

So You Want To Homeschool?



Linda Tagliaferro

My son Eric, puts the finishing touches on his paper-mache volcano. He takes the model out to our yard, adds baking soda, vinegar, and food coloring to the hollow insides and creates a life-like volcanic eruption. I sign him off on one requirement for his Webelos Geologist badge, and I also check him off on his homework for science and art.

Just where does my son go to school? Eric gets his education in the same place as did such notables as Thomas Elva Edison, Noel Coward, Pearl Buck, Margaret Mead, and Agatha Christie. Does this mean he attends some pricey private school or prestigious public school? On the contrary, Eric, 10, has never been enrolled in a conventional school. All his educational needs are met by what is popularly referred to as home schooling.

This option is one of the fastest-growing movements in education today. Although no one knows the exact figures, the estimated number of home educators in the United States has skyrocketed from 15,000 to at least 3,000,000 in just 15 years, according to Growing Without Schooling, an organization based in Cambridge, Mass.

Is this some recently-developed phenomenon? And where did it originate? Actually, the concept is an American tradition. Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, and Benjamin Franklin were all taught by their families. Compulsory education laws were not passed in the United States until the 1850s, so the history of home education is more firmly rooted in our nation's past than the relatively short period in which institutionalized learning has been the norm.

Although teaching children at home is legal throughout the nation, regulations differ from state to state. In my home state of New York, I send in quarterly reports monitoring Eric's progress to my local school board. Standardized tests are required in some states, while in others, a written evaluation or a portfolio of the student's work is all that is needed.

My program for home schooling comes from the mail-order Oak Meadow Curriculum, but I vary this plan greatly to meet our needs. Flexibility, in fact, is the key word in the home schoolroom. In our private school we can move as fast or as slowly as we need to.

Home educators have various reasons for choosing this option. Many persons are guided by religious reasons; others believe one-on-one tutoring is a more effective way to achieve higher academic standards; and still others simply enjoy being with their children sharing in the wondrous process of their intellectual and social development.

Research shows that home schooling can be highly effective. A six-year study at Stanford University comparing home schooled children with those attending conventional schools found that home schoolers were significantly advanced in academic achievement, social perception, and behavior.

Another study, by the Hewitt Research Foundation, showed that home-educated children achieved percentile scores 30 points higher than national averages on standardized tests. And similar positive results were reflected in the November, 1990, study Dr. Brian Ray of the National Home Education Research Institute in Seattle, Wash.

People sometimes wonder if my home schooling situation can devote the same amount of learning time each day as a conventional school does. Any query in this area is usually satisfied when I point out that a public school child temporarily homebound because of extended illness will have a tutor sent by the school for an average of only three hours per week in order to keep

up with his or her peers.

However, the question I am most frequently asked is not about the quality of my son's academic achievements. Rather, people want to know if I am depriving him socially. And the simple answer is that when it comes to socializing, my home schooled son is no homebody.

Eric's wide circle of friends includes both home-educated and conventionally-schooled children. Outside the home he attends a ceramics class, a swimming class, takes guitar lessons, and plays on the church soccer team.

Eric also meets other children through his Webelos den, which my husband and I serve as leaders. The Webelos program fits well into Eric's social and academic life, but beyond that, its underlying philosophy reinforces our beliefs about family togetherness and allegiance to God and country.

Recently Eric gained confidence and perfected his dramatic skills by performing Patrick Henry's liberty-or-death speech in front of his den. An American history buff, Eric memorized this fiery oration and gave his denmates a vivid lesson in our country's past.

In December, Eric earned his Traveler badge by navigating an automobile trip to Florida with his grandparents and me. We stopped in the historic district of Savannah, GA., and also at Fort McAllister Historic Park, the site of Civil War battles.

Home educators receive additional outside opportunities from at least five support groups in our area. For example, we attended a number of sophisticated workshops for home educators at the American Museum of Natural History. They covered topics such as the geography of Africa, ocean life, and plate tectonics.

We also attended workshops at a local math museum, in which the children (and their parents!) learned fascinating aspects of math that are not always covered in the elementary school curriculum (such as tessellations, Platonic solids, and symmetry in nature.)

Again, research supports the social aspects of home education. In a study at Andrews University in Michigan, home-educated children were shown to have social skills and a self concept equal to or higher than their conventionally-schooled peers.

Advocates of home education also point out that socialization begins at home. Children learn their moral standards and manners from their family, unless they succumb to peer pressure. A recent study proved that conventionally-schooled children are more susceptible to peer pressure than family-educated children.

Home-educated children relate well to adults and to younger children, as well as to people their own age. Contrast this with the findings of researchers like Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner, professor of child development and family studies at Cornell University, and Dr. Albert Bandura of Stanford University, who feel that most children today are not at ease in the real world of age-integration. The standards of the minisociety of the classroom become more important than the lessons learned at home.

As 1991 New York State Teacher-of-the-Year John Taylor Gatto expressed it, "the lessons of school prevent children from keeping important appointments with themselves and their families: lessons in love and curiosity, self-reliance, courage and dignity, lessons in service to others, which are the key lessons of family life."

According to Gatto, school, homework, and TV take up most children's lives and prevent them from learning the lessons of family life after school.

In our family, Eric has ample time to learn the key lessons of family life. The self confidence he has gained from a strong family has made him into an outgoing person.

Occasionally, people inquire how long we intend to pursue our studies in the university-of-our-living room. I reply that we'll continue as long as it works out as well as it has so far. Many home scholars continue their education through high school. Although New York State requires no final exam at the end of home schooling, a student who wants a diploma can get one by passing the standardized G.E.D. test.

The Colfax family of California had a remarkable ending of their parent-tutoring days. Three sons went straight from a life of home education into Harvard. Grant, 26, is enrolled in Harvard medical school. Drew, 23, graduated from Harvard last year, and Reed, 21, is a junior.

And the Colfaxes are not an isolated case. The Home School Legal Defense Association in Virginia has compiled an extensive list of home-educated students who were accepted into major colleges and universities.

Home education may not be for everyone, but it is a compelling choice for some. Even those involved in the public school system look favorably on home education.

As Teacher-of-the-Year Gatto put it, "At present I conclude that the only real alternative on the horizon for most families is to teach their own children at home."

For us, it is an option that combines the joy of learning and the wonder of family involvement. I look forward to more exciting years of learning at home, in which we strive to follow the ideal of poet-dramatist William Butler Yeats, who said:

"Education is not the filling of a bucket but the lighting of a fire."

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