

Getting Organized

Time can be the main problem for home-schooling parents who are feeling stressed-out both because they are not spending enough quality time with their families, and also because they do not have enough time to themselves.

I am in favor of the twenty-five hour day! If we could just have one extra hour then maybe we could do all the things that we want to do. Another way to find time was tried by one of my college friends, Mike Jones. He experimented with himself to see how little sleep he could get along on. Every night he slept a little less than the night before. He got himself down to about four hours of sleep every night. I don't know about you, but I begin to fall apart if I get less than seven hours...

Feeling Stressed-Out

I have gotten a number of letters from families this past year who really seemed to be feeling much more negative about their homeschooling than positive -- the balance was tipped down. Way down. And although we all need to feel comfortable talking about the difficult days as well as the good days of homeschooling, I think when too many bad days come our way it's time to seriously re-evaluate what we're doing, and try some real positive CHANGE.

For some families the answer to too many bad days may indeed be for the children to go to school -- after all, it's not compulsory that we teach our kids at home. For most of us the answer may mean just that we have to get ourselves out of a down time by making a real effort to interact more productively and happily with our kids, to begin enjoying them more, and to break out of a cycle of negativity.

For many of us we need to find ways to make time for OURSELVES. Maybe by getting up earlier than the kids (I can hear the groans, but if you're a morning person, it's wonderful), or staying up after they are in bed (you know, not falling asleep while reading that bedtime story to the kids, like I'm prone to...)

Sometimes, too, we need to be more patient with ourselves, realizing that all sorts of factors beyond our control -- like lousy weather -- can make for some difficult times. If we all start snapping at each other around here, it always does us good to notice what the weather is doing -- usually it's gray, muggy and humid, that slobby feeling before a storm. When the weather brightens, so do we. Being aware of this helps us not get into the blame and guilt routine.

The following are some of the letters I've received over the past year from mothers who, for any number of reasons, have been having rough times with their homeschooling. I really respect these women for having the courage to write about these feelings. I know some people feel discouraged after only hearing of the "glowing" side of things, and feel they must hide any lousy feelings they might have. These women took the step to get it all out -- and at least one told me later that just the chance to write it all out was the first step in getting herself out of her low time. Anyway, here are some of the letters... And for those of you who may think that here at our home we never have doubts, bad scenes, too much pressure, times when all is lost, I've even included a journal entry from a VERY bad day of ours here (two years back, so it's not SO painful now, and I can view it at something of a distance!).

One mother writes:

My attitude towards doing "school work" has mellowed lately which is good I believe. Unfortunately it is a side effect of too much personal stress in my life. We still use the Calvert materials but I'm more relaxed about when the work gets done. Maybe it's like when the glow of the newborn wears off and changing diapers and keeping the wash up, etc., is, well, more like routine work. I get *Growing Without Schooling*, but have only read the first couple of pages of #47 so I'm behind there. And here I am renewing with you but I haven't finished the last issue. I'm tired of homeschooling. My husband doesn't help out other than give me occasional words of support. My son doesn't want to go to school.... There's a homeschooling support group forming in the area that I have just learned about and have sent for info on. Some get-togethers with others in the area would probably do quite a bit of good for me...

Here's another:

We have been homeschooling since the beginning. Our kids are doing very well both academically and in every other way possible. I'm very happy to be homeschooling them and love them dearly and am very glad to have them here -- BUT in the past couple of years I find I'm having a harder and harder time coping emotionally with kids always here and no breaks for me -- unless I go out evenings which I do at the expense of our "family time"... Anyway, I feel that there's so much written in a general way about homeschooling and how to do it -- legal things, etc. -- but not much written about how the mother copes emotionally with kids ever present and stays sane and still has some sort of creative life of her own. We live in a very rural area and don't have many friends close. The homeschoolers we knew when we moved here from Illinois 5 years ago

in large part have ended up putting their kids in school for various reasons and the few we know that are still homeschooling are mainly very interested in structuring the homeschooling fairly strictly, which is not what we're doing. We're very UNSchooled a la John Holt's ideas...

