

## Homeschooling-- It's Really a Lot Like... Housework?

From Susan Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 62 (Spring 1998) of the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.]

Like WHAT?? You maybe thought I'd say, "homeschooling--it's really a lot like loving." Or maybe "a lot like growing." Or at least "it's really a lot like living." But housework???

I know right off that you may think that homeschooling has nothing at all in common with housework-- or at least they may often seem to be mutually exclusive realms. I know homeschooling and housework don't always take place in the same house. I've often heard many great homeschool moms admit that they felt they either could homeschool well or keep up their housework well-- doing both at the same time, on the same day (or the same month?), seemed like an impossibility. And finally if you know me at all, or have been to my house, you probably know that housework is not my forte (to put it pretty mildly). So what am I talking about here??

Well, I've come to realize that a lot of the problems many of us have with homeschooling are really very similar to problems we may have with our housework-- and the way we handle both and view both can help us get over some of these common hurdles. See if any of these analogies ring true for you....

**1. Homeschooling is just like housework because.... just buying the right curriculum won't necessarily mean you'll get the promised results, just like buying the right cleaning tools won't necessarily make your house shine.** There's something called, "taking it out of the package and using it" that comes into play. How many of you have (like me) bought some nifty cleaning gadget-- say, recently I finally coughed up for Don Aslett's extension-arm window squeegee kit, so that now my very high second floor windows could sparkle. I now own the kit, I have it stored in a very accessible spot, and I've even read up briefly on how to use it. Only problem? I haven't yet used it. Should I complain that this product is crummy, because my windows are still grimy, just because I've never used it?

Now, the homeschooling tie-in: how many of you have bought some marvelous new curriculum product at a seminar and workshop. You bring it home, sure that NOW your problems are over, that now your kids will not only learn but be enthusiastic about learning. Only problem? You never got it out of the box. It's sitting there on your shelf, maybe still in the shrink wrap. That's not the product's fault.

**2. Homeschooling takes time, just like housework.** One thing I've learned is that it can be hard to spend time on, say, one major remodeling project around the home-- such as repainting my upstairs bathroom after a new ceiling had just been installed and the roof leaks fixed-- while simultaneously keeping up with the laundry (the washer and dryer are right in that bathroom). Once it was all completed, then I could get to those piles of clothes-- and neaten up for the house guests due to arrive that next afternoon also.

Homeschool tie-in? You launch into a major project with your kids for the upcoming history or science fair, and this involves maybe papier mache, making posters, creating models, binding a book, making signs and labels, finishing up a lengthy report-- all fun, all energizing,

all full of great learning, and things that will make memories for your kids (and great photos for the portfolio). But can you still get in your regular math time with the kids? Or make sure they practice piano for 45 minutes? Or see that they finish their chemistry lesson to send in for their high school correspondence course? Probably not. You may just have to wait on those more normal daily homeschooling tasks until the flurry is over with the project fair.

And just like it's worthwhile to take the time out to paint that bathroom, it will also be worth it to put off your regular studies a bit to do this special project. Still, I wouldn't want to be always in the midst of home fix-up transformations-- and I wouldn't want to continually be keyed up working on major huge, creative, homeschooling projects. We all need our breathing spaces to get back to normal at times.

**3. Homeschooling needs to be continually redone, over and over and over again.... just like housework.** Kids just don't always "get" it the first time around. I think of all the times I've had a really nice math time with Hannah, who's ten. We go over multiplying fractions, and we do it in such a way that she really understands and gets it-- we use hands-on activities, diagrams, and really give meaning to the whole concept. Then, Christmas vacation hits. Math, especially multiplying fractions, gets put on the back burner for a while. When we come back to fractions in mid-January (after that bathroom paint job...), she's stumped, does something really nonsensical and looks totally perplexed. She's forgotten our previous lesson. Just once or twice was not enough-- lessons need to be redone, added to, reinforced, and regularly continued and given new meaning.

In the same way, one time I really got my hardwood floors clean for an upcoming visit from my mother and sister (they live in Georgia, so don't get up often). I actually got down on my hands and knees, scrubbed with a rag over every inch, used a heavy duty vacuum to get up all the dirt in between the floorboards, and they really looked good. My mother even noticed.

But a month later, let alone several years later, was this good work still in evidence?? Not quite. It had to be redone. It had to be continued. Doing a great cleanup today will not do a cleanup in the future, just like doing a great lesson today will not mean that I also don't have to have a great learning time with Hannah in the future too. Developing regular habits in both arenas of our lives are really helpful, and something I still struggle with. I'm guessing some of you may also.

