

Getting Off to a Great Start!

August, 2001

Another school year is about to begin. For some home schoolers, it will be their first. Here are some key points to consider that will help insure a good solid start to your home school adventure.

Home schooling is a lifestyle.

There is an abundance of statistics to prove that home schooling is the best educational method for those seeking high academic success. What can be better than a teacher to student ratio of 1:1? Many of you have chosen to educate your children at home because you are dissatisfied with what the public school system has to offer in the way of academics. But be forewarned! No matter what reason you have for teaching your children at home, you will quickly find that home schooling is more than just a way to teach your children – it is a way of life!



Of course, the first thing to change will be the way you have fun. Longtime home schoolers often joke that nothing is fun anymore – everything has to be a learning experience. You can't go to the grocery store without a lesson in math or economics. The simple family vacation has turned into one long field trip, with two months of studying beforehand and a term paper due at the end! Out go the vapid toys we used to buy... only educational toys will do now! Yes, I am being facetious, but only slightly.

The true change that home schooling brings to your home will not be quite as evident as the one just mentioned. It will take more time in some households than in others, but I feel confident that it will happen. It will be a change of the heart. You will find your heart leaning more toward your family. Time at home together will be something you begin to enjoy, even to covet. While I am sure that God is concerned about your child's academic education, I believe that it is this facet of home education that God desires when He calls you to teach your children at home. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 says, "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart; And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." Home education gives us the opportunity to not only offer our child the very best academic education, but to teach God's commandments to our children in everything we do.

Don't imitate public school.

Don't worry, I'm not going to make you give up your schoolroom! I would be lost without mine. What a joy it is to have one room to corral all of my educational material. A wall full of bookshelves! A closing cabinet for art supplies! Of course, those learning games and all those great books have a way of wandering into other rooms; and that is as it should be. In my house, learning is taking place all of the time (see Item #1 – Home schooling is a lifestyle). But when it is time to put things away, a well-organized school room comes in very handy.

When I caution you not to imitate public school, I am referring to something other than books and rooms. The trap is falling into the habit of just getting things done. Just doing the next lesson, just finishing the workbook... It is so easy to get caught up in the job at hand. What is the home schooler's favorite quote? "Education is not the filling of a bucket but the lighting of a fire" (William Butler Yeates). Step away from the public school model and spend time with your children, encouraging them to learn everything they can about the world around them. Use books, games, and simple observation skills to enrich their lives and make them want to learn more, more, more! Ask lots of questions, inspiring your children to look for answers.

Lifestyle changes may be needed.

Ouch... This last one might hurt. I promised you that your lifestyle would begin to change when you made your family a priority by choosing home education. But some changes will have to come from you, and they might take a little work. Ask for God's help as you look around your home to see if you have any of these traps waiting to trip you.

Trap #1 – Television. My family watches a hearty amount of television – probably more than many families. But I learned a long time ago that having the television on during the daytime was like leaving an enormous magnet in the middle of the living room and then dressing my children in metal! This can be especially dangerous with middle schoolers who form attachments to certain shows and then argue (or bargain!) with you when it is time for school work. The same is true for video games. Night time TV? A great family activity, right? Unfortunately, this has rarely been my experience. Occasionally, we all get together to watch a movie or a special program and I love to turn it into a real treat by including popcorn or hot chocolate. But having the TV on during the evening usually seems to lead to a lot of really bad attitudes – from children and adults. Instead, we observe "TV Off Time" from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m. We do a lot of reading aloud or we drag out board games and my husband plays with the older children while I play something simple with the toddlers and preschoolers. Let me warn you – TV Off Time doesn't go smoothly at first! You will meet with resistance if the television dominates your home. But stick to your guns. The payoff is worth it. In a matter of weeks your home will have a new routine and you will

find your children coming up with creative ways to spend all of that extra time!

Trap #2 – Routine. Speaking of routines, do you have one? In home schooling circles today you will hear a lot of talk about relaxing your educational technique. Throw out those workbooks and just read to your child! I encourage you to take this advice to heart, because it will do wonders for your family (see Item #2 – Don't imitate public school). But don't fall into the trap of doing nothing. It's only a few steps from "relaxed" to "lazy." Start your school day nice and early with a good breakfast. At our house, this was a problem for years. Everyone had breakfast when they happened to stagger in for it and no one was ever ready when I called for school to start. A couple of years ago we started having our Bible class over breakfast and this changed our family dramatically! Now we all meet at the breakfast table and start our day with prayer. Sometimes we still have cold cereal, but we all have it at the same time and this begins our day on schedule. The way our day begins usually dictates whether we will be able to stay on track. Another important element of our routine is bedtime. Since we don't have to wake at a certain time to catch the school bus, it is very easy to slide into a relaxed bedtime routine. We find ourselves staying up later and later, and then sleeping in later and later. Before we know it, we can't start school until lunch time! Especially with younger children, it is imperative to have – and enforce – a solid bedtime schedule.

Trap #3 – Housework. Schoolwork does need to be your priority and you absolutely don't want to put housework before schoolwork, but what to do when you are drowning in laundry and dirty dishes? You can consider this a subheading under "Routine." If you do not develop a system for keeping house, you will absolutely find yourself overwhelmed and, out of necessity, housework will become the priority. Now, we all have those times when schoolwork grinds to a halt and Mom declares a work day to get caught up on the housework. It usually comes when there has been a lot of activity, visitors, or perhaps a special project that has consumed too much time. Spring cleaning or a deep cleaning for the holidays are also occasions that make a break from schoolwork a valid occurrence. But your best plan of action is to develop a day-to-day system that allows you to stay on top of the housework. If you are domestically challenged ("Hello, my name is Mary and I am a miserable housekeeper"), you will find that many fine people have thoughtfully marketed their household system for you. Here are some suggestions: Don Aslett (*Clutter's Last Stand and Is There Life After Housework?*), Pam Young & Peggy Jones (*Side-tracked Home Executives*), Sandra Felton (*The Messies Manual and Messies No More*), Mary Carney (*Looking Well to the Ways of Your Household*). Don't forget to get your kids involved! Home management is an essential life skill! See *401 Ways to Get Your Kids to Work at Home* by Bonnie Runyan McCullough and *Choreganizers: The Visual Way to Organize Household Chores* by Jennifer Steward.

Whether you are new to home schooling or a 10-year veteran, remember that every school year brings another opportunity to get off to a good start!