulary words in the chapter and write their definitions.</i></p> <p><i>Identify these quotes by telling which character said them.</i> (The "Where's Waldo?" of novel reading.)</p>	<p><i>Which characters best typify the following virtues: honor, integrity, strength? What did they do that showed that virtue?</i></p> <p><i>Which characters best typify the following vices: greed, jealousy, arrogance? What did they do that showed that virtue?</i></p> <p><i>Which character do you most identify with and why?</i></p> <p><i>How does the story relate to life today?</i></p>

A teacher who changed her homework practice

(Molly Heckenberg is a 5th grade teacher at Westchester Elementary School in Kirkwood, Missouri)

Several years ago when I began teaching fifth grade, part of the daily homework my team assigned was for students to work on completing vocabulary packets. These consisted of workbook pages in which students had to match fifteen words to their definitions, answer multiple-choice questions, use the words in a sentence, etc. The words were randomly combined and did not directly connect to our content. It frustrated me to see my students correctly completing this homework, and even scoring well on weekly tests, yet not transferring this to their working academic vocabularies. The homework was manageable for them to complete, but was not actually supporting their vocabulary development.

Two years ago our school started having rich conversations around vocabulary. We learned about research-based instructional strategies, and began utilizing them in our classrooms. Through this I realized that the way I'd been using these vocabulary packets as homework was really missing the mark, which explained why I wasn't seeing lasting results in my students' learning. I stopped using the workbook pages for vocabulary, and began collaborating with my colleagues to create kid-friendly definitions for the most important words to understand in each subject area.

I began providing direct instruction on content specific vocabulary. Through this journey vocabulary homework became much more interactive and intentional. Nightly homework now includes having students generate their own nonlinguistic representations of the terms and creating analogies or metaphors. Instead of checking the homework and moving on to the next lesson, students now discuss their completed homework with a partner to revise and deepen their understanding of the vocabulary words. Students also periodically play games with vocabulary flashcards at home with parents or siblings. Through the meaningful modifications of assigned homework; I have seen consistent improvements in student retention and application of vocabulary content.

A teacher who changed his homework practice

(Jim Drier is a communication arts teacher at Mundelein High School outside of Chicago.)

Over the past several years I have dramatically reduced the amount of homework I assign. I don't even use the word homework. If I ask students to read outside of class I simply say *tonight's reading*, or if I ask students to write outside of class I call it *tonight's writing*. Since I rarely ask kids to *do homework* most of my outside class work involves an activity like a parent interview, watching a brief video on YouTube, looking up information or performing an activity.

It is interesting that since I quit homework, I don't cover substantially less in class. What I have discovered is that student attitudes about class and their readiness for class has improved. In one particular unit I used to assign a significant amount of outside reading, writing and research on a student selected topic. Now, the only outside activity I ask them to do is to discuss and reflect on their topic with a parent. The quality of student work improved. More importantly their curiosity remained high throughout the project, and creativity and critical thinking is much more innovative and reflective.

For another unit on *Of Mice and Men*, students read the book in class instead of for homework. Surprisingly, the class completed this unit in the same amount of time as another class that read the book outside of class. Because students read in class and were well prepared for discussions, I didn't feel a need to give reading quizzes and we used that time for alternate engaging activities like staging the trial of George, or a debate over George's decision.

Quality homework tasks

- have a clear academic purpose (not busy work)
- are customized to promote ownership (personal)
- instill a sense of competence (doable)
- are "aesthetically pleasing"(well-organized, easy to understand, pleasant)

"I never heard of a child not doing his work. It's our work he's not doing."

HOMework THAT CANNOT BE DONE WITHOUT HELP
IS NOT GOOD HOMEWORK!

The 10-minute rule

Maximum of 10 minutes per grade level per night (6th grade=60 minutes)

Suggested maximum total amounts of nightly homework
(recommended by the PTA and the NEA)

(recommended time to be spent on all subjects combined)

[the 10-minute rule is consistent with the research]

Ways to differentiate

- Difficulty
- Learning style/Interest
- Amount of structure/scaffolding
- Time(do what you can in 20 minutes)

Difficulty/amount of work

- Simpler reading or more concrete tasks
- Adapted reading packets (that come with the text)
- Optional challenge questions
- Time "Do what you can in 20 minutes, draw a line, work longer if you like".

Structure/scaffolding

- Create a graphic organizer vs. fill in a graphic organizer
- Amount of writing required/Word banks/answer banks

Learning style/Interest

- Create own method to study—outline, cards, pictures
- Method of showing learning(written, typed, verbal, pictures)

Do all students need homework?

by Cathy Vatterott

(on-line companion piece to Educational Leadership September 2010 article)

A parent once asked her daughter's teacher "If my daughter already knows how to do these math problems, why does she have to do 30 of them?" To which the teacher replied, "Well, if she already knows how to do them, she should breeze right through it."

