



## “Ask Renatta”

September 2007

“Ask Renatta” is an occasional feature of the Office of Child Care, answering real questions about early childhood, child development and education. We invite parents and primary caregivers who are employees of the County of Los Angeles and the general public to pose your questions to “Ask Renatta”. Your question with answer will be answered individually and posted on our Web site to share with others. If you would like to ask a question about your child, click on [rcooper@ceo.lacounty.gov](mailto:rcooper@ceo.lacounty.gov), enter “Ask Renatta” in the Subject line, and ask your question.

### ***This issue:***

- Is my granddaughter receiving enough homework?
- How do we handle unwelcome advice about our twin sons?

Dear Renatta,

My granddaughter, Lena, has just started second grade at a new school. I cannot help but notice that she does not have much homework at this new school. She has one or two worksheets to do. Last year she received a packet every night. I am concerned that this is an indication that her new school is not as rigorous as her old school. Its test scores are not as good. What should I do?

A Concerned Grandmother

Dear Grandmother,

You are asking several questions in your letter, I will attempt to address them all. What does homework mean? How important is it? How do you know if your child or grandchild is at a good school?

To educators, homework has come to mean different things at different times in our history. Once it was what happened with class work that was not completed during school hours. Homework has been a way for parents to have their children review what they have been doing in class, as a form of reinforcement, a connection between home and school.

We have had eras of mandatory homework, when school districts established district wide policies on how much homework each child in a given grade level would receive each night. In No Child Left Behind, 30 minutes of parental instruction became part of national educational policy and elevated homework to a new level. Parental instruction meant that homework was no longer for review, and parents could be expected to teach their children material that they had not yet mastered. This was news to many parents who were not familiar with the legislation, and found themselves bombarded, especially if there was more than one child in the family.



Other parents found the amount of homework their children were expected to complete intrusive, an interruption of their family time. It sounds like you are in the camp that equates homework with quality instruction. I personally believe homework is good for reviewing some subjects; spelling, math facts, and a means of engaging parents in their children's creative writing. I am not big on packets of worksheets, especially if the teacher does not review them to make sure that the child has mastered the content, which is often the case. In so many classrooms parent volunteers review the packet at the end of the week to make sure the student has turned it in, but let's get back to your granddaughter.

If you want to ensure that she is doing some meaningful homework each evening, have her read for a half hour, in addition to whatever has been assigned. Becoming a strong reader is the most important academic skill you can give her. Encourage her to read material that is challenging, a balance between materials that is "easy" followed by something that is a bit more difficult. All the best schools, public and private require nightly reading by their students.

So how do you know if your granddaughter is at a good school? These days many parents rely on API or Academic Performance Index scores. API is an improvement model based on the comparison of annual scores. Each school has an annual target, and the educational growths of the groups of children (subgroups) determine the score. The desired score is to achieve or exceed that target score. The range is from 200 (far below basic), 500 (below basic), and 700 (basic), 875 (Proficient), and 1000 (Advanced). I would not suggest your family make a school decision solely on test scores; however you are right to consider them. Most important is the degree to which a school is achieving its goals and moving up on the API Index. For more information on API scores, go to <http://www.cde.ca.gov/api/>.

I would also suggest you inquire about how students like your granddaughter are doing academically and socially at the school. Does it offer music and art programs? Is there an after school program if your family needs that kind of support? What's the feeling of the school? Do the children seem happy and engaged in what they are doing? Is the principal around? Does she seem to know the children? Does the communication between the principal and the teachers seem authentic or "for show"? What do the classrooms look like? Is there a lot of up to date student work displayed? Are there computers that are being used in meaningful ways? Can you tell what today's lessons are by reading the boards and materials posted in the room? Do you feel welcome? Do you like the manner in which the teacher interacts with the children? Most importantly does your child (grandchild) seem to be thriving in the environment? Answers to these questions tells you something about the over all atmosphere of the school.

I hope this response gives you a broader perspective on the homework issue.

Renatta



Dear Renatta,

I have twin boys fraternal (non identical), who are 6 months old. Josh is a bit larger than his brother, Jake, and I think they are pretty good natured. My husband and I really enjoy them. I am writing because I am constantly asked, "which is the good twin and which is the bad one?" Is this inevitable that one will be more agreeable, and easier to manage than the other?

### Parent of Twin Boys

Congratulations on your boys! I am so happy that you are enjoying them and dismayed at the "advice" you have been receiving. I find that babies are magnets for information and inquiries, most of it unsolicited. It is important for parents to have a circle of advisors that they feel comfortable and confident with; your pediatrician and nurse practitioner will certainly be part of this circle. You may also include other parents, grandparents, neighbors, people who respect your goals and wishes as parents. They should also be people that have raised their own children and you have seen and approve of the outcome. They should also be people that you can count on to be honest with you. Parenting is hard work,. Infant guru Magda Gerber used to say " Parenting is the most impossible of professions. Armed only with knowledge of the past, you must prepare a child for the future." There may be friends and relatives you see frequently who are not part of your parenting "inner circle". You do not need to disclose this to them. When they give you advice graciously accept it, politely ignore it, and go about your own way. No need to get into a philosophical argument. If they give you advice that sounds like it might be workable, run it by one of your trusted advisors. Remember a broken clock is right twice a day!

It is up to you and your husband the kind of relationships you have with your children, and to a large degree the kind of personalities they grow into. It is absolutely not predestined that you will have one "good" twin and one "bad" one. If you begin to treat, and respond to them as if one is a good twin and the other is bad, then that will be your outcome. Be equally responsive to both children; take turns when it comes to making one wait while you see to the other. Avoid nicknames that have negative connotations, and insist that others do the same.

It is very important that both you and your husband feel good about your children and your developing skills as parents

Renatta.