

There has always been a lot of confusion with the public's perception of what homeschooling is. People expect to do schooling in the home and therefore expect to be able to purchase homeschooling as a package for their children. Many are quite confused and even alarmed when they find out that homeschooling is in fact all about choices that they have to make and new ideas they have to think about.

People consider homeschooling their children for many reasons – philosophical, religious, travel and for many these days, the total frustration of seeing them hurt and unhappy in school. Until these reasons force us to explore new ways, we have never really given much thought to our children's education – education happens in schools, it happened to us, therefore it will happen to our children – full stop.

The only choice we as parents have been able to make as far as education goes is to opt for public or private schools and that's about it. Both forms present similar curriculum and no matter how bored or unhappy our children are our choices have been limited to changing schools and perhaps, if we are lucky, a change of teacher or grade level. Our little poets, artists, nature lovers, mathematicians, builders, scientists and dreamers were left uninspired, under-stimulated and unfulfilled for twelve whole years and we have been powerless to make it any better for them.

Homeschooling is a chance to make it better because homeschooling is all about choice. Homeschooling can be whatever you wish it to be. If you wish it to be school in the home and continue to follow a full curriculum with exams and tests – it can be that. If you wish just to let your children play and explore the world at their own pace and according to their own interests – it can be that as well. It can also be a mixture of both – the choice is all yours and theirs.

'Homeschooling' or 'home education', which better encompasses the meaning of teaching children at home, gives parents the opportunity for the first time, to really think about what sort of things they would like to see their children learn and experience. It can go as far as a choice of lifestyle you would like your child to grow up and partake in or it can be simply sharing with your children the things that are most important to you whether it be the love of the environment or sport, politics or music, travel and languages.

Initially, the thought of delivering a good education to your child can be quite daunting and so first off parents new to home education usually start exploring the various methods and disciplines of schooling that proliferate today. One thing we need to remember though – knowledge is knowledge – it doesn't really matter what type of package it comes in, what

the label reads or what it costs. Knowledge is freely available at all levels whenever we wish to access it. Parents just need to decide how they wish to deliver this knowledge to their children. The ways and means to do this comes back to our individual thoughts and ideas of what an education should be and what we would like to see our children gain from it. We can strive for academic excellence and set up a study routine for several hours a day, using texts and literature that we have carefully selected, enrolling them in music, French and dance classes in preparation for an academic career of their choice. We can also simply encourage our children in whatever they enjoy doing, read to them about anything and everything, introduce new experiences when we think the time is right and generally live life together. Both of these ways and anything in between can be highly successful for your child.

Remember though, even if they seem to be doing nothing, education is happening all the time, every minute of the day. It is like the air we breathe - it sustains us, nourishes us and gives us strength. Children will learn all the time from whatever is happening around them – this is nature's design.

If we need cues and ideas about how and what to teach our children we just need to observe them – they will give us all the ideas we need. If you watch any child or young person closely you will notice fairly early on that he will show an intense interest in a few things in particular and have his own way of working things out. Is he academically minded or a dreamer, a musician or an artist? We can observe whether or not he loves books and reads early or if he shies away from letters and numbers for a while and leans more towards mechanical things - whether he has a love of physical activities or hunts for bugs in the undergrowth. All of these observations are telling us who he is, where he's going and how he intends to get there. If there is one thing that I have learned from home educating it is that all children are born with their very own blueprint for life. There is no way you can make a musician out of an engineer or a lawyer from an artist although the pressure of society often encourages kids to strive for high power, high wage-earning careers despite the artist or writer jumping up and down trying to get attention – it never really works to anyone's satisfaction.

As parents we also need to realise that we are quite capable of home educating our children regardless of our own educational background. We all have talents that we bring to this and it is best to start with what we know whether it be art, computer skills, building, literature or cooking and work outwards from there. We have access to everything we will ever need to give our children a really wonderful start to life.

Choices in education become even more important in the

secondary years. If your children have been at home throughout the primary years, their interests are usually well and truly established by the time they move into their teens. For young people that are being removed from the system in their early teens, having been confined to school class rooms for many years, it is often much more difficult to adjust to a life without bells, tests and homework. Some are transformed instantly, others need plenty of time and encouragement to start living and learning again.

It is again very important to watch these young people and try and identify where their passions and interests lie. Try and remember what interested and enthralled them as small children. Maybe now they are spending a lot of time designing websites, or fixing your neighbour's car or helping on the farm, doing maths equations in their heads, writing movie scripts, building chicken houses or dancing all day long. These are the clues as to where their interests and passions lie and these are the things to be encouraged. Making the decision to remove a teenager from secondary school can be a terrifying ordeal. Turning one's back on traditional well-worn paths takes courage but this is the time when many new pathways will open up. Now not only do parents have choices but now so do the young people themselves.