And from another mother...

You asked about our homeschooling year... It is getting mixed reviews at the present. There are MANY plusses, the largest being the joy of seeing my son free to be his own person. His natural interests are so different from most 1st graders... BUT there are some drawbacks. I never even read articles on stress in the past because I thought I was incapable of building up stress, but last September I practically had a nervous breakdown in panic over symptoms which have turned out to be vasoconstriction -- a reduction in oxygen to the heart when under stress. On the list of helps is relaxation. The force of my son's personality and the sheer quantity of (incessant) noise he generates is a constant assault on my senses and I find by the time the girls come home at 4:00, I have no cushion built up during the day, my nerves are in a raw state, and I feel physically horrible. Like so many situations, it feeds on itself, for as I become depressed and distracted, I tend not to follow through in disciplining him and he gets away with doing less and less (chores) and becomes more out of control and harder to handle, and I become more depressed. Of course, not every day is bad, but I am concerned about the toll it may be taking on my health, and about the effects of all this in its many facets on my son....

Another mother writes...

I'm doing Home Schooling with three children, ages 8, 7, and 5, and also have an almost 3 year old daughter. I have some problems and I wondered if you might have some advice or tips to help me. My biggest problem is lack of patience. I feel under stress most of the time: I feel busy beyond my capabilities: I can't take care of the house, the meals, the laundry, and most importantly, the kids, the way I would like. There is nothing I would rather do than spend my days with my kids. I don't understand my impatience, but I feel badly for the kids. (This sounds like a "Dear Abby" letter, but I'm just hoping you might have some tips that will help us.) We have chosen Home Schooling for Religious reasons and we use the Our Lady of Victory Home Study Program. I LOVE the course, and so do the kids....

And from a later letter from the same mother...

Thank you so much for your wonderful letter. It was a great help to me, especially when you said it was a concern of many parents (the stress, strained nerves, and impatience). I thought that I just wasn't cut out for Home Schooling. I've been told by people close to me that I'm too much of a perfectionist, I'm too organized, and I expect too much of my kids and myself. On top of all of that, I am very slow at what I do. I also have some outside of the home concerns with my mother that take me away too much. We have made a few changes this year that should help....

And now for MY story. Again, this is a journal entry from several years ago, and I even tore it out of my notebook and stashed in the back of a desk drawer -- it's not easy to admit we have these times, even to ourselves...

This has been a painful time for Jesse and me, this trying to establish new homeschooling routines and expectations. It infuriates me at times when he seems so easily frustrated, so always close to tears, so resistant to suggestions. As Holt said, he's not letting ME be the "fine creative, motivating teacher" I like to see myself as. Visions instead of failing, failing miserably, making my son into a pressure cooker of anxieties, a short fuse bundle. Also frustrating that I am too exhausted to get up early in the morning, and our day starts at 10:30 and time slips by improperly used. No writing. No seeming memory of how he used to spell words (talking here of just REASONABLE spellings, not "correct"), leaving out all blends and ending consonants other than *s*, etc... Drives me wild to see him shift his weight in a chair, slouch down, wiggle, yawn, fiddle with his pencil, rearrange his paper -- WASTE TIME... Me -- always aware of our STEALING time, of not wanting to spend all DAY on this writing work. And Jesse then TAKES all day just to barely begin. I long for an end to vacation, for a full week of getting back to a reasonable schedule. Also drives me wild that Jesse seems often so enthusiastic on HEARING of a new idea, apparently eager to start (tomorrow!), and then it is cement feet time when tomorrow comes. Good to hear that Meg Johnson [used to publish a homeschooling paper has also threatened hers with school if they can't find better ways of getting on -- the ultimate option. Then of course I curse myself for lack of patience, for putting such pressure, for exploding as I do, for doing just what I know will set HIM off -- seemingly BOTH of us just ready to pounce at the chance to do whatever we KNOW the other will HATE. Making us hate our time together...Intense learning time for us all now....

