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Chapter **1**

Answering the Big Questions

Perhaps you just found out that your best friend intends to homeschool his children next year, and you want to know more. Maybe you're thinking of pulling your children out of the local school and want to know about your options. You may be a veteran homeschooler who always taught from the textbooks and now want to add different subjects or unique learning opportunities into your day. Maybe you've heard one particular term over and over, such as "unschooling," and want to know more about it.

Whatever your reasons for picking up this book, start here if you want to begin at the beginning. This chapter answers those big questions that are uppermost in almost every new homeschooler's mind, including a discussion about that elephant in the room, *socialization*. Find a comfortable chair, settle in, and begin your journey into the world of home education.

Getting to This Point

Stunned, you look up one morning over your cup of coffee. How did you get from being a perfectly happy public or private school parent to someone contemplating homeschooling? When did the feeling begin to dawn on you that you weren't

ready to send your bundle of preschool joy out into the school world, and you also aren't entirely sure he's ready to go, either?

You may be tired of spending four hours on homework after your child returns from a full day at school. Reteaching the skills at night to a child who passed the daytime hours at school is exhausting and frustrating for both you and your child. You're both tired, you want to get the work done and out of the way, and you may even quietly resent the intrusion into what used to be your family time.

Maybe the escalated violence in elementary, middle, and high schools worries you. You hear reports of guns and knives in school, police patrolling the halls, and you want to ensure (as best as you can) that your children remain safe. Or violence may have already touched your community, and you feel the need to react in a positive way while you still have time.

Perhaps you see your family values, traditions, or religious beliefs lessening as your child spends more and more time in an institutional setting, and this bothers you. Children function best from a strong foundation, which is hard to build when they spend six to eight hours per day outside a parent's care while they're still young. Parents see amazing changes even after bringing high school students into homeschooling from a troubled school setting, but building the foundation when they're young is easiest. In this case, homeschooling builds (or rebuilds) strong families, which in turn provides balanced adults for society.

Your child's lack of academic progress may concern you. As every parent knows, each child develops in her own time and in her own way. School materials are designed for the mythical middle-of-the-road child who learns certain skills at certain times. If your child fits outside the mold, she may fall behind in classes or show signs of stress. Pulling this child out of public or private school and teaching her at home takes the pressure off and allows you to spend as much time as necessary working through specific subjects or skills.

Perhaps family work or activity schedules clash irreparably with school schedules. Although not the most common reason for homeschooling, this is certainly as valid as any of the others. If one parent travels several months of the year or a family business or passion, such as stage or athletic performing skews your weekly schedule, then homeschooling may prove to be the optimal solution for your family. It allows you to be together, do what you need to do, and still meet your state's educational requirements.



REMEMBER

No matter what your reasons are for wanting to homeschool your children, if they center around what's best for your family right now, then your reasons are valid and worth pursuing. Home education is all about meeting your child's needs. If the school no longer meets those needs, and you're willing to take the plunge and give it a try, then you may find homeschooling a perfect fit.

Knowing Not to Know It All

No one knows it all, not even the teachers in the schools. Many schools assign teachers to lead classes on subjects they were never even trained to teach. At the beginning of a school year, these teachers, scrambling as much as anyone else, read the teacher's manuals to determine what in the world fifth-grade science is all about.

You don't need to know it all. You come to homeschooling with certain strengths and specialties. The topics you love and those things you do well become natural subjects in your homeschool. If you love to cook, for example, home economics class becomes an effortless and fun way to spend close teaching time with your children in the kitchen while passing on something that excites you. There's a good chance that they'll learn to cook well, too, as they catch your excitement and internalize it.



TIP

In the beginning, until you develop a support network of other families with specialties of their own, you teach what you know and use teacher's manuals or library books for the rest. If your children are older, you can even turn them loose in the library to research a subject that you know nothing about and then ask your students to report back to you after they learn about it. This way, you both learn something new.

With a good textbook in your hand or a sound idea of what you want to teach or learn and access to a decent public library or the Internet (almost every community has a good library these days), a homeschool parent learns alongside the student. Most homeschoolers, after three or so years teaching the kids at their houses, say, "I had no idea I'd learn so much along with them!"



TIP

After you meet a group of homeschool families who have children roughly the ages of yours, a natural networking begins to take place. You may offer to teach cooking to a group of kids whose parents think that the family can opener is a prized possession. In return, if you don't know a bass clef from a quarter note, another homeschool parent may be willing to hold an introductory music class for the group. By joining together and sharing skills, nobody needs to know it all. You spend less time fussing over the teacher's manual, and you still get it all done.