A school's curriculum is very restrictive. Knowledge is doled out in small spoonfuls according to height and age. Real learning doesn't work this way. Real learning has no boundaries or grades and children can fly as high and as far as they wish with it. There is no way that institutional learning can replicate real learning or allow students to learn at the levels they are really capable of and they are capable of so very much more. As a result, many young people become depressed, bored, angry, turn to drugs and alcohol and, sadly for some life itself ceases to be worth the daily effort.

Parents who make the decision to remove a young person from this institutional nightmare are in fact giving them a new beginning. No doors close and many more will open. Once released from the restrictive embrace of a set curriculum most young people begin to thrive. They have choices everywhere they look. It is often just a matter of what to choose and when.

For most the VCE or HSC has been held up as a goal they must aspire to if they want to get anywhere at all in life. These courses consist of a collection of minor portions of subjects which for the most part are irrelevant to a future employer and to the young people themselves. So the young people finally arrive at the end of an often tortuous journey not knowing much about anything in particular at all. These courses involve tens of thousands of young people across the country all studying exactly same thing, reading exactly the same chosen novels and sitting exactly the same exams. I for one can't see how this society

can ever go forward when the excitement and freedom of real learning is suppressed in favour of a tightly controlled, inflexible curriculum, designed specifically to train - not educate - to train uniform, compliant workers and dependent, reliable consumers. The VCE is simply testing endurance and study skills. It is not a test of intelligence or ability and all young people have these in abundance. There are many pathways into the careers of our choice, it is only a matter of finding the right one at the right time. For many people it takes years of life experiences before they can truly identify their choice of life's work.

We are all fiercely protective of our freedom of choice in all aspects of our life. We are free to choose the type of lifestyle we wish, yet, when it comes to the one thing that will most influence our child's life - their education, we don't seem to want look very far for choice. The existence of schools as the only source of a child's education seems to be so deeply ingrained in us that most seem to have begun to see it as part of the natural world. At some deeper level though, we all know what a thoroughly unpleasant, hurtful, uninspiring and soul-destroying experience school really is.

The choice to try something other than school for our children can be a life changing experience - often for the parents as well as the child. Most families live their lives influenced by society without seriously giving it a lot of thought - they just somehow seem to end up in a place they never planned to be, doing a job they were never especially interested in, living in a place they don't particularly like. Maybe it all started out with making do with limited choice in schools, opting for courses for which they were eligible and then a choice of career simply because they would always have plenty of work. Somewhere along the way though, something was lost. Many probably don't even remember it going or what it felt like in the first place - our soul, our spirit, this blueprint of life we were born with. If we are lucky, it will keep poking and prodding at us until we are forced into acknowledging its existence and perhaps allowing it back into our lives again.

Choice is a healthy thing - choice and diversity. By allowing our children to learn as they were born to learn, unrestricted and free, we are allowing their natural talents and abilities to flourish. Who knows what your child will be capable of in the future, what they may invent or compose or write or lead.

We all know that something happens to our children when they go to school. They can't take with them their intense curiosity about everything, their individual ways of learning and their very own level of energy and intelligence. These things can't thrive in school. Children have a bright spark of curiosity that fuels their intense period of learning in the first five years of life. Once they

start school, this starts slowly to dim and eventually goes out altogether. Our confident little boys who know and understand such words as diplodocus, Jurassic, Powerbook and multiple fractions suddenly become confused, angry and lethargic.

They come to believe that they are not special, that no-one really cares that they are an expert on animals from the Triassic era or that they can break a horse or identify 239 species of birds or multiply fractions standing on their heads. In fact these things are downright embarrassing, something to be ashamed of and at that moment they start to withdraw into that space we all have - that space we all go to lick our wounds and soothe our soul. That space becomes a home for many young people from which many never really emerge.

The journey to becoming a compliant, non-thinking, consumer-oriented team member of society has begun and they have had absolutely no choice in the matter.

There are many children who fight the system all their lives, who don't want to conform and spend days doing things they have no interest in. The system fights back of course with weapons such as detention, failing grades, bad reports and labels such as 'school refuser', 'troublemaker' and 'no hoper'. It is quite often these young people who, if they don't succumb to drugs or alcohol, go on to become the movers and shakers - the musicians and adventurers, writers and environmentalists that inspire the rest of us. They had a choice of sorts - a fire in them that wouldn't be quenched whatever happened.

There is not one of us today that would give up our right to free choice and certainly not very many of us who would freely choose to go back to school and yet, knowing what we do, we happily send our children in the belief that they need this experience as a preparation for life! Life doesn't need suffocation as a preparation, it needs fresh air and wide open spaces.

We do have a choice though and if we wish we can make it on their behalf. Choosing to teach them at home, as with all new adventures is not without its ups and downs. It is an unfamiliar road and can be a lonely one for us. We need to have a goal to shoot for though and that goal can be to raise children who are not afraid of making choices and standing up for what they believe in. Children who are free to go wherever their dreams can take them and who can make their own decisions about who they are, where they are going and what their place in the world might be.

Choices such as this can effect generations to come. Choices can change the world.

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# Home Education A Choice For Life



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