

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Education Series, Part 13 ABCs of Homeschooling By *Darla Isackson, with Diane Hopkins and Heidi Hanks*

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Trips are wonderful times for conversation; I just got back from a trip where my daughter-in-law Heidi and I talked a lot about her two years of homeschooling experience. (They have five children, the oldest just turning 7 this month.) I want to share some of Heidi's perspectives, along with some I've received via e-mail conversations I've been having with Diane Hopkins (who has been homeschooling for 20 years). Let me tell you a bit about Diane first — how she got started homeschooling and where she's gone with it — so you'll know why she had so much to offer Heidi when Heidi was starting out, and why I felt she had a lot to offer to Meridian readers.

Diane is the mother of 7 children; she started homeschooling when their oldest was in 6th grade. He'd just won the Presidential Award for Achievement, so she assumed he was doing fine. ("Up until then I had been too busy having babies to pay much attention to what was really going on in school," she quipped.) Her 4th grade boy was not faring so well. The teacher told Diane that he couldn't sit still, didn't pay attention, etc. That report motivated Diane to work with her kids over the summer vacation.

First she got out an old standby — times tables flashcards — to review multiplication. Her oldest "award-winning" son couldn't flash through them! Diane couldn't believe it. She questioned how he could have gotten the award when he didn't know all his times tables. He said that he knew them the best of anyone in the whole class. For the first time Diane began to question the quality of her children's education.

When she decided to homeschool her 4th grader she admits she was trembling at the thought. When her 6th grader found out her intention, he asked Diane why she wouldn't homeschool him as well. "But you like school," she protested. "That's 'cause I didn't have a choice," he replied.

So the rest is history ... Diane has been homeschooling all her children ever since. Four of her children are grown now — #1 son is a college graduate, computer science degree, teaching seminary, and has two children. #2,3, and 4 are nearing graduation from BYU. #2 son is graduating in mechanical engineering. #3 son in political science (he is being sent by BYU on scholarship to Vienna, Austria as a diplomat next winter) and #4 child, a daughter, is graduating in family life. Children #5, 6, and 7 are still in homeschool, and Diane thinks they are progressing even faster than their older siblings.

About two years into homeschooling, Diane had found some great books for homeschooling. When her homeschooling friends heard about them, they wanted to know how to get their own copies. In this unintentional way her book business (www.LDFR.com) was begun.

Over the years Diane has directed many support groups and co-op schools. With her husband Rick and son Daniel as webmasters, she has set up helpful homeschooling websites, listed later in the article. She has also written informational homeschooling articles and books. Her very useful book *Curriculum Guide for the LDS Homeschool* is free online. She wants it to be of use to others to encourage and give practical help in setting up a homeschool, choosing books, etc. Go to: www.ldfr.com/guide/

Start Homeschooling with a Spiritual Focus

Tari Cartwright Radulovich said in the July 4th LDS NHA Sentinel (newsletter): “As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we are concerned for our children’s spiritual training and character development as well as their social and academic welfare. Many Christian families homeschool because the Spirit has told them that learning at home is the Lord’s will for their children. We are one of those families.

“We believe that all things are spiritual before the Lord — especially in the pursuit of truth or knowledge. D&C 29:34 says, ‘Wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal.’ We believe that true learning comes only by the Spirit and may occur in any life setting that the Lord directs. We view all of life as learning and not as separate issues.”

My daughter-in-law Heidi thinks Diane’s website is a good place to look when you begin homeschooling because of her spiritual emphasis. When Heidi was getting started she ordered many basic materials from Diane. And Heidi reminds me that Church material has been her best ongoing resource for teaching her young children all along. Since her most motivating purpose for homeschooling is to teach her children the gospel every day, she says, “No matter how important secular learning is, shouldn’t the gospel come first? We don’t want our kids to think that the most important thing we learn in a day is science or math. If I teach my children about God and the scriptures first thing in the morning, every morning, and create a gospel framework for the rest of the subjects, hopefully they will have their priorities straight.” [Just for the record, I think Heidi also does a great job of teaching reading, math, science, and other subjects.]

How to Keep Homeschool Focused on the Spiritual

Heidi always starts the school morning with a Primary song and a prayer; then they say the Pledge of Allegiance and do their calendar activity. She teaches new Primary songs next. Heidi’s children are often the only ones in the Junior Primary who know the songs. Heidi laughs when the teachers think her kids are brilliant; she knows they learn them mostly from repetition. She takes advantage of Church materials, including the Church website’s list of all the Primary songs the children are going to learn during the year. Anyone can go to that site and burn a CD of the songs, free of charge.