Affording It

The truth doesn't always make good news stories. News media relies on the sensational and the bizarre, while normal, run-of-the-mill life generally doesn't qualify as news. Homeschool media stories that tout homeschooling as expensive,

elitist, and only for the wealthy are simply not true. The truth, which is that anyone can homeschool for nearly free if they need to, doesn't make splashy headlines.



REMEMBER

Many people manage to homeschool their children for about \$500 per child, per year, on the average or less. Some swing it on \$500 per family. A few manage to teach for nearly free, but they're the truly dedicated bargain shoppers. Five hundred dollars per child, per year, is a good round figure for estimation because you can get a good number of books, supplies, and even a few extra goodies like field trips for that amount. Now, opting for a \$500 budget means that your child won't be using the coolest, newest whizbang textbooks for every subject, but it also means that you can provide a more-than-adequate education.

Set a budget for homeschooling supplies at the beginning of the year, but remember that you're bound to pick up some fun stuff along the way. So include that in your estimates. Setting up a reasonable budget can give you realistic boundaries while also letting you know that you can do this. Keep in mind that preschool and kindergarten are relatively cheap educational years. After you stockpile construction paper, glue, crayons, kiddy scissors, and some read-aloud books, you're most of the way there.

As you rise through the ranks, however, books get more and more expensive, until you reach the high school level where a new science book may cost you \$90 or more. With more than one child, however, your costs go down every time the next child in line uses that \$90 book. Planning a \$90 purchase when three children can use the book in turn gives you a sturdy text for \$30 per child in the long run.



REMEMBER

When you think about pulling your child out of a private or public school system, don't forget to consider all the items that you currently pay for that will become irrelevant, such as

- »» Book rentals
- »» Club fees
- »» School lunches
- »» Tuition (for private school)

You can apply that money to the extra costs that you now have, such as textbooks and lunches at home. Even clothing costs take a dive when you realize that you can homeschool in your sweats and no longer need school-appropriate clothes for each day of the week.

If you opt for low-cost or almost-free homeschooling, you find yourself trading time and energy for the money you'd normally spend on curriculum. Trips to the library take time; you may spend hours writing math practice sheets for your first grader or searching for them on the web so you can print them out. Buying the books you need for the whole year saves you time and gas, but it means you need to fork over the money to pay for the books yourself *and* find a place to store them in your home. Chapter 21 covers cost-cutting measures in depth.

On the other hand, families can spend as much as they like on homeschooling. I know at least one family that considers homeschooling their major spending hobby, and they have plenty of money to spend. Such a family may drop \$6,000 or more per child, per year, on homeschooling, but to do that you need to purchase the most expensive curricula that you can find.



TIP

Look for curriculum ideas and resources throughout this book. Also glance through Appendix A for more options. Although I could fill a 700-page book with nothing but recommendations for books and kits that you can use to teach with, I don't have that many pages. As I mention various teaching methods, age groups, and so on, I also try to throw in a few products or books that you may want to look at if you want to pursue that particular topic.



WARNING

If you purchase everything mentioned in this book, you'll easily top the \$2,000-per-child marker. No homeschool family does all this. For one thing, people only have 24 hours per day, and trying to follow all these systems and add-ons would take many times that.

Hanging in There

When you first jump into homeschooling, the question nags at you: How long can I keep this up? Another question that sometimes rankles is: How long will the educational establishment allow me to do this? Because these are two different questions, they need varying answers.

Signing up for the long haul

When your child spends her days in a home where she's loved, cared for, and guided to knowledge, she's in the best possible place. If you truly have her best interests at heart (and what parent doesn't?), then you'll ensure that she learns to read and add. Even if you miss something along the way, your child will grow to be a productive, useful adult. She can always pick up a community college course in the subject later if it proves to be extremely important to daily life. I know it's

hard to believe, but many balanced, rational people came from educational systems that offered no weekly art class. (If you and your child love art, then structure it as a course in your homeschool. Your child will survive, however, if he learns everything but art appreciation.)

With the energy and assurance that comes from knowing that you're doing what's best for your family, you can homeschool until and even through college. Although many parents are ready for their children to spread their wings and fly a bit after high school and encourage their fledglings to seek schooling or work outside the nest, some situations encourage you to homeschool even through college. For the 12-year-old who is ready for calculus, college at home is the best possible solution — after all, she needs to pursue some type of schooling until at least age 16. Community or online college courses meet these students' needs while allowing them to mature.



TIP

Just because you *can* homeschool through high school, of course, doesn't mean that you *have* to. Many families pull their children out of school for one or two years to help them over a tough academic or social spot. Then, after the problem is corrected and the student reads at grade level again or the sticky social situation irons out, they send their child back to school. The bottom line is doing what's best for your student. If he only needs a year away from the school routine to catch up, and you're comfortable sending him back after that year is over, send him! You may find, however, that after a year or two at home, he really doesn't want to return, and you don't want him to go. That's okay, too.