**4. Ever notice how dejunking always helps make both housework and homeschooling easier?** I know I do have the sort of temperament that rather enjoys certain types of clutter-- but not all types. When the disorderly piles start getting too out of hand, in either the homeschool project room or the rest of the house, I start getting unsettled. I've learned gradually how much better I feel-- and therefore how much better everyone else feels-- when I've had a good reaming out of some area of the house. I've learned that before I can let myself visit my sister and her terrific secondhand bookstore, I need to make myself go through my shelves and gather up at least a couple of boxes to donate to the cause first. Sometimes I'm astonished at the crumpled books that nobody ever really liked that are still shoved into our crowded shelves-- out they go! Now I can hit my sister's store with a clear conscience.

**5. You can learn more about housework by reading up on it, just like you can learn more about homeschooling by reading up on it.** Sometimes we think we need to invent the wheel all over again from scratch-- when there might be some good models out there we might want to use. I can learn about how to wash my windows (I'm sure I'll get to it this spring, guys... or maybe this summer, after evaluation season) from Don Aslett's books. I'm grateful for the little tip I read once on putting a pad of paper on the wall of the kitchen so you can easily write down items for your shopping list right as they occur to you-- like when you find that, no, you can't make onion soup tonight for supper because you are out of onions. This book helped me over this little housekeeping bump.

Same with homeschooling-- take initiative and read up on what others have done. None of us automatically knows great ways of introducing fractions or decimals or of helping kids learn the mysteries of reading, let alone how to help a kid with trigonometry or how to get a child into college. Find out what's worked for others, see what ideas might fit for your family. Be resourceful-- the resources to help you are all out there.

**6. Basic organizational skills are needed to do both basic housekeeping and basic homeschooling well.** I'm talking simple things here, folks. For instance, I've found I will be more likely to actually wash the dishes after a meal, if right before dinner I fill the sink with hot soapy water, letting all the breakfast and lunch dishes get a soak while we eat. That way the first part of the job is done, and I only have to follow through (and sometimes I even get inspired and wash up the morning dishes while supper is cooking-- realizing that I usually have to do some hanging around in the kitchen to check on last minute supper fixings anyway, and might as well use my time well).

Likewise, if I remember the night before to set out the audio tapes to bring in the car the next morning when we go to piano lessons, there's a much better chance we'll actually get to listen to them-- I won't find myself saying, once more, "Oh, gee, kids-- I forgot to bring those history tapes we were going to listen to... sorry!" Recently heading to piano lessons early one Friday morning we actually got to listen to, first, Hannah's Suzuki piano tape (a first in months), then a tape of classic poems (Molly is taking Ruth Staver's poetry correspondence course, and recognized several of them), and finally a US History lecture from the Teaching Company-- all because I'd laid them out the night before on the dining room table. The previous week I didn't do so, and we had no tapes to make the hour drive go more productively. Basic planning-- it can really help.

**7. Enlisting your kids' help is crucial to making housework less of a burden or drain or stress--** and isn't it the same with homeschooling? A pleasant but firm attitude helps in both arenas. Games for cleaning up with little kids, and games for learning with little kids. Involvement of the kids, giving them some (limited!) decision making options when you need their help: "Do you want to clean up your bedroom or burn the paper garbage and take out the compost?" (Note: there is no option to "not help.") My kids know I'm famous for giving them the same type of options with homeschooling tasks: "Hannah, you can either practice piano now for a half hour or work on your writing club piece." (No option to "just sit around and draw" right then.) As kids get older this all really starts fitting into place, and kids really can start taking lots more initiative on their own in both areas of life.

**8. Our personalities show through in both our housekeeping styles and our approaches to homeschooling--** and usually it's the same style. I decorate my home with children's artwork

and homemade kid posters of owl pellet dissections. I love having my ceilings and walls papered with maps. I love having interesting little bits of this and that around-- little collections of bird nests, or small animal skulls we've found in the woods, or odd little wooden toys put on little shelves I found at yard sales. I like the patterns and colors of lots of books on lots of shelves-- in every room. Although I always feel a cool calmness whenever I'm at someone's home where everything is spare and elegant and clear and clean, I've had to just realize that this isn't me. Although I've dejunked a lot, I'm still a collector at heart.

Likewise my homeschooling is often a little bit of this, a little bit of that, pulling a book spontaneously off the shelf to begin reading it aloud and finding it's just what we wanted, collecting books at secondhand bookstores, browsing through our huge collection of back issues of National Geographic to find just the article to bring alive a Geo Bee question Hannah has come across.

Although over the years I learned that there are definitely times for really following a course of study just as it was designed (for instance, we do French in Action strictly by the book, every exercise in every lesson), I also really like adding on extras (like French camp, or French songs, or French kids' websites on the Internet, French comic books, or the National French Exam). I like improvising.

I'm reminded of Naomi Strunk, a wonderful homeschool evaluator and mom, years ago sharing at a meeting that she finally just had to admit that she could never strictly follow a curriculum. She then made the housework analogy: "It's just like when I cook... I may start out thinking I'm going to make a chocolate cake, and well, you know, I just may end up with....lasagna." I could identify.