So, there you are folks, for those of you who have thought I only have positive dealings non-stop with my kids. I think the day I wrote this entry was the day that Jesse literally ran out of the house crying, saying he'd NEVER come back. All over a writing idea I was pushing on him (he was 7). We all do have times that leave us feeling wilted, dismayed, guilty, times we're not proud of. I know one thing that has helped here is learning to apologize to the kids when I've really been out of line about something -- as they do with us. And I always try to look at the whole day -- do we go to bed angry still? I think I can say truthfully that we don't. If we all blow up at times around here, we're also quick to recover and go on and make up and come at the problem from another more positive direction, or just find a different direction entirely and forget the lousy one. I think we're gaining trust in ourselves by going through this sometimes painful process -- trust that we CAN find solutions. We wouldn't know we had that in us without some kinks along the way.

I think the issues brought up by all these letters bear more looking into -- how CAN we manage to find time for ourselves in our day, how much interaction do we need with other homeschoolers to be able to maintain our enthusiasm for what we are doing (thinking about OUR social needs, not just the kids!), how do we communicate our needs to our kids in realistic and positive ways. And perhaps most important, how do we stop over-loading our circuits with TOO MUCH (in my case, our bad scene took place very shortly after we'd moved to the big farm house on the property, and a move of any sort is a stressful time for anyone). I'm reminded of those lists you see in articles on "Managing Stress" -- all the point values assigned to all the major life changes or problems that can build up to be just TOO MUCH, in this case the straw that can break the homeschooling mother's spirit. Let's help each other ease the burden.

Organizing the Homeschooling Day

Many parents have written asking for a concrete look into a typical homeschooling day -- how do families decide what to do and when? How do they structure their time? Is it even RIGHT to structure time? Hope you can share what your family has worked out that works for YOU, and for starters here's a look into our home...

We began a new strategy last December, shortly after our move to our new house. We finally had most boxes unpacked, and it seemed like time to get our days back on track. Piano, writing, and math work had all slid during the weeks and months of work on the house. Our energies had necessarily been focused on scraping, priming, painting, sanding, tear down and build up -- how welcome the thoughts of settling down instead to piano, writing, math and more reading! I realized then, too, that not only were all of us a bit rhythmless, but I was spending too much time on the phone

during the day, mostly long, involved homeschooling calls. Time for a new direction and plan.

Discussing the issue with the kids, I proposed, first, that I would try earnestly to limit all phone calls to 5 minutes or less during the daytime. (So, friends -- call me after 5:00 p.m. Better phone rates for you, too!) The boys were grateful, and would literally run and set the kitchen timer for me when the phone would ring.

We then set about making a chart of the day -- a "time-line" showing all the hours from 8:00 to 4:00, the times Daddy wasn't home. We had to realize that when Howard was home the kids wanted to be with him, playing or helping with work about the place, rather than do anything else. Our time was different then, valuable of course, but changed. What we needed was to take full advantage of the earlier in the day time.

Jesse knows all about my Side-Tracked Home Executives file card system (often ignored for weeks on end, but still helpful), and so he knew what I was talking about when I asked him to think of all the daily homeschooling work he thought we should be doing. Then on to weekly or special projects. We wrote these all out on separate cards. Here's what we came up with for "Dailies":

- Do Some Math Work (with a dozen or more possible activities listed on card)
- Do Some Writing.
- Silent Reading time -- everyone choose a book, no phone calls.
- Piano Playing -- 30 minutes each.
- Recorder time -- 15 minutes.
- 10 minute Race (that is, turn on the radio to classical music, and race around our `grand circle route' from living room to dining room to project room and around and around. Good for winter when we couldn't get outside as much).
- Exercise time (gymnastics, dancing, or physical fitness self-testing. Finding it's always good to balance out sitting down times with action -- banishes doldrums and fidgetiness).