AT OUR
HOUSE

Most families take teaching one year at a time even after they homeschool several years. Those who find that homeschooling enhances family life and family schedules tend to stick with it the longest. We spent several years homeschooling during a time that the kids' dad traveled much of the time with his job. Because of our flexibility, we could periodically pack the schoolbooks in the middle of the fall, winter, or spring and go with Daddy to a conference. After we arrived in the conference city, I covered school in the hotel room during the early mornings, and we would take advantage of local museums, parks, city fountains, and pools for the rest of the day. My daughter still says she did math in every hotel she ever saw.

Staying at home forever



TIP

The United States allows you to teach at home as many or as few years as you want to, no matter what state you live in. Although each of the 50 states publishes its own requirements for homeschoolers, none of them says that you can only teach between this year and that one. You can begin homeschooling in preschool and continue through college if you want to, although often parents pull their children out of a public or private school because something isn't working and they homeschool to bring balance back to the child. Or, if parents begin homeschooling in

the preschool years, they may opt to send their children to public or private high school. Few families homeschool all the way through the first four years of college.

Look for chapters that cover various homeschooling ages in Part 2.

Breaking the News to Mom

The parents in your life, whether they are actually your parents, favorite aunts and uncles, or close friends who function in a guiding role for you, *always* have something to say when you announce a major lifestyle change. Sometimes they're for the change; other occasions tend to spark less-than-positive responses. Although they usually mean it in love, negative reactions from those around you tend to derail you if you aren't ready for them. Be prepared — when you announce that you're thinking of homeschooling your children, someone will probably give you flack.

Before you respond, take a moment to consider whether a person is having a knee-jerk reaction because you threaten to go against time-honored United States culture (at least for the past hundred years or so) or whether this person is voicing well-grounded objections. If you truly believe this is the best course for your family members today, you need to proceed forward in the face of negative reactions.



TIP

This book gives you the ammunition you need to discuss homeschooling rationally. In fact, you can even hand a copy to your mom, if you like. In 30 chapters, this book talks about all the major homeschooling movements, educational needs of children at various age levels, and even includes chapters on adding zing to your school days.

When you discuss your decision with your mom, tell her what you know. Homeschoolers do get into college if they choose to go, they aren't afraid to play outside or make friends, and today's homeschoolers have many, many activities to choose from in addition to time at home with the books. If you have already decided on a teaching approach (such as classical curriculum, unschooling, or operating as a satellite school, which are all discussed later in this book), tell her about it. Tell her why you chose this method over all the others. In short, share your enthusiasm and hope.

She may not agree with you at first, but time will probably prove your decision to be a sound one. When we began homeschooling, I worked with a nonverbal, almost-3-year-old. That child not only learned to speak his native language fluently, but he went on to graduate from college, work as a web developer, and start his own international not-for-profit dedicated to making information on the

Internet accessible to everyone regardless of disability or restriction. I'd say that for this child, homeschooling worked!



When we announced that we planned to homeschool, even our friends — not to mention our family members — thought we'd lost it. Twenty-five years ago, homeschooling was much less common than it is today. (Some of the people who are close to us still think we're wackos, in spite of the evidence provided by two well-adjusted children. Oh well, there's no accounting for some people's opinions.)

Addressing Socialization, the Hot Homeschooling Buzzword

It's the first question you get from strangers who discover that you homeschool. Sometimes you even hear it from well-meaning relatives. Usually, however, anyone who actually knows your children on more than an, "Isn't that Rainbow's kid?" basis, also knows better than to demand information about your child's social life. (At least, they should.)

Among veteran homeschoolers the topic is simply referred to as *The Question*. The dialog goes something like this: "Hey, guys. I met somebody at the mall today who asked me if I homeschool and then asked me *The Question*." At this point everyone in the room responds in unison: *What about socialization?*

How do you address *The Question*? Before you can answer, you need to determine the question at hand. Is the person asking about *social outlets*, the time we allot to spend with friends and do fun things together, or is he actually asking about *socialization*? These are two entirely different questions.

Social outlets

Social outlets are a no-brainer. In fact, so many opportunities exist for homeschool families to spread their social wings and meet with other homeschooling (as well as nonhomeschooling) families that a whole section later in this chapter covers the options in depth. If someone asks you how your child finds social outlets, list the myriad of activities that nearly every homeschool family involves themselves with. Lessons, sports, scouting, religious organizations, and so on fill our children's time and create excellent social opportunities.

