

Beginning Home Education

By Lyn Loxton ©

When the notion of homeschooling our children first enters our thoughts, most of us instantly dismiss the idea that we could ever do such a thing. After all, there is this huge infrastructure in place costing millions of dollars per year, employing thousands of highly qualified people, using curriculums designed by trained minds using the latest researched and up-to-date techniques. We have been part of that as children and have come up through its ranks, survived its idiosyncrasies and have been spewed out into society like a little army of newly qualified members of an indoctrinated public ready to take our place in this very well ordered and controlled society. Who are we to compete with this? It is not possible.

This is the way we have been trained to think and it is so ingrained into the very depths of our being that most people will never in a lifetime be able to grasp the fact that you don't need schools to learn. It is an inconceivable thought to most of the population, so when we do start to entertain thoughts of stepping out of this mould and teaching our own children, before we even publicly announce our ideas, our very own minds start to put up barriers and hurdles of doubt.

We immediately start worrying how we are going to teach them what they are supposed to know, how do we keep up grade levels so that they can get into university, how will we ever know which of these invisible levels they are up to? Even though we have decided to teach our own children, the indoctrinated ideas that we have grown up with still come pouring out. We have in our minds the 9-3.30 image – the grades, the tests and the projects and we think that this is what homeschooling is about – school in the home – and the initial thought of it is overwhelming.

We all have a right to be worried. The structure of our society today revolves around the education system. It revolves around having the right piece of paper thus enabling entry into the right course and thus ending up in a respectable job. It is what everybody is expected to do and everything in our society is geared to this progressive outcome almost from the time our children are born. So – yes, to decide a different future for our children, to go against the grain of society so to speak is un-nerving to say the least.

It is now about 25 years since John Holt and others forged their ways into the home education wilderness and we are fortunate now to be able to benefit from their daring in the form of research that has shown undeniably that homeschooling not only works but is proving to be an outstanding form of education. (see *Otherways* 100) Through the use of the internet, books, local Home Education magazines and talking to those who have raised their children without school, we are able to conduct our own research and this helps in some ways to give us the confidence to step into this unknown realm.

Right – now we have made the decision – what next? How do I start.?

If you have been researching the subject you would have heard by now of the two main methods – natural child learning and curriculum based learning. All of our instincts turn naturally toward the curriculum- based learning whether we want to or not because this is how it was for us and this is how it is for most people. The talk around town is all about grades and reading levels and times tables. These thoughts and ideas are almost impossible to ignore – even if we have chosen natural child learning, the niggles about whether they are learning the right things keep returning time after time.

We need to understand here that curriculums are designed for use in schools. Levels and grades are put in place for the purpose of teaching en masse, as this is the only way one adult can oversee 'thirty-odd' learners in one room. As home educators in a one on one situation, we do not need to pay heed to a set curriculum or to set grades. Once we understand this, then the real question becomes how and when do I begin to teach reading and writing and math. The answer – when your children ask for it!

One thing that becomes apparent when we have children, is that the children themselves take charge of their own learning quite quickly. As babies and toddlers they call the shots whether it is feeding, walking, talking, sleeping or toilet training and at times we feel as though we are just along for the ride!

Teaching a child to read is no harder than teaching him to tie a shoe. We all know how to tie shoes, therefore we can teach it – we all know how to read, therefore we can teach it. We rely on instincts, our knowledge of how the child likes to be told things and when the right moment comes along we launch into our explanation of how to tie a shoe. It will happen at a random moment in time. We won't have had to

prepare ourselves for it at all because we all know how to tie a shoe. Reading is the same. When the moment comes "Mum, what does this word say?" we are ready for it because we know how to read. There is nothing magical about it and we do not need to be highly trained to do it.

What unsettles many parents is the perfectly natural phenomenon of individual timing. Not all children are going to want to learn to read or write at any given age and again we have been conditioned by the school system that says each and every child shall learn to read at five years of age... or else. Most children if left to themselves will read when they are ready to read – this could be at three years of age or ten years of age.

Much research has been devoted to finding out how children are able to master language so quickly with little or no direct instruction. The answer is that children have a natural genius for it – they have an innate capacity to generate complex linguistic structures through experimentation and play. However, the child does not develop this creative ability unless there are the proper support systems in place. This natural linguistic genius of the child requires parental guidance and stimulation in order to be fully realized. And so it is with reading.

