

Transitions To and From Homeschooling

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Because education is a personal experience accomplished in myriad ways, and because scientists are still struggling to understand how it actually occurs, it is impossible to assume that any one child's transition to or from homeschooling is representative of all. It is important, therefore, to consider all transitions from one educational method to another (regardless of the direction) in the context of an individual's unique experience.

Differentiating Between Learning at School and Learning at Home

Equally important to appreciating the impact of transitions between school attendance and homeschooling is to understand the foundational differences that distinguish each approach. Briefly, the following underpin school attendance:

- Compulsory attendance by force of law
- Curriculum, or course of study, predetermined and, with few exceptions, the same for everyone
- Achievement measured in relation to the progress of others

In most homeschooling situations, whether or not a purchased/prepared curriculum is utilized, the learning *lifestyle* created rests on:

- Autonomous use of time in ways applicable to the individual's needs and desires
- Purpose of study that grows out of intrinsic motivation, leading to quick grasp of desired information, concepts, and skills
- Achievement measured by growth of individual's knowledge and skill

Due to dissimilar foundations, the guiding philosophies naturally diverge. For example, "school mind" asks, "What should a child know at ___ grade level?" "Homeschool mind" asks the child what she is interested in, and further observes the active child to gather its own clues. School mind asks, "Does she need to know this for a test?" Homeschool mind asks, "Does she need to know this to improve her life in some way?" School mind asks, "What can I teach her?" Homeschool mind asks, "What can she learn?" School mind asks, "What answers has he retained?" Homeschool mind asks, "Has he learned how to learn?"

Transitioning from School to Home

One of the greatest challenges to a child moving from school to home is the shift from school's institutional schedule, organization, and teaching methods to those more appropriate for integration into family life. The more time a child has spent in the institution, the longer it seems to take both parents and child to acclimate to the relative freedom to create their own schedule and organization. Thus many families report they spend time experimenting to determine what works best in their own situation. Just a few examples of this "customizing" include determining at what time of day the child is most eager to learn (some night owls don't quite "wake up" until evening!), considering whether or not a child needs additional opportunities to move about in-between quieter periods (especially effective for children with special needs), or scheduling activity around a working spouse's availability.

Decompression Time

Within the homeschooling community the value of a period known as "decompression time" for children leaving school is commonly accepted and trusted. Basically, decompression means relieving the child of pressure to "perform" educational activities. The amount of time needed for decompression varies with each child. Some parents report that after just a few weeks of space to breathe, relax, and 'veg out', their children eagerly bounce into activity. Others observe that it takes a full year or even a bit longer before their children get their bearings and confidently move forward.

The decompression period serves many purposes, but three emerge critical to honor the underlying philosophy of home education:

- Time to withdraw from being told what to do so as to shoulder increasing responsibility for one's own education
- Time to withdraw from school-induced pressure to learn (including external rewards) so learning becomes enjoyable and its own reward
- Time to withdraw from resistance to learning that stems from the ill-treatment of "smart" kids in school as well as from having been forced into irrelevant studies

Missing Friends

The other major effect of transitioning from school to home is missing friends or, more specifically, missing the sense of common experience homeschooled children don't share with their peers. Even the youngest children realize they are a minority by not stepping on that yellow bus each morning. It may be difficult for children to accept and cope with a sudden drop in the number of friends. Parents can be great guides in helping the experience result in a better understanding and appreciation of quality versus quantity friendships. True friendship, just as with adults, does stand the test of time and distance, and real friends continue to call after school, go to the park, have sleepovers, and enjoy growing up together.

Other children readily accept that they are moving into a different lifestyle, one that doesn't necessarily include daily contact with former schoolmates (although homeschooling certainly doesn't *have* to preclude this, either). They realize that they are making a trade-off. Their time is not empty; rather they fill it in other directions with hobbies, sports, music, pen and e-mail pals, classes, youth organizations, apprenticeships, volunteering, and self-employment, to name just a few. Homeschool support groups offer tremendous help in this aspect of the transition as they provide abundant social opportunities both within and without an educational context. Such groups exist by the thousands across America, are neither difficult to find nor create, and provide encouragement and friendship for the entire family.

To help with the transition from school to home parents can:

- Discuss the differences that will be created in family life by the new form of education

- Help fill newly available time with interesting activity until the child is capable of doing so independently
- Model curiosity and inquisitive behavior, then follow up by finding the answers
- Think in terms of the child learning, rather than as the parent teaching
- Understand that just like physical growth, learning occurs in spurts, and children need "down time" to digest that which is helping their knowledge grow.

Transitioning from Home to School

In an earlier period of the modern homeschooling movement, more children than do so today moved from home to school, particularly when they approached high school age. For a "bird's eye" perspective on this transition I interviewed dozens of adults who had been homeschooled for *Homeschoolers' Success Stories* (Prima Publishing, 2000). Several important common threads laced their experiences.

Structure and Tests

Accustomed to relative autonomy, previously homeschooled students found the structure inherent in a school system rather odd. Jedediah Purdy, now twenty-eight years old and author of *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, explains, "School was boring and enormously inefficient, and it was scarcely learning. It was rote and dulling and, with the exception of a couple of very good teachers, I and other students who were any good essentially taught ourselves" (Purdy).