Weeklies were "Special Art Projects," "Do a new Science Experiment," "Work on History Time-Line," "Do Wood-Working in Basement," etc.

Every weekday morning now, Jesse sets up the day by tacking his cards up on our "Day." He decides when we'll do each thing, and also what that specific activity will be. I offer suggestions at times, but the final decision is his. Takes about 5 minutes to get the "Day" going -- often if I'm really together I can get the breakfast dishes done while Jesse is deciding on his arrangement.

Now don't get us wrong -- we aren't able to accomplish everything we set out to do each day, and we don't clock ourselves to the minute or adhere slavishly to the day's plan. We've sometimes come up with a plan that's impossible to follow, or perhaps one project lasts a whole morning rather than the 30 minutes we thought it might. We learn from all of it. What this idea IS giving us is a new understanding of time and how we use it, and it's helping us focus our energies more positively. We find we accomplish much more than before and without my getting NAGGY. Instead of interrupting the boys' play with an unwanted directive, I can now usually just ask Jesse what's coming up next on his schedule. And if we need to change something, we do.

Some ideas that we'd TALKED about for over a year became realities. We finally stopped just talking about making a history time-line in our upstairs hallway, and instead scheduled it in and took the hour to DO it. Instead of my trying to urge Jesse to read silently at odd moments when I thought it would be a good idea (say, when I was busy sweeping), now we all sit down to a silent reading time together. Jesse's been writing daily again -- sometimes letters, sometimes entries in his homemade journal, sometimes little articles, sometimes a pretend newspaper, sometimes poems or riddles or signs. He decides. New cray-pas drawings and yarn stitchery pictures and wood scrap sculptures are on display.

During these months of experimenting with new ways of structuring our time, we've tossed out some cards, and made other new ones. We're realizing how to juggle our time a bit more effectively and creatively even on busy days of visiting or appointments or chores. Perhaps Jesse can do his silent reading while Jacob is in the dentist chair, or during a long car ride. Maybe we can run laps around our driveway while the goats are finishing up their feed in their milking stands. We're enjoying the variety of our days, and also enjoying the stability of regular time blocks. For us, right now, it seems to be the right balance, the right track...

Getting Rid of the Big Time Waster

Often people ask how Susan and I find so much time to do the many things that we do. Perhaps the most important factor is that we don't waste our time watching TV. About a year ago, Susan wrote in a letter to GWS...

We have been TV-less totally since Jesse was a year old. A one week experiment of putting the TV in the closet just kept on and on, until finally Jesse took the whole thing apart last summer with screw driver and hammer, and saw what the insides were like. He even ended up salvaging the TV's speaker, and wired it up with leftover telephone company wire so he has a speaker from our stereo in his bedroom. (He has

also wired me a speaker salvaged from an old tape recorder so I can have music in the kitchen... He does all this electrical work completely on his own, rewires lamps too.)

I think the lack of TV in our family has been a MAJOR factor in helping us raise children who are NOT consumer-toy oriented. We do not have neighbor children nearby that our kids see, so we don't have the problem some families do of finding their TV-less kids just go to the neighbors and watch and watch. Our kids have always been critical of other kids who watch TV all the time -- they really can't understand why someone would want to waste their time like that. They also have completely accepted it that we ARE a TV-less family, and I think take pride in the fact that we are different.

We certainly have not tried to hide our feelings about TV from the kids, and we do have a number of other friends, all homeschoolers, who have chosen not to have TV either. Of course, the kids do see a few shows a year, at someone else's home, usually a public TV nature show or maybe a ballet, and we always enjoy discussing the show for a long time afterwards, finding that we really get our mileage out of the few shows we see. A few shows a year is clearly enough for us.