Heidi often plays the CD while the children are doing other activities. Just by hearing it a lot they learn the songs painlessly. Sometimes she also uses a video where the words come up (*Primary Song Sing Along* produced by Covenant Communications), and she also has the entire Primary Songbook on cassette tapes (available from Church Distribution). Heidi has found the Children’s Songbook itself to be a rich and essential resource for gospel teaching.

After singing time, her oldest child takes turns with her, reading scripture stories out of the church-produced scripture story books, (colorfully illustrated in comic book format). These books used to be called Scripture Readers and now are simply called by the name of the scripture they pertain to. (Book of Mormon Stories, Bible Stories, and so on — available from Church Distribution). After reading time, Heidi might suggest the children act out scripture stories, color pictures of scripture stories, write and recite Articles of Faith, learn the words to Articles of Faith songs, etc.

Diane has created Article of Faith flashcards. You can make them by taking index cards and putting the number of the article of faith and a key picture on one side, and the written words on

the other side. She also loves the Missionary Discussions for Youth, a coloring book/flip chart for kids that outlines the plan of salvation and basic doctrines in simple form. She often uses it as a devotional topic when she begins each day's homeschool, letting her younger kids color that page as they discuss the message. Both of these products are listed on her website.

Sometimes Heidi uses Primary manuals for homeschool lessons. They are approved by General Authorities and teach pure gospel concepts. What a boon to children to preview and discuss the lesson they might be having that week in Primary!

Heidi and the children practice anything church-related during their school time. Sometimes they prepare and rehearse lessons for family home evenings. If one of the children is assigned to give a talk or scripture at church, it will be practiced in homeschool the week before. Whenever Heidi has a lesson to prepare for Primary, she uses the children as her first audience. Sometime during the morning the oldest child does his writing practice by copying a scripture verse that Heidi has printed in large letters for him.

More Resources from the Church — and How to Order Them

For Christmas last year Heidi asked for the Gospel Art Kit, also available through Church Distribution. It includes 155 full-color 8x 10 pictures for only \$30. They are divided into categories of each of our scriptures, as well as "Gospel in Action" and "Church History." Heidi uses the pictures constantly. She also makes good use of stories and activities from *The Friend* magazine. All the Church magazines are online now (see www.LDS.org). You can find the activity you want in *The Friend* and print off copies for each child! She reminds me that the other Church magazines are a rich resource also, especially for older children — as are the Sunday School, Young Women, Young Men, Seminary and Institute study manuals — all available from Church Distribution. Church videos on a wide variety of subjects are also available there.

All materials at Church Distribution are sold at cost and they don't charge postage; you will never find better prices anywhere. The Distribution Services Customer Service Order Desk Phone numbers are:

Salt Lake area: 240-3800.

Outside Salt Lake 1-800-537-5971.

The Order Desk Fax number is 801-240-3685

The Customer Service information number is 801-240-4621.

Once a year the *Ensign* includes a listing of basic materials available with prices and ordering information. But don't wait for it; call and you will graciously be helped to order whatever you need.

Don't Forget Libraries

Ward libraries are also a rich resource for homeschool — and family home evenings. Many ward libraries have hundreds of flannel-board stories that are rarely used anymore, and they are happy to check them out to parents. Heidi lets her children tell the scripture stories to each other as they

post the flannel pictures on the flannel board, and they love it!

Speaking of libraries, Heidi suggests you see if the public library has any book you are interested in purchasing and “road test” it before you buy. Many books are good enough to check out a time or two, but not valuable enough to warrant the outlay to make a part of your permanent home library. Most public libraries now make it possible to go online and find a listing on any given subject. The Internet has made library use much less time-consuming. You can place the materials you want on hold online ahead of time — and they will be ready for you to check out when you get there.

Internet Blessings

With the advent of the Internet, homeschoolers have obtained many helpful resources. Heidi says that online connections have helped her get started homeschooling and not feel alone. (She is the only one in her ward who homeschools.) She says, “The most important thing I've learned about gathering and sharing ideas online or in books is to pick and choose. I can't expect that the exact way someone else does it will work for me. And I don't need to feel that I should do homeschool a certain way or follow a certain program because someone else I admire does. (For instance, one homeschool mother suggests Sunday-type dress every day for homeschool. We sometimes prefer pajamas or sweats! And the kids love comfortable shorts in the summer.) I have to prayerfully decide what I can best do in my particular situation and personality, what will be most beneficial for my own children, and what will best help me reach my goal of a gospel-centered education for them.”