Thirty-one year old Aaron Timlin, the owner and director of Detroit Contemporary Art Gallery who left homeschooling to attend school in ninth grade, recalls his inability to understand the purpose or methods of the tests involved, "and I bombed them" (Timlin). Just as it takes decompression time for a schooled child to acclimate to homeschooling, it took Aaron even longer to assimilate into the school program. "By junior year I started to learn how to take a test and how to study" (Timlin). Twenty-two year old Monique Harris, who scored a perfect 1600 on the SAT test, entered high school as a sophomore. "Our teacher gave us a review before the first test," Monique explains. "I thought the review was just some questions to help us out. I wrote them all down. I studied that, plus all my other notes that night. The next day I found out the 'review' was the test! I was expecting it to be a lot harder" (Harris).

Separation of Subjects

The students who transitioned from home to school found the complete separation of subjects another challenge. Because the increased autonomous use of time allows homeschooling students to learn necessary information and skills while pursuing personal interests, this separation was most often described as "unnatural." Amber Luvmour, a twenty-seven year old college graduate working in her family's business, sums it up well. "In homeschooling, research papers *were* English class. In school, the approach was 'Now we're doing math. Now we're doing English. Now we're doing creative writing.' This was a very different approach to learning" (Luvmour).

School Socialization

All of my interviewees had something to say on this topic. While children moving to homeschooling miss friends, those moving in the opposite direction feel as if they've entered a totally different social world in school.

The social climate created in school doesn't mirror that of the world outside of the institution. Therefore, during the first year of school attendance, Jed Purdy felt socially inept because he had no sense of what the school's socialization rules were or how he would be judged. "I fit in through acclimation, just getting the hang of it." He adds, "I never cared for it, though" (Purdy).

"People worry about feeling isolated in homeschooling," explains Aaron Timlin, "but *this*[in school] was the first time I ever felt social isolation" (Timlin).

Amber Luvmour's mother realized that upon entering school her daughter "was met with a lot of established social cliques and rules and power lines" (Luvmour). Amber recalls being teased and put down. However, both she and Aaron considered themselves members of no clique yet friends with members of every clique housed in their schools. "It felt good," says Amber, "because I was never caught in any of those social wars" (Luvmour).

To help with the transition from home to school parents can:

- Discuss the differences that will be created in family life by the new form of education
- Research the emotional and psychological problems increasingly attributed to traditionally schooled children and watch for signs in your child
- Continue home-based educational activities as frequently as possible so the child doesn't begin to think school is the only place to learn
- Keep up to date with the subject matter your child is studying
- Act as your child's advocate in all matters pertaining to school

At Difficult Times

In the midst of personal or family crises, we would never advise another adult to move, change jobs, or look for a spouse. Yet with no say in the matter, children are often summarily subjected to making a similar, life-altering transition at an equally inappropriate time in their lives. Although other legal matters might provide the impetus, most frequently children are asked to do this as part of divorce proceedings. Because this scenario results in a non-custodial spouse requesting a homeschooling child to attend school much more frequently than the other way around, this is the issue addressed here.

Children have a limited capacity to understand what is happening during divorce, and to understand their feelings about it. The resultant stress is best allayed through loving attention from those who best know the child. One of the benefits of homeschooling that practitioners often cite is that the time together strengthens family ties, so the homeschooling parent is already in a good position to fill this need.

In his groundbreaking book, *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way* (Random House, 1998), author M. Gary Neuman outlines "13 Ways Parents Can Help Children at Every Age." The ways relevant to this topic include:

- Spend quality time and quantity time
- Maintain structure
- Maintain family traditions
- Become involved in your child's life
- Find and focus on your child's wonderful qualities
- Allow your child to express herself freely
- Encourage your child's individuality and social development

Fully half of mental health counselor Newman's thirteen recommendations are typically present in a homeschooling family's lives *before* crisis. To take them away at a time the child most needs them is unnecessarily cruel and, worse, potentially damaging. In short, homeschooling is both the glue that keeps the family connected during free fall, and the lubricant that helps the family move through problems.

Conclusion

As the number of educational choices increases so, too, will grow the number of children transferring between available options. Such back-and-forth flow, inspired by informed families' ability to tailor educational offerings for individual children, will soon become so common it won't warrant a second thought.

Both now and in the future, utmost consideration should be provided to an individual child's unique experience, needs, and desires. To make transition as smooth and comfortable as possible:

- Understand there are major differences in the guiding philosophies of schooling and home education
- Realize that no one knows children better than their parents, and their roles in their children's lives should be supported, not usurped
- The child's source and sense of security should be recognized and honored
- The child should be consulted before decisions are made to change an educational approach
- Most homeschooling parents have conducted a great deal of research about homeschooling prior to commencement, and any involvement in educational decisions by an outside party that include homeschooling should be guided by a similarly thorough understanding of the topic

Author's Biography: Linda Dobson is the author of six books about education and is an international speaker on education issues. As a former news analyst for a national magazine for nine years, she has experience in investigative journalism. She has provided scores of media interviews for radio talk shows and publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Reader's Digest*, and "Live Online" for the *Washington Post*. Media appearances include *Upfront Tonight* with

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