
Socialization and the Homeschooled Student



A common definition of socialization is the ability to adapt to the needs of any given group, to follow the rules of society, and live harmoniously in the particular society in which we live. Because children schooled at home have the opportunity to interact with a greater representation of the society on a daily basis, they are generally more likely to be socialized to a greater variety of social situations. Brian Ray of the national Home Education Research Institute reports that the typical homeschooled child is involved in 5.2 social activities outside the home each week. These activities include afternoon and weekend programs with conventionally schooled kids, such as ballet classes, Little League teams, scout troops, church groups, and neighborhood play. They also include midday field trips and cooperative learning programs organized by groups of home schooling families (1999).

They interact with their family for long periods of time during the day, and are generally with a family member during these social activities. It is within the family and with parental input and guidance that much of true socialization and modeling of socially acceptable behavior occurs. In my clinical practice with homeschooling families, I have rarely encountered a family where the children were not actively involved in a variety of social activities. Families have many options for activities that suit both the child's interest and temperament as well as what works best for their particular family.

Homeschooled students have the opportunity to engage in activities with a wide age and ability range. They are not segregated with age mates in a setting that is quite different from any other environment they will encounter in life. There is no conclusive research suggesting that time with same-aged peers is preferable to time with individuals of varying ages. Limited testing of a self-selected group of homeschooled children suggests above average social and psychological development. Pat Lines, a homeschooling researcher, notes that "At the very least, anyone who has observed homeschoolers will notice a high level of sharing, networking, collaboration, and cooperative learning"(Dobson, ed., 1998, p.96). I agree with Pat Lines. What I most often hear from new homeschooling families who have had a chance to observe veteran homeschooled children is how impressed they are with the level of cooperative play and learning, the way older children look after and include younger children, and the ease with which children mix with

varied age groups. This fluidity of social interaction allows children to play and learn in a group that matches his or her developmental level, while at the same time fosters a learning environment that truly supports healthy social interaction. Barbara Bliss in her research project, "Home Education: A Look at Current Practices" (1989) contends "that it is in the formal educational system's setting that children first experience negative socialization, conformity, and peer pressure". According to Bliss "This is a setting of large groups, segmented by age, with a variation of authority figures the individual, with his/her developmental needs becomes overpowered by the expectations and demand of others-equal in age and equally developmentally needy" (1989). Studies have shown that children learn to socialize in a positive way by spending time with people who love them and have a compelling interest in helping them learn to be a part of society. They learn this art of being social by being with people of all ages and by following the models of the adults around them in a healthy way. They learn by being with friends, siblings, shopkeepers and neighbors, learning what does and what doesn't work. It has become "common knowledge" that children learn to socialize by only being with children of their own age in a highly structured, institutional setting, with punishment and shame as the motivating force for behavior. The truth is, children want desperately to belong to the world of adults, to become competent, contributing members of society. This happens when a child is allowed to be part of the world, not apart from it.

In a study conducted by Lee Stough (1992) comparison was made of 30 homeschooling families and 32 conventionally schooling families with children 7-14 years of age. According to the findings, children who were schooled at home "gained the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to function in society at a rate similar to that of conventionally schooled children" (Stough, 1992). The researcher found no difference in the self-concept of children in the two groups. Stough maintains:

insofar as self concept is a reflector of socialization, it would appear that few home-schooled children are socially deprived, and that there may be sufficient evidence to indicate that some home-schooled children have a higher self concept than conventionally schooled children (1992).

This echoes the findings of John Wesley Taylor of Andrews University (1987). Using one of the best validated self-concept scales available, Taylor's random sampling of homeschooled children (45,000) found that half of these children scored at or about the 91st percentile-47% higher than the average, than conventionally schooled children. He concludes,

"Since self concept is considered to be a basic dynamic of positive sociability, this answers the often heard skepticism suggesting that homeschoolers are inferior in socialization" (Taylor, 1987). In another study Dr. Delahooke (1986) of the California School of Professional Psychology, using a standard personality measure, compared two groups of children: a homeschool group and a matched private school group. Dr. Delahooke determined that "the private school subjects appeared to be more influenced by or concerned with peers than the home educated group" (Williams). These studies help to dispel the concerns expressed by teachers, administrators, and legislators about socialization and homeschooling. "The results suggest that home schooling improves a child's self-concept and helps children develop the ability to withstand peer pressure. Both of these outcomes are indications of positive socialization experiences." (Williams, 2002)

In my observations, both informally and in my practice, children who have been primarily homeschooled, especially through middle school, emerge with a strong sense of self, an inner direction, and feelings of self-worth. Although they have established friendships, they are not easily influenced by peers, and can clearly make choices that might go against the group.

Social Development

Social development is the development of understanding of self in relationship to others. It is the "deep, comfortable level of self-acceptance that leads to true friendships with others." (Silverman, 1993) Social development begins at birth with the first exchange between mother and baby. The baby sees the love reflected back and experiences the beginnings of attachment and bonding. As the child grows, the mother insures safety and security while the young child begins to explore the world. Within this secure base, children learn to trust their environment and interact within the rules of society. Children model their behavior from the people around them. This modeling, coupled with an understanding and support of their basic temperament, begins the long process of social and self-development. Humans have a long period of dependency, but in our society's rush to make children independent as soon as possible we have disrupted the natural developmental process. In my 25 years of experience working with families and children, I have seen how this rush towards independence, along with a deficit of emotional protection and nurturing it fosters, has created many difficulties for families and society.

