

Homeschool Kids and PLAGIARISM

from Susan Richman

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Has plagiarism ever come up in conversation at home with your kids?

Maybe it should.

I think my own kids' first intro to the idea of plagiarism was way back when our oldest son, Jesse (now 24 years old), was about seven. We had a huge stack of old *Highlight Magazines* that a retired teacher friend of ours had given to us, and we especially liked looking through the pages with kids' original writings and drawings. And there it was -- blatant plagiarism by a child. One of the submitted poems was not really written by an 8 year old, but instead was a poem I'd read in a professional anthology of poetry for children. I found the original poem, showed it to my kids, and we talked about how terrible this was that the child had lied and said the poem was his when it wasn't. Plagiarism was just like stealing.

Later we had other glimpses into plagiarism, sometimes through books we were reading aloud. We found out about the time Helen Keller was accused of plagiarizing a story while in high school -- and the hurt and confusion this caused her. We related it to that *Highlights* incident.

And my kids also knew about the story I'd later share in our book *Writing from Home*, in the intro to a chapter about creative alternatives to report and research writing:

"I remember many years ago a young 9 year old neighbor came up to visit at our house, a borrowed school encyclopedia under his arm. He told me that he had to write a 'report' for school, and it was to be about the Kremlin. The encyclopedia was appropriately Volume K. On talking more with the boy, I gradually became aware of something shocking -- he actually believed that the teacher wanted him to copy verbatim the encyclopedia entry on the Kremlin. He thought that's what writing a report meant -- copying the dry words somebody else (an anonymous someone at that) had already written. He had no notion of the wrongs of plagiarism, that stealing someone else's words and passing them off as your own was very wrong. And he had even less notion that the goal probably was that he actually learn something about his topic. The Kremlin meant nothing to him at that point, and I'm sure it didn't mean much more once he'd finished his 'report.'

And then it came closer to home, at our own homeschool Writing Club many years ago. A 6th grade girl had just read aloud her 'report' on Germany, and she'd had great difficulty getting through it, laboring over complex sentences that surely didn't sound like they really came from her -- and I wondered if she had copied it from an encyclopedia like my young friend writing about the Kremlin. My son Jesse immediately asked her where she'd gotten her information for her report -- and the girl innocently showed everyone the book on Germany she'd borrowed from the library. I grabbed it, flipped through -- and found that

indeed she'd simply lifted various sentences about different aspects of German life directly from a smattering of pages from the book.

I was faced with a real dilemma. As leader of the group, I felt I couldn't let this pass by, but of course I did not want to embarrass the girl in front of her friends. I decided upon a sort of general approach -- I talked about how important it was to find several different sources of information on a topic, as otherwise we'd often feel that there was no other way to put the ideas we were learning about than exactly the words used by the sole author we'd just read. I also talked about how it was often a better idea to write about things we really did know more about -- that when we wrote about something quite (literally!) foreign to us, our writings were often hollow or stilted or... merely copied. I asked if anyone had ever heard of the word 'plagiarism' -- my kids were the only ones who had. The mother of this student was right in the room the whole time, and she later thanked me for my careful approach -- and said she'd had no idea that her daughter had just copied the info straight from the book. In fact, the mother hadn't yet even read her daughter's report. The mother admitted that she had never ever discussed the idea of plagiarism with her daughter -- it just had never come up.

Around that time a new member of Writing Club shared a poem about ballet that she'd written. This girl was a dancer, and I knew she was very bright (had been in the 5th grade gifted program at the local public school before starting homeschooling mid-year) -- and this poem was remarkable. Lilted, fluid, really capturing the essence of stretching into a ballet pose. I enthusiastically asked if we could use the poem in the Backpack, the children's writing section in each issue of Pennsylvania Homeschoolers, and the homeschool mother who was the Backpack editor then also loved the piece. She later wished that she had shown the poem to her daughter, also a ballet dancer, before we had published it. Claire immediately recognized the poem -- it was plagiarized (with very minor changes) from a poem used regularly in a ballet magazine ad. We were devastated.