Diane offers the following websites (all of which Heidi has found helpful):

<http://www.LDSHomeschooling.org> is a website for LDS homeschoolers that offers support, connection, and quotes of the Brethren related to educating our children. It has been operational for 6 years and has a huge database of LDS homeschoolers all over the world. You can click on a state on our USA map and be connected to LDS homeschoolers in your local area that are willing to offer support. Privacy is well kept.

<http://www.LDFR.com> is a website of curriculum that meets LDS standards for those who want to teach their children/grandchildren: educational toys, games, conservative reading books, etc. Her program “Happy Phonics” won a national award. This website includes a highly trafficked discussion board that serves LDS homeschoolers worldwide:

<http://www.ldfr.com/board/>.

Books by Diane that may be helpful to LDS moms exploring homeschooling include:

[*Homeschooler Goes to BYU*](#) [Diane worked with BYU admissions to get the facts for this little booklet]

[*Best Homeschool Secrets*](#)

[*I Love Homeschooling*](#)

Heidi reminds me that you don't have to spend a lot of money to do a good job homeschooling.

She is on a tight budget, and only buys the books and materials that she finds most essential and helpful as she goes along.

More Internet Sites:

www.ldfr.com/question/ includes a Question of the Week column where Diane explores and answers homeschooling questions.

Another of Diane's websites offers a column that gives step-by-step advice for getting started in homeschooling is called Homeschooling: You Can Do It! It is found at: www.ldfr.com/homeschooling_you_can_do_it/.

Two national LDS homeschooling organizations offer online newsletters with helpful ideas and inspiring articles and quotes. They are:

1. LDS Home Educators Association: website www.ldshea.org e-mail comments@ldshea.org

(This organization will hold its annual conference in Salt Lake City on September 10. Keynote speaker is Sister Barbara B. Smith, past general president of the Relief Society.)

2. National LDS Homeschool Association website www.lds-nha.org e-mail information@lds-nha.org.

How Can A Homeschooling Mother Do It All?

The first thing I hear from mothers who are considering homeschooling is, "How could I possibly spend all that time preparing and teaching my children and still keep up with the daily household duties — to say nothing of the things I really want to do myself?" I've really wondered how Heidi does it all with her five little ones. She spoke briefly at a recent homeschooling convention and I found out. She bore witness that angels help her. I believe it.

The remainder of this article is by Diane Hopkins. It includes her answers to the above question and some of her tips for those who are just starting the great adventure of homeschooling.

How-to for New Homeschoolers

Many mothers are facing homeschool for the very first time. Talking to a few of these mothers made me yearn to write to every mother who is in that wonderful and overwhelming position! If you are bringing children home from public school to homeschool, you may be wondering how you'll ever manage.

One important adjustment is to see schooling for what it is. We are trying to raise upright Saints, not just to "get them through school." Real life is the best classroom, so consider drawing your children into your world, your daily activities, work, and interests rather than centering your family life on school. When I began home schooling, I felt I never could find the time to do the things I felt were important for my life — such as writing in my journal, corresponding with relatives, studying my scriptures, and more. I learned that the homeschool lifestyle incorporates the whole family into the daily necessities, rather than usurping the time needed for them. Home maintenance, chores, food preparation, gardening, food preservation, budgeting and finances,

clothing construction and care, developing close family social relationships, caring for small children, record keeping, service to those in need, etc. are all wonderful life skills that can be done together and that contribute to a child's education!

Children learn best, not from school, but from those older and wiser who model good behavior. An interesting study shows that the biggest determining factor for a child's success in reading in school is having seen a parent reading in the home on a regular basis. This is especially true for boys if the parent who reads is their father, rather than their mother. Somehow, the example says far more about the value of reading than endless hours in school reading groups.

The parent's joyful task is to lead and guide the child into the real world — not set up a contrived pseudo-world to teach skills that children easily learn if they spend their time around adults who are striving to live good lives. What constitutes an adult trying to live a "good life"? Following our prophet's counsel alone could be a full-time curriculum! Plant a garden, read good literature, serve the needy, be politically aware, be kind and courteous, keep a journal, develop your talents, etc.