Or do they? We think they do because we continue to sign them up for the classes and the organizations.



WARNING

Do you find yourself seeking an endless roster of activities? What purpose does endless activity serve? Is it to meet an educational need or to pacify some unknown questioner who may peer over our shoulders at any minute? If not for educational purposes or to fill empty hours, why do we feel that we need to satisfy anyone but our family with our activities? (I tried scheduling my days to pacify the family dog for a while, but that didn't work at all, so I gave it up.)

Socialization

The majority of questioners ask about something much more nebulous than scouts or Sunday school. The words are the same: *What about socialization?* However, they don't want to know what you do so much as where your children will stand when they mature.

Now when The Question is posed to you, and you truly understand the query, you are free to answer the question instead of providing a few fluffy comments or blindly running through your after-school itinerary. (Or telling the person to bug off, which is also an acceptable response.) The question is really *How will your child fit into society if he doesn't go to school?* The answer, of course, is that your child fits into society just fine.

Your child learns from you and the other adults and almost-adults in his life. He gets a much better view of how life really works because he isn't incarcerated with a selection of age-mates all day long. Your child sees wisdom at work as she watches you plan and complete tasks, interact with people in your community, and schedule your life to get (almost) everything done. She learns your values and morals as she listens to what you say and watches what you do. In the meantime, your child learns to

- » Interact with the people around him, regardless of age, sex, or social class.
- » Observe and join adults in conversation that includes more meaningful topics than what the latest cute junior-high boy wore to school.
- » Work with others as a team for longer than an hour on the playing field. Working together becomes a way of life with homeschool students and parents.
- » Spend concentrated time and effort becoming good at a skill, such as dance, engineering, or computers.

This is the kind of interaction that leads to healthy, independent citizens.

Presenting the Issue of the Year

For years socialization always appeared as the homeschooling issue of the year, no matter which year it happened to be. Although you don't hear it as often as you used to, people still raise this as The Homeschooling Issue. Of course, it's only an issue among people who don't actually teach their children at home. The veteran homeschoolers know better.

By the time a homeschool family has a couple years' experience, its members understand that the best social place for its children is the home environment. Where else can you learn to relate to people from all different age groups, strengths, and weaknesses without resorting to insanity or institutionalization?

Families pass along values, morals, and standards as they interact together. Parents teach their young ones how to interact with society, how to tell right from wrong, and why they should avoid sticking their fingers in light sockets. (Ouch! That one hurt.) In fact, parents do a fine job through about age 5, and then someone else comes along and tells them that they need to send their children to school to learn all that matters.

Take time for a quick trip back to introductory logic. If you did a great job when they were 2, and you were magnificent when they were 4, then why is it that all of a sudden you need help at 6, 8, and 10? That doesn't make sense. How is someone you don't even know more qualified to teach your children about society than you are?

You learn about society by living life. Sitting in a classroom for six hours each day while someone tells you to be quiet and listen isn't living life. Unless you happen to be a professional bank depositor for a large corporation, neither does real life consist of standing silently in a line several times per day.

So if these scenarios aren't real life in the adult world, why do we insist that our children fit a mold that we ourselves wouldn't be caught dead in? I don't know about you, but if I worked in a job where I needed to raise my hand to go to the bathroom and then marched there and back carrying a brightly colored tag that reads *Girl Bathroom Pass* in large block letters, I think I'd find another position. At home, my children don't raise their hands for permission to go to the bathroom. Do yours?

THEY WON'T FIND ONLY 25-YEAR-OLDS ON THE JOB

Imagine working for a company that only hires 25-year-old workers. Everywhere you turn you see other 25-year-olds: in the mailroom, at the computers, in the warehouse. Each person is exactly your age.

Sounds vaguely *Brave New World*-esque, doesn't it? Thankfully, it's not reality.

Homeschoolers get a jump on this whole reality thing. Because they incorporate multiple ages into learning and life from the beginning of homeschool (whenever that may be), these students cope without shock if their first manager is old enough to be a grandfather (or, conversely, young enough to pass as an older sister). Homeschoolers grow up with the idea that people come in all ages, all sizes, and all shapes. After all, that's what they see at home, in the educational co-op, and in the community.

They learn to be kind to younger people and listen to older ones. They find out that a best friend can be several years older, several years younger, or the exact same age. And they understand that they can pursue interests and hobbies different from those of a close friend yet still share some things in common. They learn to be individuals.

This carries over into the workplace. These students think through problems and suggest solutions because that's what they do at home. They tend to follow instructions even though they may ask *why* the first time or two. If I ran a retail establishment, this is the kind of student employee I'd want working at my store. How about you?

