

Learning Beyond School: A Parents' Guide to homework in the Junior School, ISU

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." - Alvin Toffler.

At ISU we understand that in order for young people to be successful in life, our focus must be on the skills, understanding and competencies that will be valuable for life and not just for the next rung of the educational ladder. In this short guide we explain the why, how and what we value when it comes to learning beyond school.

Why We Value Learning Beyond School

Learning is Continuous & Consistent

We believe that learning does not start and end with the school day. Learning is a continuous process that human beings are engaged in from before birth and throughout their entire life. Deborah Meier reminds us that, "A passion for learning isn't something you have to inspire; it's something you have to keep from extinguishing" (1994). And young people are learning all the time. They are learning when they are playing: role construction, game design, rule making or breaking, imagining, building, creating, designing and modelling. They watch our actions, whether good or bad, and build concepts of right and wrong from those around them.

Our homes therefore, as much as our schools, are places that can nourish and cultivate learning, through their design of spaces and opportunities for learning. The dinner table can be a place to learn language through speaking and listening, thinking through questions and elaborations, and for learning cultural and social cues. The kitchen can be a place to discover number, space, measures and shapes. It is a laboratory of senses, smells, sounds, tastes, feelings and sights, where chemicals and compounds are fused through mixing, heating and cooling. The sitting room is a place for telling stories, imagining the unimaginable and learning to empathise with characters and creatures shared in story books. We believe that home and school are both places for rich learning. Through intentional design and thoughtful consideration we can create a culture and environment for learning to flourish.

How We Value Learning Beyond School

Homework: A Value from the Past

Learning beyond the school day has traditionally been housed in the form of homework sheets, homework journals and assignments. A common refrain for many of us during our schooling years, would have been "What homework do you have?" Homework has often been seen as a marker of high standards and discipline. As with many aspects of school systems, homework appears to be a requirement that has remained because it's how schools have always been. At ISU we believe that a more thoughtful approach is needed if we are to prepare our students for living in the 21st century.

Curiously, educational research does not hold fast to these claims of higher standards, especially in the younger years, and homework has limited value in the older years. In fact, it appears that homework could actually extinguish that passion for learning with apparently little or no gain in academic success and achievement. Alfie Kohn (2006), has written extensively about what he describes as the "Myth of Homework" and how the research in support of homework is lacking, with little causal relationship between homework and academic achievement. Kohn goes on to unpack the negative impact of homework on family relationships, wellbeing and the motivation and happiness of young people, as well as limiting growth in other areas such as curiosity, creativity, critical thinking and social skills.

The research unpacking the value of homework is weak at best, and harmful at worst. However, we do know that regular reading has a significant impact on academic achievement and success. Numerous studies, such as Durkin (1966), Bus van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995), and Neuman and Celano (2006), have shown that reading regularly at home (either being read-to, or reading to a parent) has significant impact on academic achievement in a number of areas including cognition, vocabulary, language development, writing skills and comprehension.

Learning at Home: Igniting a Passion for Learning

Ultimately, we want our young people to enjoy and be excited about learning that is not dictated by the requirements of a given assignment or homework entry. We want children to come home from school eager to continue learning and test out their theories, to share at the dinner table or to race to the sofa to unpack their new library book. We know that when children follow their passions for learning, their motivation can take them to new levels of learning. We also know that having time to play has a significant impact on children's well-being, imagination, creativity and social skills. We believe that when children come home from school, the opportunities to learn are laid out in the family evening routines. So, we shall share some ways that you can create space for learning beyond school in your home and family.

What Learning Beyond School Looks Like

Read, Talk and Share

Reading, speaking and listening are all essential components of language development in the younger years. The beauty of these is that they can all take place in the comfort of our evening activities without feeling burdensome. Reading daily is an important part of literacy development. This can be either reading to your child or your child reading to you. It should be done in an atmosphere of comfort and enjoyment. Find a comfortable place to sit and read together. Reading together is a great opportunity to build relationships and strengthen bonds between parents and children. To support this, we will regularly send home physical books from school that you can enjoy, in the form of library books that have high interest and/or 'just right' levelled reading books.

Speaking and listening is an activity that is part of your evening routine, but we can be intentional about how we have conversations. The dinner table is a great place to share stories from the day: the highs and lows, the successes and challenges, and the things that you appreciated and made you smile. It's an opportunity for children to learn to take turns to listen, to ask and answer questions, and to build vocabulary and knowledge about the world. To support this, we will update Seesaw once a week so that you can take time as a family to have conversations around some of the learning engagements that they have had at school that week. Also, we will send home a monthly Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) prompt that is designed to engage you in some collective thinking and inquiry as a family.

Puzzle, Play, Relax

Puzzles and games are great ways to build numerical fluency and number sense. Most mathematicians attest to the fact that their number sense and flexibility came, not from hours of times table practice or number drills, but through puzzles, card games and board games. There are a great range of number sense games and activities that can be part of your evening routine and that support a variety of mathematical skills including recall of facts, persisting through errors and challenge, logical and strategic thinking. These activities should not be a chore but enjoyed.

Play that is not governed by rules should also be encouraged and supported. Children need time to play without structures and adult intervention, where they can develop their own rules, systems, creativity and imagination. Play is learning, developing a wide range of skills and dispositions including social skills, problem solving and conflict resolution. While spending time on a screen or an electronic device may include elements of play, we suggest that this is strictly limited.

We do encourage the evening to be a time to: relax and rest; to take a break from the busy day and to let the mind wander and create; to enjoy time in the garden; to watch a bird building a nest or discover how millipedes curl into a spiral for safety. Spending time relaxing in nature and quiet spaces is important for rejuvenation, essential for the health and functionality of the brain. The school day at ISU is an extremely long one and children are tired by the time they get home.

Follow and Support Passions and Interests

We are firmly committed to supporting children's passions and interests and so we encourage you to support children's passions by creating space, finding resources and providing access to expertise. This might be as simple as gathering a sketchbook and colours for drawing, purchasing a ukulele, hiring a tutor, joining the local sports academy, or borrowing magazines from the ISU library. Getting involved in your child's passions builds relationships and happy memories, and is a great way to appreciate and honour your child. You never know, your child's passion may just start to rub off on you!