The exciting part about leading children into the real world is that they are self-motivated. The moment I sit down to play the piano, all my children want to play and want me to teach them to play something. No sooner do I begin typing on the computer, than I have the whole family "needing" to type. My efforts at writing have stimulated the production of "books" from my youngest children. Modeling is so much more effective than lecturing. Elder Russell M. Ballard said, "It is not possible for you not to have influence, my dear sisters. The only question is how far reaching and how righteous your influence will be." (BYU Women's Conference, 2003)

School time is the time to give the instruction that children need to master the basic academic subjects plus music competence — subjects that take focused concentration and time from mother/teacher to accomplish. It isn't realized just by living in a family but shared family life practices and contributes to those skills. Having taught my little girl (at age 5) the numerals and the plus, minus and equal signs and how they worked, I overheard her figuring out how many plates she needed to set the table using her new skills: ("We have 9 people in our family and Mark is on a mission, and the boys are at BYU so that is minus 3, so we need six plates").

When we think of homeschool, sometimes we get tunnel vision, and think "academics," "keeping up to speed," "covering everything," and other worrisome concerns that don't really tell the whole story. Homeschool is the growing and nurturing of fine, upright, balanced people.

So, to the new homeschool mom who may be feeling fear and trepidation, here are some ideas that might make your adjustment to homeschooling a little bit easier:

1. Set the Stage

Children are used to going to school on the first day of the new school year and seeing a decorated schoolroom, bulletin boards, name tags, and other well-thought out preparations for the new school year. It really doesn't take much effort, but in this case, a little goes a long way. Jump in and buy school supplies when they are on sale, just as you would if your children were attending public school. The mental fresh start that a binder and new markers create makes them well worth the few dollars you spend on them. I take my children on a school shopping trip. \$10 will buy crayons, markers, scissors, glue stick, a pencil box, 3 ring notebook, and other "essentials" of learning. Let them choose the color of their pencil box and the type of markers. That is a very small investment to create excitement and thrill a child! If you have the funds, a

new outfit or even just a new t-shirt for school gives them the "new school clothes" thrill. Designate one area in your home as your "school room," even if it is the kitchen table and adjacent wall with a "cinder block and board" bookcase. Create a bulletin board area (even just a wall to stick things on) and decorate it with some construction paper cut outs or a border from a school supply store. Put a picture of the Savior, along with your children's pictures, up there, and eventually display the projects they do. Post a weather chart so you can graph the weather, and a calendar so you can put a sticker on each new school day and count days until the next field trip or birthday or event. Take a trip to the library and get books on the subject you intend to teach that week and put them on your bookshelf, accessible to the children. If you are studying lizards, for example, print off a few pictures from the internet to post on your bulletin board or set up a little display with some toy lizards lounging on rocks. None of this takes much time or expense, but you can be sure your children will notice, and they will help your children feel enthusiastic knowing that you really take this new project seriously.

It helps, Mom, if you look ready for the job. I go on a walk before I start school each morning, and I often come home with a flower tucked behind my ear. That alone makes the day different and special. Sometimes I slip on a skirt and top and put on lipstick to help my children take their teacher more seriously!

2. Have a Plan

It is easy to feel nervous and wonder exactly how to proceed, as you start on this adventure of homeschooling. Even though your plan may change and be fine tuned, it is important to have a plan.

I use a "one subject per day" schedule, teaching all my children in a group lesson together at the beginning of homeschool. (After our group learning time, children can work in their math books, write in their school journals, and do other individual schoolwork.) For example, Monday is history day in my homeschool, Tuesday is science, Wednesday is English, Thursday is art, etc. (You can see more ideas for how to set up a schedule and a teaching plan in *The Curriculum Guide for the LDS Homeschool*). I briefly outline the school year by topic, so I know in advance what is coming up and can get what I need at the library, or supplies for projects. For example, if we are studying biology as our chosen field of science for the school year, I use a textbook or reference book and take the table of contents and jot dates by each topic. This gives me a year-long teaching schedule to work from. If you have children in the elementary grades, you will have about 30-40 minute maximum attention span for exploring the subject through reading and discussing books and looking at illustrations. It is fun to follow your learning time with a hands-on project, experiment or activity or a video from the library that further explores the topic.

When you feel like you are floundering, give your children a 15-minute recess, say a prayer and pull things back together. A read-aloud story or an art project can save even the worst homeschool day.

3. Choose Good Materials

Obviously, everything you want your children to know isn't in your head. You will need something to learn from! I start with the basics. Each child needs to have the 3 R's (a math, reading, and writing program). From there, you can teach science, and history as a group lesson using just library books, if you like. The library (or the internet!) is a homeschooler's best friend. Each of my children has a good classic book ongoing for their reading. I choose great historical fiction to coordinate with our history studies whenever I can. I also find it essential for each child to have an assignment tool for accountability purposes. This can be a student planner, assignment

notebook, or a check-off chart — something to record assignments in so that both you and your child can see accomplishment taking place.