The answer to the question "Do all students need homework?" depends on what one believes the purpose of homework is. If you believe the purpose is to reinforce learning or extend learning outside the classroom, then you probably believe that the child needs more challenging homework. If you believe the purpose of homework is to develop independent learners, then you probably believe the child should be able to create her own homework. If you believe the purpose of homework is to build the habit of doing homework, then you probably believe all children must have homework.

The idea that some children would not have homework makes many people very uncomfortable. Is it fair that they have less work than other students? But if you believe the purpose of homework is to help students master a set of standards for a grade level or course, and the student has done that, then you may quite comfortable with some students not doing homework.

In standards based systems, homework is often optional. If the student can pass the assessments, they have shown mastery—the homework is merely a tool for those who need it, much like in many college courses. If a student gets 100% on the 3rd grade spelling test, that student doesn't have spelling homework. And no, they don't have extra homework in other subjects.

Most of us could see the logic of allowing an Olympic athlete or a gifted musician to succeed academically without doing homework, because they are honing a unique talent. But if other students are allowed to skip unnecessary homework, they may spend more time reading, learning Spanish, or delving into their passion for history, science or art. And isn't that what educating the whole child is all about?

HOMWORK IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW FAMILY

Three Kinds of Parental Diversity

Parenting Styles

Beliefs about Academics

Level of Parental Involvement

Diversity in parenting styles

←Dictatorship-----Democratic-----Child in charge?→

"Why can't the parents just make their children do their homework?"

Diversity in beliefs about the place of academic work in life

All Academics/All The Time

"Homework is the job of childhood." (Corno and Xu, 2004).

Homework as the path to lifetime achievement.

Balancing academics and family-chosen activities

Feeding the high school resume for college.

Religious, cultural, or family traditions a priority.

Balancing academics, leisure, and happiness

"They just need time to play".

Non-custodial divorced parents--limited time.

Parents who work evenings or shift work—limited time.

The priority of family responsibilities and paid work

Families may need children to baby-sit younger siblings or cook meals.

Families who own businesses or farms use children as work force.

Families want children to build work record to prepare for future life in the workforce.

Diversity of parental involvement in homework

←"helicopter parent"-----uninvolved→

Uninvolved parents

"Parents should not be expected to morph into tutors by night"

"If it's supposed to help the child be responsible—why is it *my* job?"

"Helicopter parents"

May micromanage homework

May not let their child fail/May do homework for the child

HOMEWORK CARD FOR PARENTS

Child's name _____ Grade level _____

It would be helpful for your child's teacher to know how homework fits into your child's daily schedule. Please complete the homework card by writing down how your child typically spends their time in the weekday hours when they are not in school (ie: homework, sports practices, music lessons, visitation with non-custodial parents, dinner, sleep, play, tv, computer.)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
3:00-4:00 pm				
4:00-5:00 pm				
5:00-6:00 pm				
6:00-7:00 pm				
7:00-8:00 pm				
8:00-9:00 pm				
9:00-10:00 pm				
10:00-11:00 pm				

Overview of "What parents need to know about homework"

(complete parent handout available at www.homeworklady.com)

Why is it important for my child to do homework?

[develop skills, independent learners, identity as successful learner]

What are the purposes of homework?

[check for understanding, practice, preview, review for test or quiz]

What is good homework? *[clear academic purpose, not busy work, not overly tedious] Can be done without help*

How much homework should my child have? *[10-minute rule]*

How can I get my kids to do their homework?

- Explain to your child that It's not your job—
- Talk with your child about your expectations and why homework is important.
- Help your child with organization. *[13 steps to completing homework]*
- Empower your child to take ownership of the homework process
home study plan/negotiate where, when, and how.
- Rethink your child's schedule of outside activities.

How much should I help?

- Monitor, but don't hover or micromanage
- Ask to see/don't correct/send note to teacher if needed
- Jump in when frustration builds--before the "melt down" stage
- Praise the effort

How do I communicate with teachers about homework?

Parents need to be LESS INVOLVED with the homework task,
and MORE INVOLVED with communicating with the teacher.

Make an appointment to talk to the teacher if

- *homework is causing distress for your child
- *the amount of homework is crowding out sleep, play or family time
- *homework is causing your child to hate school
- *homework is causing your child to fail a subject or grade

DECriminalizing Grading and Late Policies Things to Think About

- ~Work ethic + behaviorism = using grades to reward virtue and punish vice
(often to the detriment of learning and motivation)
- ~Giving a zero for incomplete homework is not "holding them accountable".
Accountability is making them finish the work.
- ~We think we're teaching them responsibility, but are we teaching them math?
- ~What if grades reflected what students really learned,
not which work they chose or were able to complete?