Then there was the time I was evaluating a homeschool student who had great difficulty with writing -- as a 7th grader he could barely eke out a five-word sentence on any topic. But this time his mother talked on and on about the wonderful book report the boy had written that year -- it was his very first book report, and he'd certainly spent lots of time on it, and she was so proud. After I'd read through this summary of the biography of a western hero, I too was warmly congratulating the boy, amazed at his strong progress. Then the family happily showed me the book -- and I was devastated to realize rather quickly that the boy had simply copied various sentences from different chapters, and strung them together to write his 'book report.' In this situation, I chose not to say anything. Maybe I was too dumbfounded and startled. Maybe I was hit with the fact that maybe the parent didn't even realize how wrong this was. Or maybe I worried about what might happen to the boy if I exposed the fact that the boy had just plagiarized -- maybe the family didn't know. For whatever reason, I said nothing. I did give many ideas for other types of writing the boy could try for the next school year, and hoped for the best.

Then there was the time that my daughter Hannah came up to me during an evaluation I was doing at home with another homeschooling family. She interrupted me quietly, saying, "Look at this story," showing me the new magazine that had just arrived that day, *Merlyn's Pen*, which is devoted to publishing original children's writing. This was their big 'awards' issue, and the top prize went to a lengthy story by a 12 year old girl -- this was the story

Hannah pointed to, asking me to read the first paragraph. Then she held out another magazine, this time an older copy of her beloved American Girl magazine -- she often spent happy hours in those days curled up on the sofa with a full stack of issues next to her, reading and rereading articles. She opened to a story in American Girl, and pointedly said, "Now read this." It was the identical story -- with only a few names changed, and an occasional (very occasional) word altered. The young girl had copied this story and submitted it as her own -- and won first place! We were all stunned. We poured over the two stories very carefully, noting every little word altered -- these minute changes must have made the girl 'feel' that she wasn't really plagiarizing. I immediately had Hannah write an email to American Girl Magazine and had my older daughter Molly email Merlyn's Pen, letting them know immediately about this blatant plagiarism. Both magazines wrote back by the end of the weekend, thanking us for alerting them, and noting that several other readers had also reported the situation. We put all these letters in our girls' portfolios that year -- a major lesson in ethics for them, and on writing for a real purpose.

Over the next several months we continued to receive updates from the magazines, telling the lengthy process they went through with the girl to ascertain that she had not copied the story (one editor had had some doubts about its authenticity.... but wasn't a 'connoisseur' of American Girl like my daughter Hannah, and so of course couldn't verify the steal). The girl had originally submitted the story to a teacher for a routine assignment, perhaps thinking that 'writing' it out by hand equaled 'writing' it in the real sense. And she had made those little changes.... The teacher had raved about the story, insisted it be sent in to the competition, the school had a special assembly when it won, and on and on. How devastating for this young girl to have to now face the humiliation of having it admitted to everyone that she had cheated, that she copied, that she'd merely plagiarized. The girl was now receiving special counseling. And how foolish the teacher must have felt -- she should have realized this was not the work of that child. I thought too of that ballet poem I'd gushed over -- and remembered vaguely that the girl had sort of tried to get me not to publish it, but I'd thought this was just a bit of normal shyness or humility. I had reacted just like this teacher.

And plagiarism isn't just seen among young kids who maybe really just don't understand fully what they are doing. It happens even with Advanced Placement level homeschool students. I've uncovered plagiarism at least four times in my own AP US History online course, and have had to discuss this issue at length with these students, and bring the issue up for discussion at times with the whole class. I now have plagiarism warnings right in my syllabus - - and I let kids know that if caught a second time in this, they will be dropped immediately from the course. All offenders were strongly religious kids, from good families -- the types of kids who would never steal things. They just didn't think of words as things. Interesting enough, in my current studies of Hebrew I've found the fascinating fact that the Hebrew word 'devar' means both 'word' and 'thing' -- in Jewish tradition, stealing words is equal with stealing anything else, and much attention is given to the ethics of properly attributing ideas to their original source. I think more attention needs to be given to this in our homeschooling, to specifically telling our children about plagiarizing, and not just hoping they'll somehow make the connection. Some won't.

In my class, plagiarism has almost always been in a biography assignment, where kids are pulling info off the Internet. Computers just make it so very easy to 'copy-and-paste' and be done with an assignment when you're pressed for time. Now whenever I see something odd in a biography essay -- things out of chronological sequence, ideas or even whole

sentences repeated in different paragraphs, or simply a very choppy presentation, I now do a quick google search on a few sentences from the piece -- and unfortunately the plagiarized website quickly pops up on the screen. One student even copied a short book review from Amazon.com instead of writing his own response to a lengthy original document. Several years ago a girl actually plagiarized directly from the textbook that everyone in the class was using, claiming she had no clue this was not allowed.