4. Find Friends

If your children are accustomed to attending public school or private school, you will find that one of the greatest challenges for your children to get used to is the absence of the peer setting. While this is of benefit (from an ease of learning viewpoint), it still takes some adjustment. When you do not use public school, you have the job yourself to provide opportunities to fill their social needs.

You can help things along by organizing opportunities for your children to get together with other homeschoolers. It doesn't take very long before children that are no longer in public school feel like they don't fit in very well with those who still attend, mostly because they aren't involved in all the school stuff (who fought who on the playground at lunch recess, the latest fashions, Mr. Brown's horrible test Friday, etc.). The cure for this is to keep the old friends, but to also make new friendships that don't depend on the school culture for conversation. It is easy to get deeply involved in which books to use, lesson plans, and the how-to of the actual teaching and forget that children are social beings that need to have friendship and companionship to be happy. Your children will become much better friends with family members in home school, and that is a great blessing. However, they will also need your help in organizing and planning frequent get-togethers with peers.

Meeting the social needs of our homeschooled children has created wonderful friendships with other homeschooling families. We have met with others one morning a week for a co-op school. Mothers rotate teaching classes followed by playtime at a Park Day. We participate in our local support group's field trips and activities, such as Boy's Club, Girl's Club, Junior Explorers (4 to 7 yr olds), homeschool sports, choir, Harvest Festival (a Halloween substitute), campouts, and more. As soon as our children turn 13 years old, they are included in our teen activities. All the homeschooled teenagers gather about once a month for a potluck dinner and games. Everyone is welcome and encouraged to bring a friend. This has been one of the best things we've done, as teenagers can feel awkward meeting new friends, both boys and girls. We put on an annual [Homeschool Prom](#), weekly teen class, dramatic productions, sports teams, and more. Although this may sound exhausting, the efforts we have put forth in creating wholesome activities for our children have paid big dividends! It helps children connect with other children with similar values where friendships can blossom. It also fills a void that would be left aching if a child was taken away from the social school environment he is used to with nothing to make up for the loss.

A support group can make all the difference in your confidence to homeschool and your children's enjoyment of homeschooling. You can find LDS homeschoolers local to you by going to this website and clicking on your state: <http://www.LDSHomeschooling.org>.

5. Make it Fun

You've set up a homeschooling spot in your home, you've got a plan, you've got your books, you've got new homeschooled friends for your children. What more could you possibly need to do to make homeschool work? I suggest that you need some pizzazz, some spice, some fun! That is what makes homeschool so unique and exciting! All of us enjoy work that is varied and meaningful. Here are some ideas: Instead of just practicing penmanship, create a book of quotes or scriptures written in your very best penmanship to give as a gift. Instead of drilling the times tables, play multiplication games. Instead of just studying the science unit on "fish," visit an aquarium or catch a fish and eat it for lunch, taking a good look at it in the process. When you

teach the math concept of cups, pints, quarts, gallons; use measuring cups and bottles and learn it with water in a hands-on way. That is the beauty of it! Homeschool is perfectly suited to individualized, interesting, hands-on, fun and meaningful learning.

Last, but not least:

Remember every day to thank the Lord in your school prayer, that you have the freedom and the blessing to be together with the ones you love, to learn from a gospel perspective!

If one of my children is being difficult, it helps me to realize that he is better off with me. I think: "If I feel annoyed, how would a school teacher feel? I love this child, I suffered and sacrificed to bring him to earth, I have his future and well-being as my central aim. I have a vested interest. This is my responsibility and I am glad to do it."

Take courage, Mom, and do the best you can — with the Lord's help. Homeschooling is not hard. It does take attention and work, but this is the kind of work: reading to your kids and playing phonics games with them and doing science experiments and going to the library and writing stories and showing them how to make soup. This really sounds more like "fun" than "work" to me. I love to be with my kids. I want to teach them that life is good and learning is fun and satisfying, and that great literature and fine books can open a whole new world to you. I am very interested in giving them Christian values and faith in God. For me, this is the most satisfying way to live and raise children!

Darla's Conclusion

Recently the Sentinel newsletter ran a quote from Neal Maxwell entitled "Take Especial Care of Your Family":

"Our first duty of teaching is to our own families; we have been organized by the Lord into families first. It is a wonderful calling to teach and bless people of the world, but each parent has been given a special calling and assigned pupils, our children. These are our first priority."

What better validation could a parent or grandparent have for homeschooling?

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