

Homeschooling Resources by Lillian Jones

Searching for homeschooling resources seems like such a natural way to start out, but the question of what resources to choose and where to find them is usually asked prematurely. We often skip right over the important matter of thinking about what "education" means to our us and how "homeschooling" can be tailored to fit that ideal.

We unconsciously assume that a standard body of educational wisdom was established many generations ago, and that the school systems have been tending that body of wisdom for us ever since. We see that the schools have problems, and we sense there's a better way to go about what they're trying to accomplish, but we don't necessarily question what it is they're trying to accomplish. We want to know what's supposed to be taught, when it's supposed to be taught, and what materials and methods we're supposed to use to teach it. Sometimes we glow with enthusiasm that we'll be able to teach it better and more creatively than the way it's being done in schools, and yet we unquestioningly hold the same basic framework in mind. It's hard to realize in the beginning that learning outside an institutional setting is a very different (but very natural) experience.

It's not uncommon for people to inadvertently spend a lot of money at first on materials and programs that don't get used or are used with resistance and exasperation on the part of the children having to use them. This can lead to a rocky start with all-around frustration, impatience, and insecurity. With that in mind, it's wise to take time to relax and explore the new territory together with as few assumptions and expectations as possible.

As we observe our children, we find that a lot of what we thought we'd have to teach is commonly and spontaneously learned simply in the course of pursuing interests or participating in day to day activities. We find that children all have different rhythms, with times of intense pursuit of new skills or knowledge, as well as times of becoming more quiet and internal, and times when they feel more driven to "just play" for hours on end. When they're in school, those cycles are not as obvious, because they need to keep marching to someone else's drum. We also find that they all have their own learning styles, some learning best with music, or with movement, or through seeing or hearing or hands-on experience (it takes time and sensitivity to observe them and accommodate their individual styles.) When they're home, we can give them the space and time to fall into their more natural rhythms and to find unique paths into some pretty interesting and amazing new discoveries and growth. We can even begin to see that "just play" can actually be nature's curriculum for growing children that their play is their work.

As we continue our homeschool journey, it becomes more and more obvious that there isn't necessarily a separate set of stuff we need to think of as "homeschooling resources" or "educational" materials. We often find we can no longer limit our understanding of learning by labeling specific things as educational curriculum. Seeing birds starting their day as we watch the clouds move across the morning sky; learning about history while reading captivating books; observing the workings of the world in field trips to businesses, factories and museums; adjusting measurements in cooking and sewing, carpentry or painting; making calculations and estimating profits while running a small business; learning how to use a computer; pursuing one's interests with research on the internet; learning how to write and spell from corresponding in email with friends; developing one's athletic or artistic skills (all these real life experiences, and many more, can become powerful elements in a total learning environment. Learning happens all around us at the most unexpected times, and as we see our children drawn to new interests, we often see them learn in ways that amaze us. Many times the best educational technique might be to resist teaching altogether, and stand back to let them learn in their own way. That kind of learning tends to go deeper and be owned by the learner in a special way.

It's asking too much to expect children to find all the wonderful things in life on their own (a rich learning and growing environment includes lots of books of all kinds, access to the arts and music, lots of time for creative play, plenty of new experiences, and a variety of people. However, a rich environment doesn't necessarily mean buying a lot of things labeled educational or homeschool curriculum. There's a wealth of learning materials in the average home, in the average library (even along the street between the home and library!)

Homeschooling resources are all around (in our cupboards, closets, yards, neighborhoods, community) everywhere! Specific learning materials are abundant at homeschool conferences and in beautiful magazines and catalogs. These things can add texture and color to our learning experiences, and we do find that we need some specialized materials along the way. It's fun to browse through packaged learning materials, but it's most satisfying to buy each one if and when we see a specific need for it or because it's fun or fascinating in it's own right. Even we adults buy specialized books on things like sewing techniques, household repair, computer operation and so forth, but starting off "homeschooling" with a pre-determined set of purchases toward a particular set of studies can present some pretty expensive surprises about how learning really works and/or doesn't work. What our children can and will teach us about learning is as much of an education for us as the one we're providing for them. Enjoy!