

## First Steps: Finding the Right Support

from Patricia Richman

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Welcome to First Steps! My name is Patricia Richman, and this is my first column in a series. First Steps focuses on the first steps that we parents take with our children in the early years of homeschooling. Yes, my name looks familiar. I am the daughter-in-law of Howard and Susan Richman, the editors of this fine newsletter.

We now live in Norfolk, Virginia, where many of my friends introduce me as a "second generation" homeschooler. I was homeschooled for 8 years, and am now a stay-at-home, homeschooling mother with my degree in special education hanging on the wall. My husband, Jesse, was taught at home his entire life. He is currently a professor at Old Dominion University after receiving his PhD in political science. We have three children: Sarah is 6 ½, David turned 4 this spring, and Leah is 2 ½. I'll share some of our experiences as we begin our children's education paths.

Perhaps you just decided to try homeschooling for one year, or you are already convinced this is the best education option for your family. What is the next step? I believe that before you choose a teaching style, curriculum, or co-op (I plan to write about each of these in future articles) you need to find homeschoolers. Receiving encouragement and support as we begin any journey is important. Knowing you are supported along your homeschooling path is invaluable.

When I was growing up, finding homeschoolers was difficult. People were not familiar with the choice, and usually asked if it was even legal. Also, there was no Internet. (I did manage to find an excellent husband within the homeschooling community, so it was not all that bad!) Today it is relatively simple. There are homeschoolers everywhere, and with a bit of effort they can easily be found. Type in search terms on the web for homeschooling in nearby towns and cities, and dozens of responses may seem to fit well. The challenge I have found is with the increase in sheer numbers, homeschoolers can and do become more selective and specific. Now you need to persevere to find the *type* of support you want. Once you call the contact person for each group and talk with them or attend a meeting, you begin to learn exactly what you are looking for. If a group does not seem to fit well with your style of steps, keep looking.

When we first moved to Nashville TN, I felt pretty isolated. I was in a new city, a large city, with no contacts. Within days, we discovered that Jesse's office mate homeschooled his five daughters. However, all their activities and support were through their church. (This is another way to find homeschoolers □ through your church or other groups you participate in.) My first searches on the Internet brought up numerous groups, but none of them seemed like a very good fit for us. One was strongly religious-based. Another focused on field trips. This seemed daunting with a four year old, two year old, and nine month old. I just could not go on a bakery or post office field trip when our children were at that age and stage.

Another way to find homeschool groups is through groups you're already part of. In Nashville, I went to a parenting group and expressed interest at my first meeting in finding other homeschoolers. I was immediately directed to a small co-op where we fit in nicely. (In a future article, I will describe my own adventures in starting a co-op.) Meeting with these families once a week, or visiting at play grounds or each other's houses was the amount of support that we needed at that time. Through the group I made some close friendships that I still treasure.

I started to hear about the popularity of homeschooling in Norfolk VA even before we moved here. There are homeschooling groups for all ages, stages and geographical areas, homeschooling sports teams, homeschooling girl scout troops, and homeschooling days at local museums and attractions. The first group that I joined after arriving here came highly recommended, but again the focus was on field trips and outings. Although all of our children were now a year older, I wanted more support with daily lessons before we filled our days with field trips. The second group we joined has weekly gatherings at a local park where mothers can talk while the kids play. This was exactly what we needed.

The other aspect of finding homeschoolers for me has involved message boards that link homeschoolers in my area. These groups make planning and coordinating trips and activities easier, and provide an ongoing online homeschooling support group.

The most important aspect of finding other homeschoolers is gathering support around you. Even if you have a background in homeschooling, as we do, or you are extremely confident that this is what is best, it helps to have other families around you that you can go to for support and help. All homeschoolers have bad days, as do all classrooms. It is vital to know that you have support out there and friends.