For many families, one of the reasons they have chosen homeschooling is to allow for the natural developmental process to unfold and to honor their individual child's temperament. Some may see this as negative, and homeschooling parents are often accused of overprotecting their children from the "real world." Many researchers do not consider this extra time for children to develop within a family situation a problem. Bliss (1989) argues that "Protection during early, developmental years for purposes of nurturing and growth is evident in many arenas: plant, animal and aquatic. Why should it be considered wrong or bad in the most vital arena - Human development "

Allowing a child to develop socially and emotionally, following his or her own timetable of development allows for better learning. Research has shown that learning while anxious, scared or emotionally disengaged will negatively affect the understanding and recall of any information presented. Homeschooling allows a child to work at an academic pace that matches his or her social and emotional developmental level.

Protection during the developmental years is crucial. Many family interventions I have observed have benefited from this understanding of child development. I have had occasions to use homeschooling as an intervention with children who are having difficulties. Children under stress need high levels of support available only within a family setting of love and caring. They flourish when they have the opportunity to increase attachment bonds to their primary caregivers, and have the time to heal from past or present trauma. When their temperamental needs and pace of development are honored, they can again become confident learners.

Wendy Priesnitz (1998) furthers this idea for the need for security and nurturing in a child's early years.

My observation of thousands of home-educated children over the past twenty years suggests that another factor outweighs any kind of peer or sibling interaction in its influence on social development. Feelings of security and self-confidence are created in children who have the freedom to venture into sophisticated social situations at their own speed. This positive self-concept is nurtured by warm, loving interaction with parents who respect their children. As some of the main ingredients in a child's proper social development, these even outweigh the contribution of continued social contact in creating a child who functions well in society (Dobson, ed., 1998, p.91).

Developmental and social psychologist, Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University, who has spent many years studying children in various societies, reinforces these observations. He notes that overexposure to a peer group during a child's early years can be damaging. He has found that until fifth or sixth grade level, children who spend more time with their peers than with their parents or older family members become peer dependent. This, he claims leads to a losses in many different areas, including self worth, optimism, respect for their parents and trust in their peers. (Bronfenbrenner as cited by Priesnitz in Dobson ed., 1998)

Assessment

How do parents and those working with homeschooling families assess a child's social development and socialization? Most of the relevant studies have used a variety of measures, such as the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, the Children's Assertive Behavior Scale, and the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales. Researchers also use direct observation, interviews with the families, and self-reports from students. Most professionals and families are not likely to administer tests in order to determine a child's social development or adjustment. It is far more revealing to rely on direct observation of the child in a variety of settings.

There is a wide spectrum of behaviors that we can look at to help determine if a child is growing socially. For the most part, researchers and therapists look to see if the child interacts comfortably with family and close friends, has at least one friend by school age or early adolescence that is mutually satisfying, can abide by the general rules of the society in which they live, and is engaged in activities that match their temperament and interests. These behaviors are generally accepted as a sign of a competent, socialized child.

Social Competence and Success

Ultimately the question becomes, "will homeschool children become well-functioning adults and contributing members of the community?" The most recent research replies with a resounding YES! Knowles (1991), an assistant professor at The University of Michigan, is one of the researchers who has looked at the long term success of homeschoolers. His research shows that more than 40 percent attend college, and 15 percent of those had completed a graduate degree (Knowles, 1991). Nearly two-thirds of the homeschooled individuals were self-employed,

but only a few worked alone as craftspeople or in other solitary occupations, while most either provided employment to others or worked along with family members (Knowles, 1991).

"That so many of those surveyed were self-employed supports the contention that home schooling tends to enhance a person's self-reliance and independence" (Knowles, 1991). Knowles also found no evidence that these adults were even moderately disadvantaged (Knowles, 1991). Two thirds of them were married-the norm for adults their age, and none were unemployed or on any form of welfare assistance (Knowles, 1991). More than three-quarters felt that being taught at home had actually helped them interact with people from different levels of society (Knowles, 1991). Webb, another researcher who looked at aspects of the adult lives of wholly or partly home-educated people, found that all who had attempted higher education were successful and that their socialization was often better than that of their schooled peers (1989).

Conclusion

As homeschooling continues to become more common and the information and understanding of the benefits are understood, the question of socialization, while still asked by grandmothers and nosy neighbors, will become irrelevant to those who bother to do their "homework." Research, direct observations, and anecdotal reports clearly show that homeschool children are well on their way to strong social competence, good self esteem and the ability to become active and involved members of their communities.

Again Knowles (1991) finds,

The characteristics of the adults in this study suggest that they grew up with specific advantages that contributed to their independent views of society and their roles in it. As a group they are not homogeneous or amenable to easy categorizations: they are located throughout the United States and Canada in both rural and urban areas: they are employed in a variety of professions and occupations, although many seem to be concentrated in those occupations that allow for independence, flexibility and often, creativity; and they exhibit a wide range of political views, and religious affiliations.

With continued research and with more homeschool students beginning to enter college and the work force, "I am prompted to ponder whether

or not homeschools may have advantages that hitherto have gone unrecognized" (Knowles, 1991).

I have long contended that homeschooling has advantages that have not been fully explored. The longer that I am involved with homeschooling children and their families the more advantages I see. I see families who love their children deeply, who give freely of their time and love to be there for their children. These families work diligently to provide the best possible social and academic environment in which their children will thrive. The outcome is clear-homeschooling is an exceptional way to socialize our young.

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