

# Each Family is Unique

Growing children. This is a work in progress, for both children and their parents, changing as needs and interests change and insights deepen. This journey is charged with challenges and joys. How does making the decision to homeschool a child enhance and nourish the family? Every family is different; every child is unique. Homeschooling allows children and parents to appreciate variability and celebrate different talents and interests. Homeschooling encourages parents to spend time to share in their child's discoveries. The excitement generated by self-discovery creates a love of learning that can last a lifetime. It is this love of learning that enriches the whole child. For parents, the gifts of homeschooling children in this complicated and diverse world can be a source of richness and joy.

## Learning Styles

For those parents considering the homeschooling option, it may help to clarify their own learning styles and temperament. Asking parents "How do you learn best? What environment is most conducive to your learning? How do you respond to stress and timelines? How do you know when you are learning?" and encouraging authentic and heart felt replies can begin the process. Howard Gardner's work on learning styles and multiple intelligence theory proposes that there is not a single "Intelligence" but rather that there are at least seven intelligences: Visual / Spatial, Musical, Verbal, Logical/Mathematical, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Bodily / Kinesthetic. Homeschooling allows the learner time to experience all these ways of learning and encourages the learner to discover the ways s/he can learn and remember best. Society can be fast paced and competitive. Does learning also have to be formatted as a race or a contest? Many students shut down when they feel overwhelmed by a rate or frequency of information. Homeschooling can offer 'think time' for students to discuss, write, and process new information. Homeschooling can offer a workable alternative for children whose temperaments may not match the public school setting. Homeschooling allows parents to focus on the whole child, not just their perceived inadequacies, and highlight and encourage their child's strengths.

# Curriculum

In working with a parent who is considering the homeschooling option, it can also be helpful to ask for their self-reflection on the meaning and value of education. Asking questions such as, "What is worth learning and how do we go about teaching it?" Or a question asked by many learners: "Who am I and what is my relationship to the world?" can help parents clarify their expectations, desires and fear about homeschooling their child. Homeschooling can allow parents and children to organize a curriculum around these essential questions. Homeschoolers can approach these questions as the framework for learning, with the specific disciplines and subject matter offering systematic ways for thinking. For example, homeschooling reading may consist of surrounding students with good books and plenty of time to read them, giving students choices about what to read and how to respond to what they've read, encouraging them to read from rich stories and primary source material, all with a focus on meaning rather than on decoding skills. Reading in this framework is not a tedious prerequisite to receiving points, prizes, grades or test scores. Understanding the material is the powerful and intrinsic motivator. Thus, the subject of 'Reading' presented from a homeschooling view can encompass and enrich the child's personal growth in exploring the question "Who am I and what is my relationship to the world." Homeschooling offers the time and space to discuss deeper issues, values, dreams, expectations, questions and struggles. This curriculum is invaluable for growth as human beings. Homeschooling also encourages the learner to more fully experience the learning, placing the information into their own mental map and language template. Giving the child this freedom to learn and trusting that the learning will occur is a great philosophical leap of this alternative education choice. Expanding into this sense of freedom and trust impacts and informs a sense of self, place, path and responsibility.

# Evaluation

A common question from parents is often "How will I know if my child is learning?" There are many different ways to find answers here, from formally testing a child to collecting portfolios of work to seeing a child in action in a real life learning experience. Because time spent homeschooling encourages parents to understand their child's strengths

and weaknesses, parents usually can assess and evaluate learning in a more natural setting. As a homeschooling parent, they are free from many of the problems associated with performance evaluations. Using standardized tests and grades to rate and rank children and standardizing grade level curricula so that each student learns the same material carries with it a bundle of assumptions about the role of education, what constitutes success and failure in that endeavor, the nature of motivation, and the question of how students actually learn and remember what they learn. It can be a reductive idea that all learning, texts, teachers and students can be judged on these few criteria. Learning can be a shift away from isolated facts and memorized procedures and toward conceptual understanding and problem solving. Homeschooling, with its emphasis on finding each individual's talents and interests, has no need for specific guidelines for instruction and evaluation, nor for grade level objectives. Homeschooling, with its long view, measures children for the people they are becoming. Grade level expectations are arbitrary at best, and restrict learning at worst. Placing external rewards on performance assessment and a preoccupation with performance in general can undermine an inherent interest in learning. Treating children as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge can disempower students' ability to discover on their own. Homeschooling values interactions between parent and child and the learning material itself and promotes learning for the intrinsic rewards inherent to learning. Self-assessment is the goal. Homeschooling encourages formulating a curriculum with the learning content and learner's style informing the assessment tools. In growing the whole child view -- curricula, disciplines, subject areas, standards, evaluation -- all function as means, rather than ends. This can help project and protect the rich experience of learning.

## The Role of Education

Finally, a discussion with the parents to consider what it means to be an 'educated person' can help with their values clarification and homeschooling expectations. Homeschooling for the whole child allows parents and children to take a broad definition of 'educate,' and offers the long perspective, giving many years to learning. A homeschooled child has more time to experience the world outside the traditional classroom and to nurture the feeling that education is not just something you do to mark time, make more money or pass an exam, but also because it is a part of participating in a larger framework. Because the half-life of science and technology information today is estimated to be twenty-two

months, one may not feel that a person who is educated can know about every area, but rather an educated person can know how to gather resources and 'find out.' A homeschooler knows how to make use of information, and how to think clearly about that information, how to learn from the expertise and experience of mentors, how to find direct learning experiences, and how to continue learning throughout their lives. Homeschooling does not mandate a particular method of instruction or a specific form of that education. Surely our diverse and vibrant citizenship has many ways to learn, and many different topics to learn. The whole child has a desire to learn, a desire to be challenged. Homeschooling provides direction for that desire. Making the decision to homeschool a child and see a child, not as a fragmented mass of skills, but rather, as an individual unfolding and blossoming into a whole person, can nurture and enrich a family's life journey.

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