

Don't Forget to Have Fun!

May, 2001

Recently while playing a board game with my four oldest children, my son said something funny and I laughed. My nine-year-old daughter immediately clapped one hand over her mouth, pointed at me with her other hand, and shrieked to my son, "You made her laugh!" Something seemed odd about that statement, but instead of dwelling on it I tucked it away and continued with the game. The very next night, while playing another board game, my son once again said something that caused me to laugh. And once again my daughter went into hysterics and said, bouncing in her seat, "She did it again! She laughed!" This time I sat up and took notice. Had it been so long since my children heard me laugh?? Had I become such a sourpuss that a chuckle from me would bring on such a reaction??

I thought back over the past school year. It had certainly not been one of our best! Last summer we found out we would have to move just as I was in the throes of morning sickness. The move was (as most moves are) a nightmare which caused our school year to be delayed until the end of October. I wanted to stay on course right up until Christmas because I knew we would need to take several weeks off in February when our new baby arrived. But (stop me if you've lived this story!) one thing and another seemed to always be in the way of our school time. After Christmas I was absolutely determined to make the most of the last five weeks before the baby's arrival... but then a flu bug hit our household and took its time working its way through the entire family....

So, yes, I was having a stressful year! We had not accomplished as much as I had intended by this point in time. But I am no rookie at this homeschooling thing, so I was able to calmly remind myself that it would all be fine in the long run. I work a lot with new homeschoolers and one of my "sermons" is about sticking it out when real life doesn't seem to be following your carefully prepared lesson plans. Everything gets back on track eventually and the life lessons your children learn in the meantime are as valuable as anything they can learn from a book.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.... but I forgot one simple little thing. I forgot why I'm doing this! Homeschooling is not just about what I want my children to learn from their textbooks... or unit studies... or even from just sitting around reading great books. I know my children are getting a good education - even in a year when our time in the classroom has been "catch as catch can." My teenage son has been reading some excellent books on his own and I can see a marked improvement in his writing skills as a result. He also finally seems to be having some kind of breakthrough in math (the end of "Middle School Brain Fog," I guess). I bought my fourth grader some books on bugs - her current passion - and she has been busily inhaling everything there is to know on the subject and delighting us at the dinner table with evidence of her vast knowledge. My quiet little first grader just reads and reads

and reads and writes loving notes to everyone in the family – and I can't help but notice what an excellent speller she has become! And my dear little kindergartener who has struggled with letter recognition and sounds for quite some time shows amazing improvement every time we go back to school. And her little face just beams and beams every time she correctly identifies a letter.

So my children are learning just fine... but something has been missing and my daughter identified it that night over our board game. Where is the joy? More to the point, where is MY joy? When my children are adults and people ask them what it was like to be homeschooled, what will they remember? Will they think of all the days spent on grammar and geography? Will they frown when they think of maps and charts and papers written? Or will a smile come to their lips when they remember art projects and board games and toddlers playing the clown? My children will graduate from our home school with the skills they need to achieve whatever goals they set for themselves; but what about the goal I set for myself? My ideas about homeschooling are about a lot more than book learning. I wanted to build a family. I wanted children who loved each other and enjoyed each other's company and preferred spending time at home to spending time in the world. I wanted warmth and caring and... yes... laughter. How can I teach my children to be joyful about life if I have been robbed of my own joy? And what was it that robbed me of that joy? I think there are several things that homeschooling moms face that threaten to turn them into sourpusses.

Problems

We all have them. Most of the homeschoolers I know are often facing financial problems, the result of living on one income. There are also many families facing very serious health issues. It is so easy to let our fear and worry carry over into everything we do. Oh, yes, we may wear a happy face for the world, but what happens when we are at home with our family? Do our children see us at our worst? Wouldn't it be an incredible testimony to our faith in God if our children could see us wearing a countenance of joy and praise in the face of adversity? Wouldn't that be a lesson so much more valuable than the study of prepositional phrases?

Tunnel vision

Working with new homeschoolers, I see that one of the first pitfalls of homeschooling is tunnel vision. But veterans are not immune! We get so focused on getting the job done that we lose sight of what the job really is. We research and study and buy and teach spelling and grammar and math and history until our heads are swimming. Working on lesson plans can become a full time job and we soon find ourselves drowning in paperwork. What was I doing? Oh, yes, I was building a loving home-centered family. Well what in the world has all this got to do with that?? Of course those things are important. They are the mechanics of

homeschooling. But if we get too focused on the mechanics we will lose sight of the true goal. We will also find that our joy has been robbed by all the work we are doing.

Burn out

We think of this as being an issue for veteran homeschoolers, but burn out can happen halfway through your first semester of home schooling. Many things can contribute to burn out, including the aforementioned problems and tunnel vision. The best cure for burn out is getting charged up. Here's another of my sermons for new homeschoolers – "Take time for yourself!" If you allow yourself to be drained, you will have nothing to give to your children. When people learn that I have seven children, home school them, and work in home school leadership, the inevitable question is, "How do you find time for yourself?!" For one thing, I have a wonderful husband. He makes it a priority to give me time to myself, even if it just means going to the grocery store by myself. He always sends me off with these words, "Have fun... take your time... we'll be fine." I also have at least two nights a month that I spend with other women, either at a Bible meeting or a homeschool meeting. And last, but certainly not least, I have a really great bathtub! I keep a good supply of bath oil and candles at all times! I spend a minimum of thirty minutes soaking away the cares of the day. The children are in bed and my husband always manages to keep the current infant well out of ear shot. This might sound like a very trivial indulgence but in reality it is one of the most important parts of my day. It is during this time that I reflect, plan, and spend time with God. My most intense prayer sessions often occur during this quiet time. It is here that I am able to make sense of childish outbursts, wounded feelings and neglected duties. I can offer the Lord my thanks, my repentance, and my petitions. Take time for yourself! Whether it is with a crowd or by yourself, make it a priority to have some recharging time. My time with other women leaves me feeling like less of a drudge, my time with other homeschoolers gets me excited about the whole process of educating my children, and my time with God restores my joy.

Whether you are brand new to home schooling or you've been home schooling for ten years, I would encourage you to ask God to help you to be ever vigilant about your attitude. When your toddler stands at your fourth grader's elbow and becomes a parrot while she is reciting her spelling words, let God nudge you a little. Instead of shooing him out of the room in frustration take a moment to stop and look. You will realize this is cute! You will smile. You will hug him. Your fourth grader will laugh. You will laugh. And there you have it... joy!

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2014 Update –

By the way, the kids I was playing board games with in this article are all grown up now, but board games still serve as one of our very best connecting points – and they still give us all opportunities to laugh, and laugh, and laugh....

