

What Homeschooling Has Taught Me

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In thirteen years of home schooling, I have had the joy of watching my children learn many wonderful things. I have taught five children to read, starting with letter sounds and leading all the way to chapter books. I've watched addition and multiplication facts being tackled over and over and seen the light go on when fractions are mastered. When things aren't going so well and I feel like I'm not accomplishing enough, it is often very heartening to think back over all of the things that my children have learned. But lately I've been feeling reflective in a different way and have been mulling over some of the things that I have learned during thirteen years of home schooling.

Children are a blessing.

With seven children, I have often been met with statements like, "You sure have your hands full..." "I don't know how you do it..." and my favorite, "I would go crazy!" Home schooling a large family has sometimes seemed like nonstop chaos, but I have learned so many sweet lessons from the Father who gifted me in such abundance. The curiosity of a child can ignite a fresh fire in a burned-out parent. The exuberance of a child's love can make the most despondent parent take heart. When I am feeling low and my inclination is to retreat, if I will push myself to go and sit with my children for a story or a video, I come away so refreshed that I feel as though I've been touched by a healing balm. Stepping back from moments of frustration to just look at my family has served to renew my perspective many times. For example: Wednesday night at my house is a high-stress time. After a full day of school I have to feed the children and then dress them for church. We are always running late, shoes are always missing, and tempers are always tense. When my husband arrives home after his hour-plus commute from work, I shove a couple of corn dogs in his mouth, spin him around, and herd everyone to the van. I confess to often doing this with less than the sweetest tone and attitude. A couple of weeks ago, I was the last one out the door at the end of one of these episodes. I stopped on the porch to watch my six-year-old son lead my two-year-old son to the van. He had gently helped his little brother down the porch steps and now, holding his hand, was strolling leisurely down the walkway. I saw him pointing to different things in their field of vision saying, "See that, Baby?" It was a sweet sight that I hope I shall never forget.

God designed families to be familiar.

Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines familiar as "well acquainted with, intimate, close... affable, not formal or distant." Home schooling has given us the opportunity to avoid society's pattern of age segregation. While my children have many friends outside of our family, they are truly each other's best friends. They know each other's fears and strengths, support each other, encourage each other, and honestly love each other. Do they fight with each other, too? Oh, yes, my children are very normal. But I can clearly see a unity in my family that, I believe, exists because of the closeness our home schooling lifestyle has given us.

Teenagers are, in fact, wonderful people.

While I can only claim ownership of one teenager, he isn't the only homeschooled teenager I know. I realize that home schooling does not lessen the hormonal surges even one iota, but I do believe that the home schooling lifestyle gives us a wonderful opportunity to develop a relationship with our teenagers that will supply them with an extra measure of strength to take them through these challenging times. I believe that the public school setting exacerbates the tendency of our teenagers to pull away from us. Strong dependence on peers leads to a feeling that their friends are right about everything and their parents are the Enemy. Home schooled teenagers are not immune to the influence of their friends, but it is very rare to see the intense attitude of rebellion against parental authority that is so often the norm in society as a whole. When my 17-year-old son was younger, we certainly had our share of tantrums and shouting matches, but the time we spent reading historical novels or tackling algebra together seemed to heal many wounds before scars could develop. Now, I can honestly say that he is one of my very favorite people. He is witty and entertaining. As a friend, he is loyal and sensitive. He is protective of me and even of the siblings that he still can't resist tormenting on occasion. He is moving away from being my student, learning things that I can't teach as he explores the field of Visual Communication. I treasure the years I've had with him – even the most turbulent ones. Although I sometimes joke about the future when I will have an entire house full of teenagers, in reality I look forward to it. My children are all so very different, each with their own endearing (and challenging) qualities. Watching the young man that Danny has become, I wonder now who contemplative Laura will become... who sweet, complacent Sarah will become.... who eager, active Rachel will become.... I am so thankful that I will be able to watch these flowers, and all the other flowers in my garden, bloom to adulthood.

A considerable amount of schoolwork can be accomplished from mom's sickbed.

Numerous pregnancies have meant numerous bouts of morning sickness and postpartum recovery. In my early years of home schooling, I would become so depressed because I just didn't feel like "doing school." That's partly because "doing school" meant sitting in a certain

room around a certain table with a certain posture. One of the best lessons I've learned from home schooling I learned because of being in less than peak physical condition all year long. What did I learn? Mom's sickbed is apparently the very coolest place in the world to do school. In fact, it's so popular that even when I'm back to normal, it still beats the sofa out as best read-aloud location. Instead of losing a day of school, I can tell a child which books to bring to me and we can sometimes get a full day's worth of school work finished just sitting on my bed. I know that there are many times that an illness in the family is very serious and at those times school work is often best laid to the side, but so many times we can recover time that might be lost if we insist on doing things the "proper" way.

Home schooling is best accomplished at home.

Over the years, we've been involved in some terrific activities. Even though I have enough children so that no one ever has to play alone, I still want my children to have opportunities to be around other children. There are so many wonderful co-ops, activity groups, and academic classes being offered to home schoolers. Unfortunately, many times the effect of our involvement in outside activities has been more negative than positive. First of all, taking seven children anywhere is stressful. I have found that doing it more than once a week is just not wise. Not only do we fall behind in school work, but the daily household routine suffers. As a rule, a week of high activity will see flared tempers (especially mine!). Too much evening activity is just as bad. Sleep schedules are thrown off, evening chores are missed, and family time is nonexistent. I have found one rule to be undeniable in my home – no family time means no sense of family. When my children seem to be bickering more than usual, I sometimes stop to think, "How long since our last quality night together?... Have we been on the go too much lately?" Time for popcorn and a special movie, or a night of game playing. Time lost during the day leads to lack of focus and frustrated students. No wonder we're struggling with fractions; we've missed math twice this week! Outside activities can really enhance your home school experience, but it is vitally important that you seek a healthy balance for your schedule and remember the "home" in "home school."

Some things matter more than others.

My house is a mess. It always is. At best, I manage the clutter and disarray by keeping it from totally crippling us. In my heart, I dream of a Better Homes & Gardens model house. In reality, we try to keep things from growing in the pantry and strive for children's rooms that aren't fire hazards. I know plenty of home schooling families that have nice, neat homes; some of these families have as many children as I have. What's the deal? I guess it comes down to one thing – some things just matter more than others. If it really, really mattered to me that my home was immaculate, it would be a high priority. Please don't get the wrong impression and think that I'm just a slob who lets her children destroy her home while she reads novels and eats bon-bons. We have a chore system and everyone in my house is responsible for certain jobs. We try to do these jobs every single day and I endeavor

to teach my children the sense of pride that comes from doing a good job well. But a really clean living room means room for our favorite games and puzzles. Bunk beds just scream for bedsheet tents. And once you've built the perfect beanie baby zoo... how can you be expected to just put it all away?? Some day I will have no one to make messes and nothing but time to clean. Look for me in Better Homes & Gardens.

A few last thoughts on other lessons I've learned from home schooling...

- World history is much more interesting the second time around.
- Algebra is still algebra.
- There aren't many things sweeter than watching an 8-year-old teach a 2-year-old how to "read."
- The first crisp day of fall is a valid school holiday.
- Everything is a science project.
- Life is sweet and God is good.
- This too shall pass... sooner than you think.