U.S. teachers lead 50 countries in the grading of homework. Almost 70% of U.S. teachers use homework to calculate student grades, compared to 28% in Canada, and 14% in Japan. (Baker and LeTendre, 2005)

LATE POLICIES AND GRADING Is the climate one of learning or compliance?

In school, deadlines are necessary for

- A. timely feedback to the teacher about student understanding**
(for formative, time-sensitive tasks)
- B. efficiency for the teacher in the grading process**
(for large summative projects)

~"We are faced with the irony that a policy that may be grounded in the belief of holding students accountable (giving zeros) actually allows some student to escape accountability for learning" (O'Connor, 2007, p. 86)

If you feel you must grade homework:

- *First, do no harm—don't kill motivation or course grade by being too punitive
- *Preferably, don't grade at all, but require completion so you can assess learning.
- *Give credit for completion only, not correctness or accuracy
- *Count homework 10% of the grade or less
- **Allow redo's or give "incomplete" grades
- *Have a Zeros Aren't Possible policy—all work must be completed.
- *Separate grades for completion and work habits.

If you feel you must "count late" in the grade, strive for the middle of the road—

- too strict—kills incentive to complete work
- too lenient—gets turned in after it matters or crazy for the teacher

Laura Eberle, 9th grade science teacher--Homework Grading Policy

<i>Full stamp=10 pts</i>	Completed and turned in on time, full credit
<i>Half stamp=5 points</i>	Turned in on time, but incomplete (Complete it before the day of the test and you earn 7 pts) <i>No stamp=0 points</i>
Was not turned in on time	Complete it before the day of the test and you earn 5 pts

(This connects the purpose of the homework to the assessments)

If LATE counts too heavily in the grade—the grade no longer reflects the student's knowledge or mastery of the material

If homework counts 20% of the total grade---1000 points possible

Student	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%hw	10%hw	Final points	Final grade
Katie	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	0	0	760	76 C
Rachel	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	50	50	820	82B
Ben	85	85	85	85	85	85	85	85	85	0	0	680	68D

If homework counts 10% of the total grade---1000 points possible

Student	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%hw	Final points	Final grade
Katie	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	0	855	85B
Rachel	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	50	860	86B
Ben	85	85	85	85	85	85	85	85	85	0	765	76C

If homework counts 25%, a student with a 90% average and 0 points for homework would earn a 68% D for the marking period!

Homework reveals broader problems
"Not doing homework is a symptom, not the problem"
(Darnell, 2010)

Maybe we're looking in the wrong place (can't see the forest)

- disengagement
- lack of skills
- K-12 attendance

Students are at high risk of dropping out—if by the end of the 9th grade—they are credit deficient, are over age, or have not passed Algebra I. (Canady, 2010).

"Gradual disengagement"

Missing as little as 10% of school days (about 2 days a month) even in elementary school, sharply increases a student's risk of failing and dropping out. (Sparks, 2010)

HOMEWORK COMPLETION STRATEGIES
Diagnosing why the homework is not getting done

- Academic—*work is too hard or too lengthy for the student's working speed*
- Organizational—*getting it home, getting it done, getting it back*
- Motivational—*burnout, overload, too much failure, frustration with tasks*
- Situational—*unable to work at home, too many other activities, no materials available at home for the assignment*
- Personal—*depression, anxiety, family problems, etc.*

Completion Strategies (Put a check by the ones you could try)

- _____ Make homework for feedback only.
- _____ Explain to students the learning purpose of each homework assignment.
- _____ Provide a copy of the textbook for students to keep at home.
- _____ Have a written copy of the assignment for some students.
- _____ Assign students "homework buddies" to work together or call for help.
- _____ Set a maximum amount of time the student should work on each assignment.
- _____ Prioritize assignments for students who do not complete all homework.
- _____ Give students more than one day to complete assignments.
- _____ Give all assignments for the next week on Friday, due next Friday.
- _____ Give intermittent due dates for parts of long term projects.
- _____ Allow parents or students to call the teacher at home when necessary.
- _____ Give parents guidance on how to help with homework and how much to help

Student Feedback Checklist (*attach to homework*)

Dear student:

I estimate you can complete this assignment in _____minutes.

It is not necessary for you to work longer than_____minutes on this assignment, even if you do not finish it. You will not be penalized.

How much time did you spend on this assignment?_____

If you did not finish the assignment, please check the reason or reasons why below:

____I could no longer focus on the task

____I was too tired

____I did not understand the assignment

____I did not have the necessary materials to complete the assignment

____I did not have enough time due to other outside activities

____other reason (please explain) _____

student or parent signature

13 Steps to Completing Homework

For student self-diagnosis/Which links are weak or broken?