Recent studies in literacy have shown that children also have this ability when it comes to reading. It has been found that children as young as two can recognise what a story is when they are being read to and that adults get the story from a book. They begin to form attachments to favourite books. At three or four they begin to make particular connections to the printed text in books, understanding that a line of text is read from right to left and top to bottom and that the story moves from page to page and has a beginning and an end. At this age many children will also start to begin reading print around them such as brand names on cereal boxes, or traffic signs and bill-boards. They sit down and 'read' a book using their own words to tell a story using all the right intonations, breaking points, and inflections. This suggests that they have already mastered many of the underlying skills of literate behaviour. They start to create their own books consisting of page after page of scribbles, and start sending simple notes to family members in symbols that begin to resemble letters. During this time many young children will have taught themselves to read. It is regrettable that young children starting school at this stage are treated as completely illiterate and forced to submit to so-called pre packaged

“one-size-fits-all” readiness activities therefore disrupting the natural genius that nature has so endowed on the young of our species. Parents can however, at home, allow children space and freedom to complete this natural learning task in their own time.

Children also have a natural genius for maths, science and history.

Have you ever watched your child sort shells or stones into groups, or share out a box of smarties with their siblings so that they all get the same number? Ever noticed the hours that a young child spends investigating the properties of muddy water or the way some toys float or sink in the bath? These things and the plethora of other experimentations that young children make every day, are the beginnings of the natural learning cycles for maths and science. History also makes its entry into their lives in the form of their interest in the lives of their grandparents, or an old farm wagon or dinosaurs. They will seize upon something that excites them, demanding to know more and more, until we have exhausted nearly every book on Ancient Romans in the library. Parents need to regard this inner spark with a sense of sacredness, cultivating it as one would nurture a growing seed rather than ‘plying’ it with artificial stimulants.

As time goes by

Schools use grades, tests and levels to measure children’s knowledge – or to be seen as trying to. Schools use curriculum to gradually introduce children to higher levels of learning. To the parent’s eye it is an obvious process, one that many take comfort in and one that also many agonise over when the child is seen to be falling behind. When we have our children at home, this sequential style of learning – this one again that we all grew up with – is not there. It is not obvious to us that our children are progressing as others think they should and there is not one of us that doesn’t at times worry about this.

Again we can take comfort in the vast amount of research that has been done into the natural learning styles of children. Natural learning does not happen in a structured step-by-step manner but in a sequence of stops and starts, periods of stagnation and recovery times, times of forgetting and times of great discovery. It can happen on a daily basis in the brief flash and in a way whose only evidence might be a sparkle in the child’s eyes. It can happen as a major peak experience after months of regression and stagnation, like a child that suddenly finds they can read or balance a bike. There will

be peak learning periods throughout our children’s lives and there will be the doldrums when they seem to be recharging their batteries for the next explosion. Children who have never been in the school system are perfectly comfortable with this type of learning. For them it is simply life. It is us – the parents – who have to be trained in ways of natural learning to become comfortable with it.

Our main task is to provide a learning-rich environment for our children. We all revel in this when our babies are born, buying brightly coloured mobiles, music boxes and rattles – all things to stimulate their interest. All we have to do is continue this as the children grow and at some point they will take the lead in expressing the things that most interest them. In a way, parents are also naturally equipped with skills to do just this. In the eons before even the words ‘school’ or ‘education’ existed, parents have been successfully passing on the skills of life and cultural traditions to their children. We are still well-equipped to do this, more so in fact that we ever have been before. We are for the most part a highly educated bunch with access to a whole world of resources.

When I first started writing this article, I fully intended to write about the uses of curriculums as a method of teaching children at home. The more research I did, however, on the child’s natural abilities to learn about almost everything, the more convinced I became that curriculums are an artificial, un-natural and unnecessary way to go. By all means, use them as a guide and support especially when you are starting out. There is a vast array of enticing workbooks that we can purchase for our children to have fun with. These are a great tool to have in the home and one that many children may use to grasp the use of words or work out long division with – they are a great tool but they are just that – a tool – one of the many tools that children will use to discover the world with – along with the mud puddle and the pile of stones.

As parents we must let go of pre-conceived ideas of how learning works before we can fully appreciate the learning process itself. Yes – our children are going to grow up to be different – there is no denying that. They are going to be different as children, as teenagers and as adults. We must steel ourselves from trying to rein in that difference and to try not to control it. Let them be different – rejoice in it. Difference is diversity and the human race needs this diversity to survive.

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