But you may be very different, in both your housekeeping needs and in your homeschooling outlook-- be who you are, while always being ready to learn some tips from others who may be very different. My kids actually like it sometimes (the rare times) when I serve them a new meal where I actually followed a recipe.

**9. Special events really help.** If you are at all like me, company coming really makes you clean up your act-- I mean, house. That's when we all jump in and really work hard together to get everything done, and done quickly-- floors get scrubbed, piles get removed or at least neatened, the kids desks get cleared off, and maybe even everyone's bed gets made. And we feel great then about how it all looks-- refreshed (well, that's how I feel anyway-- I won't vouch for my kids or husband!).

Special homeschool events (the writing club coming over, the French night coming up, the Speech Night on Saturday, Homeschool Excellence Day in the Capitol) spur on many of our best homeschooling efforts in the same way. Amazing how fast you can work when necessary!! That essay gets written and proofread, the French songs are learned along with a new French skit, everyone pulls together a speech topic and practices so they'll be ready, posters get designed.

Just like guests arriving at 2:00pm is a real life deadline for clean up efforts, so these homeschool events are real life deadlines for our learning efforts. We all scramble to meet them-- and feel a boost because we have. Just be careful about having too many special

homeschooling events pile up on you, or you'll feel like you do when company keeps coming non-stop for a month!

**10. It always seems like everyone else really has their housework-- or their homeschooling-- together.** You must be the only one in the whole of Pennsylvania who is struggling today. We get unrealistic expectations for the day to day realities of life at home, either for our homes or our homeschooling. We all have our good times, and we all have our days when things seem, to give it the best possible spin, frazzled and out of joint.

**11. When your house is a mess, with things strewn all about, it's very easy to fall into the total discouragement trap.** You've hit this if you start moaning, "My house is always a mess, I'm never organized, I always blow it, I'm setting a terrible example..." And a necessary ingredient in this scenario is that you do NOT lift a finger to actually do something to pick anything up or straighten out the mess. Just moan-- and forget all the good days when your home life was at least a bit more on keel.

I used to regularly berate myself because my clothes hamper in the diningroom (yes, you read that right-- it's mostly for cast off clothes left downstairs, or cloth napkins, or cleaning rags) was always packed full, and I never seemed to take everything upstairs to the laundry room. I now have learned simply and very regularly, before the damp cleaning rags get the wool sweaters moldy, to take the hamper upstairs and empty it. Takes about a minute or less-- far less time than I use to spend mentally whacking myself about it.

Similarly, when we have a bad day with homeschooling, or when we realize it's been two weeks since our third grader did any math work, let alone spelling, we all tend to start inwardly moaning too: "I'm completely incompetent at homeschooling, I'm ruining my kids' lives, I can't do this anymore, look how neglectful I've been." And again, to complete the full syndrome, we are very careful NOT to do anything to salvage the day-- like find a good read aloud book to share with our kids, or give everyone drawing paper and set some good music on, or get out an educational video to watch all together, or even start them on a spelling lesson. No, in times like this, many of us tend to just moan and inwardly complain. It is hard to learn that sometimes just ACTING to change a situation can be less stressful than moaning.

One of the real benefits of being required to pull together year-end portfolios is that they let us see, concretely, that indeed we actually did accomplish quite a bit over the course of the whole year. It wasn't all bad days after all.

**12. And finally, housekeeping is a lot like homeschooling because, if we really work at it, lots can be accomplished in those little two minute dead spots in the day.** I'm upstairs and the kids are all busy reading or doing other "legal" homeschooling activities-- take two minutes to toss in a load of laundry. Two minutes before dinner is ready? Hey, kids, fill in your daily logs! Stirring the supper? Call Hannah in to help and let her talk to me for a couple of minutes about how she is realizing that the book Heidi is really a good bit like The Good Master. Quite a little literary discussion in just two minutes, besides being friendly.

Now, you can't repaint the bathroom in two-minute spots, or have your high schooler finish that 2500-word paper only in a series of two-minute binges-- many things do take extended and uninterrupted stretches of time. But we often do miss the little opportunities to do a

quick neatening, a brief review of those history timeline dates, one-more-time through on the new piano piece. I've been really noticing that people who get lots accomplished often seem to have a sort of ready list in their heads of little jobs they might do when these little extra moments present themselves. And remember too, just takes a couple of minutes to slow down and enjoy your kids for a bit-- a friendly joke, smile, a moment to relax and enjoy, and see how their day is going.

So, you see, homeschooling really is quite a bit like housework. Jacob says I should have called this piece Everything I Ever Really Needed to Know About Homeschooling, I learned from Sweeping my Floors. Maybe it's true-- but then you should also know that Jacob is the one who now does most of the floor sweeping around here!