How to help your kids avoid plagiarism

First, tell them some of these stories -- even read this whole article around the lunch table and discuss it. Keep your eyes open for other examples. Let them know plagiarism is wrong before the story you find out about is your own child's. Bring the issue up for discussion directly. Recently I continued this with my daughter Hannah by reading aloud an essay from Time magazine about the popular history writer Stephen Ambrose. Unfortunately, this fine writer has now been caught in multiple cases of plagiarizing from secondary sources in a number of his recent books. This doesn't just happen with kids. Here's a favorite quote from this essay, by Roger Rosenblatt: "These were people who defined their lives by the words they made. What laziness or madness could possibly explain their deliberately wearing someone else's mind?" (Time, January 21, 2002).

Next, see that assignments are structured to almost make it impossible for a student to plagiarize. At the suggestion of some wonderfully creative students in my AP online course, I've encouraged the kids to write their Biography Essays in innovative ways. I let them know that their audience is their classmates, who really want to learn something from their piece - - but they may fall asleep in three sentences if an essay starts out droning "John Doe was born in 1827 in Philadelphia...." If they find a creative way of bringing out all the information they've gleaned from many different sources, their readers will keep reading. Students have been remarkable in the range of formats they've developed now for this assignment -- they've done mock interviews, funeral orations, series of imagined letters from the famous person to a grandchild, or from an invented friend to the famous person. They've written mock news articles from different periods of the person's life -- often making sure they write from different perspectives in each 'article' so we get a sense of how opposing groups reacted to the person. They've created journal entries spanning a lifetime. Perhaps one of my very favorites was one written this year about President Buchanan. The student created a whole story -- she, as a student in my course, was touring outside the White House, and pondering her upcoming Bio Essay assignment.... when all of a sudden a strange, skinny old man pops out from the shrubbery and eventually starts telling her all about Buchanan -- the man is a fount of knowledge on everything to do with the history of the presidency it seems. She eventually finds out at the very end of the story (after we've learned a remarkable amount about Buchannan) that this old man is really... Uncle Sam. It was delightful.

Students who take this sort of creative approach can't possibly plagiarize -- they have to use the info they've gathered in really novel ways, showing us both personality as well as facts, and they have to make true decisions about what is really important to include. Students caught doing 'cut-and-paste' from the Internet are always those trying to get by with a straightforward, bare-bones, factual, and usually short essay -- they then must rewrite it completely, this time using one of the creative approaches. The difference is remarkable. Next year, I'm requiring inventiveness from everyone, right from the start.

This idea can be adapted to all ages, and across many disciplines. I remember the time our daughter Molly wrote about Helen Keller in her very early elementary years. Rather than having her write a 'report', the task was to create an alphabet book about Keller's life, coming up with something for each letter of the alphabet that would tell something important. It was charming -- perhaps my very favorite entry is this one for the tricky letter Q:

“QUIET: Everybody was quiet. She could not even hear herself. It is like being sealed in a rock that only your hand could go through.”

There was no plagiarism here!

And what if you want your child to write a report on a foreign country? In 7th grade my daughter Hannah was faced with this for a distance geography course she was taking. She had to write about a country that was a new political entity, and she chose Eritrea, a country she'd been interested in as she used to have a homeschool penpal whose family lived there as missionaries. Hannah was bored thinking she'd have to do this as a 'straight' encyclopedia-type paper, so instead she developed a creative story format. A girl from the US, who knew little to nothing about world geography, went out in her backyard and was suddenly in a very strange land.... which she eventually finds out is Eritrea. The format gave her ample opportunity to bring in all the information required in the assignment, and her distance teacher was delighted with the amusing approach. And Hannah was definitely not bored while working on it -- and no option of merely copying info from a website or atlas.

One last story about plagiarism, one with a positive ending: several years ago, when my daughter Molly was editing the Backpack, she wrote an editorial about plagiarism, telling a bit about that Merlyn's Pen fiasco I shared about above. She knew her writing had really done some good in the world when a young boy wrote to her a few months later, apologizing for sending her a poem that had really been plagiarized -- he now knew what this meant from her editorial, and he was sorry. I don't think he'll ever plagiarize again. Hope this will be true for your kids also.