The Homework Chain (Taylor,2007)

- [] (1) Realize an assignment is being given
- [] (2) Understand the assignment
- [] (3) Record the assignment accurately
- [] (4) Understand how to perform the assignment correctly
- [] (5) Check to bring correct books home
- [] (6) Arrive home with materials and the homework assignment
- [] (7) Begin the homework time
- [] (8) Complete all homework
- [] (9) Check that it is complete,accurate,and neat
- [] (10) Set completed homework in a special place
- [] (11) Take completed homework to school
- [] (12) Arrive at class with completed homework
- [] (13) Turn completed homework in on time

ESTABLISHING HOMEWORK SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Options for finding time in the school day

- *ZAP(Zeros aren't possible) after-school homework assistance program
- Advisory time used as teacher or peer assistance
- **Homework Assistance Program* one period a day for homework and reteaching
- In-school suspension also houses homework support program
- Monthly late start days
- Shorten classes once a week to provide catch-up time
- Extending school day—extra period at end of day for all for supervised homework

*Using lunch or recess time denies kids a much needed break—
no matter how you spin it, it feels like a punishment.*

Curricular and scheduling options

- Academic coach (full time position) pulls recommended student out of one elective course for quarter/semester for extra help with homework, organizational skills.
- Academic lab period/study hall/independent learning for credit
- Independent Study/Alternative Strategies—elective courses
- Mandatory "Math help" or "Credit recovery" course is place of an elective
- **Student Teacher Access Time (STAT)*—30 minutes added to lunch
- Middle school--Pull out of one exploratory wheel, short term or for quarter/semester to catch up and learn homework management skills
- "Friday Fix-it" (Boaz Middle School)—students with unfinished homework get pulled out of PE or computers to complete work.
- Elementary school—once a week "Bonus PE" period for students not missing homework/time with teacher for students needing homework time
- Limit the number of AP classes students may take

Typical ZAP (Zeros Aren't Possible/Zeros Aren't Productive) programs

Held Monday through Thursday for 1 to 2 hours
Kick in when students are missing 3 assignments
Both mandatory and voluntary
Often provide snacks
Transportation home usually provided
Can be funded by 21st Century or other grants

***Homework Assistance Program (HAP)** Monticello Middle School, Shawnee Kansas

Fifth period every day for homework completion. Teachers list homework on a webpage. HAP teachers keep a record of completed as well as missing assignments. Teacher use HAP time to reteach students who score less than 80% on common assessments.

***STAT** Prairie High School, Vancouver, Washington

Thirty minute period following lunch for academic help, library, or clubs. Based on 6-week progress reports, students must report to teachers twice weekly for classes they are failing. Teachers may also "Summon" students they feel are struggling. Students with no F's from the previous 6-week progress report go to clubs or have an extended lunch. Juniors and seniors with no F's may leave campus for lunch.

Baby steps to homework reform

- Limit the percentage of grade that homework may count
- Limit number of subjects each night
 - specify certain nights for certain subjects or class periods
- Limit the weight of the backpack
 - no more than one or two books go home each night
 - extra copy of book at home for frequently used books
- Revise late policies
- Set weekly or nightly time limits
- Prioritize subjects
- Coordinate homework with a calendar limiting the number of tests or projects at a given time
- Limit the number of AP/challenge classes that students may take in one semester.
- Prohibit weekend or holiday homework

HOMEWORK POLICIES

In the past, homework policies have been vague and general (or non-existent).

- Increasingly, homework policies are being created in concert with school wide assessment policies.
- Those policies tend toward standards based practices—where homework is considered to be formative assessment.
- *Comprehensive* homework policies should address the following:
 - purpose of homework
 - quality and non-quality assignments
 - limits on the amount of homework
 - how homework should be graded (or not graded)
 - percentage homework should be counted in the grade
 - procedures for late work
 - guidelines for parental involvement
 - restrictions on weekend, holiday, and summer homework

Best example: Calgary Catholic School District draft homework regulation
contact Bryan Szumlas at Bryan.Szumlas@cssd.ab.ca

REFERENCES to read

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Best book for parents of overworked kids

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(awesome website www.stophomework.com with news articles, forums, etc.)

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www.racetonowhere.com

"Race to Nowhere" is a new documentary being shown in the U.S. about how some middle school and high school students are overly stressed by too much homework, overscheduling, and extreme expectations for getting into college.

About the presenter

Dr. Cathy Vatterott is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, as well as a parent and a former teacher and principal. She is the author of three books—*Academic Success through Empowering Students* (National Middle School Association, 1999), *Becoming a Middle Level Teacher: Student-focused Teaching of Early Adolescents* (McGraw Hill, 2007), and *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices that Support Diverse Needs* (ASCD, 2009). She has presented her homework research to over 9000 educators and parents in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. She has been interviewed as a homework expert for radio and television, for articles appearing in such magazines as *Parents*, *Better Homes and Garden*, *Child*, and *Working Mother*, and for articles appearing in numerous U.S. newspapers and educational websites.