

Are You Considering Homeschooling?

Homeschooling isn't new; most of this country's founding fathers were, in effect, homeschooled. But in recent years interest has been growing, and many people, who never thought they would even consider it, are finding themselves more and more intrigued by the idea.

What is it that is attracting so many families to homeschooling?

As a homeschooling parent who has talked to hundreds of other homeschoolers, I know that there is no simple answer to that question. There are many, many reasons why we homeschooling families make the decision to keep our children out of conventional schools, either public or private, and take direct responsibility for our own children's education.

Many people choose homeschooling for:

- values-based or religious reasons
- academic and learning reasons
- social issues
- health issues
- safety concerns
- flexibility of family schedules or lifestyles

The overriding reason, however, is that homeschooling offers freedom along with that responsibility -- freedom to make our own decisions regarding how we wish our children to live and learn. Whatever initially leads parents to make this choice, homeschooling nearly always evolves into something far more than an alternative educational choice -- it becomes a lifestyle choice of personal responsibility and freedom and incredible joy within a close family life.

Values-Based Reasons

Homeschooling allows children to be consistently guided in a family's values. Religious and family special days can be planned and celebrated together, and our children learn from seeing and participating in their parents' daily lives. For some families, religion is a critical reason to choose homeschooling, and many use a specifically religious curriculum. This was not our family's primary reason, but the chance to discuss values in the context of what the children are learning is a wonderful bonus. Volunteer service activities can easily be incorporated into a homeschooling family's regular schedule; community service of all kinds is of tremendous importance in a child's overall development, as well as being a significant learning experience.

Educational Reasons

Most homeschoolers probably begin homeschooling because of the educational benefits that they anticipate. There are many, but the most important is that each child's education can be tailored to fit that particular child. No one-size-fits-all curriculum or methods need be used. Children with varying learning abilities can move at a pace appropriate to their developmental levels and interests. In the classroom, it is especially difficult to accommodate children who are learning more slowly or more quickly than average, and all children are slower and/or quicker than average in different subjects.

There are children who learn more quickly than their classes can allow; at home, they can move through material at their own fast pace, allowing time for learning material not offered at school, or time for more in-depth study of subjects of interest. If a child needs more time to fully comprehend something, they can take it. They won't be pushed on, ready or not, to keep up with the class; they can even drop a subject and come back to it when they are ready.

Learning at appropriate levels can be more satisfying and challenging to the specific child, less like busywork. And, learning can be more efficient because the children use methods most suitable for their own learning styles.

One of our primary reasons for homeschooling was to give our children the gift of long, uninterrupted blocks of time to write, read, think or work on a activity. Creativity and serious in-depth study are discouraged in a classroom where there is a lot of noise, a schedule designed for keeping every child busy, and continuous distractions and interruptions. We also wanted our children to have more time for pursuing special interests, such as art and music.

A major goal of many homeschoolers is that their children feel more responsible for their own education. Rather than being passive recipients of subject matter selected by their teachers (actually administrators or government committees), we wanted them to have input into designing their own education and eventually take over full responsibility.

We also wanted our children to realize that learning can take place in a large variety of ways and that they can seek out assistance when needed from many alternative sources, not just rely on a classroom teacher to provide all the methods, materials, and answers. We hoped that our children would not be as tempted to take the easy way out by doing just enough to satisfy their teacher, that they would be the judge of the quality of their own work and would work and learn for internal self-satisfaction, more than for external reward. We felt that the heavy reliance on reward and punishment systems by schools would undermine this goal. And we

hoped that our children would be more willing to take risks and be creative, since they do not have to worry about being embarrassed in front of peers or being criticized by their teacher.

Most important, we wanted our children's love of learning to be supported, and their enthusiasm and excitement about education to be maintained. We felt these goals would be undermined in conventional school.

Social Issues

The question most often asked of homeschoolers is, "But what about socialization?" The resounding response from homeschoolers is that our children are not isolated, but are busy, active participants in community life. They participate in scouts and sports, theater and music, and they have many friends with whom to maintain very active social lives. They have more time and more flexible schedules than children in school. My own children, for example, are members of a Shakespeare theater company, which often involves late-night rehearsals which would be impossible for them to attend if they had to get up in the morning for school.

In school, children associate almost entirely with other children who are nearly the same age. They have few adults with whom to interact, and those interactions are limited, since there are many other children who must also be accommodated. Socialization at school often consists of large numbers of children with very little supervision, much less adult help in learning how to get along with other people. At lunch and recess, for example, playgrounds often have hundreds of children being supervised by one or two playground aides.

Homeschooled children interact with other people of all ages, younger and older. They learn to get along with diverse people, to solve conflicts, to work and cooperate by being out in the community in "real life." They do this with the nurturing guidance and support of their parents and other adults.

Many homeschoolers belong to homeschooling support groups. These are as varied as homeschoolers themselves, but they all offer opportunities for children to work, learn, and play together. Anyone dropping in on a homeschooling group day at the park, for example, would find children of all ages interacting, maybe playing a game of soccer, building a model, practicing a play or song, drawing pictures, playing musical instruments, writing poems, listening to a story, planning a trip, or just climbing a tree. Bigger kids would be helping littler kids. Adults would be conversing with children.

Homeschoolers have many responses to the question of socialization and we recognize it is of primary concern to others. Ironically, one of the reasons many of us have chosen to educate our own is precisely this very issue of socialization! Children spending time with individuals of all ages more closely resembles real life than does a same-age school setting.

Health Issues

Some children begin homeschooling because health problems force them to miss school for an extended period of time. School districts usually provide home-study teachers, who spend a few hours a week helping the child "keep up." These arrangements are not what most of us mean by homeschooling, where the parent takes primary responsibility for the child's education. But they do sometimes lead to permanent homeschooling, as a parent realizes its benefits.

Other health issues may be important to homeschooling parents. For example, our children spend a lot more time outdoors (even reading, writing, or studying) which is more healthy physically and mentally than spending most of their weekdays indoors in a crowded and often overheated classroom. These days, many children come to school sick, and illnesses passed from child to child in the classroom are very common, as are head lice. We certainly can't avoid all illnesses by homeschooling, but many parents who have taken their children out of school say that the frequency of things like colds and ear infections decreases tremendously. Most homeschooling families are able to enjoy less hectic, more relaxed, lifestyles -- often because they stop trying to supplement school during after-school and weekend hours, and because there is no time-consuming homework. Reducing the stress level of family members may also contribute to better overall health.

Safety Concerns

Many people first become interested in homeschooling because they are concerned for their children's physical safety at school. Sometimes this is because of fear generated by events such as school shootings, and sometimes because their own child is being bullied or mistreated and the parents are unsatisfied with official school responses.

Family Schedules or Lifestyles

Some families choose to homeschool because it fits better with their particular circumstances. For example, their work might involve constant travel or frequent moves. Others have children involved in the entertainment industry or other activities that interfere with standard school schedules.

Like so many others, we homeschool because we caught a vision of what learning and living without schooling could be like, decided to take the risk, and found out for ourselves that we loved it. Having begun this journey, we've never looked back. The benefits are apparent to us as we look upon our children, and we experience great joy seeing the love of learning and life so vibrant and alive in them.

By Pam Sorooshian