I really like the book *The Plug-in Drug*, by Marie Winn where she makes the very important point that TV is not just an addictive "drug" for kids, but also for PARENTS -- it becomes such an easy babysitter, such an easy way to get the kids quiet and out of your hair. Just plug the kids in. They happily zombie out while you can get on with your adult life. But what a price!

I feel about the no TV question very much the way I feel about homeschooling itself. It's a choice that we do have the power to make within our own homes. Our choosing not to send our own kids to schools won't make schools go away, and our choosing not to have TV in our home won't make TV go away. And I'm not on a neo-Luddite campaign to smash TVs everywhere (or tear down schools). We've just tried it in our own family and have found that frankly we have SO MANY things that we LOVE to do with our limited time on this earth, that TV (and school) just can't be allowed in.

I remember when we first put away our TV, Howard kept saying to me, "But how could we have wasted so much time just WATCHING TV before? We have so much time now." We are often asked by homeschooling friends how we ever have the time to do as much as we do, and not having TV to eat up hours and hours a day is one very important help. I also think that choosing to have, or not have, a TV in your home should be a very conscious decision, based on firm conviction.

I know some families who flip back and forth twenty times on the TV issue -- one week it's TV with no restrictions, the next it's taboo and gone, next month it's cartoons

all day. I wonder what messages these parents are sending their kids. I think it would certainly be better to accept TV and carefully monitor use so that it doesn't become addictive and overtake family life entirely, than to just keeping jumping from side to side of the fence, giving the kids no firm base and guidance.

For us it was one of those eye-opening things to even realize that we could make a personal choice about TV. We could say yes, or we could say NO. Same thing with schooling. Our society might like us to think we can't make these choices, but we can. For us, it's been the right one.

Scheduling Time for Dad With Kids

At the beginning of this chapter, Susan wrote about the way she organized the part of the day when I was not home. Not long after that we scheduled our evenings as well. I don't know what your memories of schedules are. Maybe you remember being in the middle of something when the bell interrupted. Maybe you think of a particular moment sitting in class, watching the clock, waiting for the bell to ring.

Well, schedules have all of those faults, but they also have one tremendous advantage: They give you a period each day when your time is your own with no one else making demands upon it.

Before we instituted our evening schedule, I would come home from work and would try to sit in "my" chair and unwind and read the newspaper and the family would descend upon me.

Susan's feeling was, "I have been with the kids all day and need a break. Now Howard can take the kids." She wanted to go up to our study and write articles for our newsletter. At about this time I read Nancy Wallace's book about her family's experience with home education, *Better Than School*. The reason that Nancy had enough time to write her book was because her husband would take her children at 3:00 each day for a couple of hours.

My feelings, as I would try to keep the family at bay, were a mixture of annoyance and guilt. I was annoyed that I could not have any time to relax without being the victim of assault, and guilty that I was short-changing Susan and the kids.

Jesse and Jacob and Molly's feelings as they pounced upon me were, "Let's see if Daddy will play with us now." They had discovered that the way to check if Daddy would play with them, was to just start playing with Daddy. Then if

Daddy crouched into a shell or yelled in an unfriendly way, maybe he wasn't in the mood.

Saturdays and Sundays, my days off each week, were even worse. Whenever I would come in from farm work and try to read a book, the after-school scene would repeat itself. I had a problem -- no time to myself that I could count on. Susan had a problem -- no time to herself that she could count on. And the kids had a problem -- no time with Daddy that they could count on. Finally we all got together and discussed the problem and arrived at a schedule that satisfied all of us.

Our original schedule began when I would get home from work at about 3:30 after a day of teaching. I would have free time to relax or do whatever I wanted to do until about 5:30 when we would eat dinner. After dinner, Susan would wash the dishes, then we would all spend 15 minutes cleaning up the house. Then for an hour, Susan would go up to our study while I would play with the kids. My original playtime with the kids was divided into segments with each child having fifteen minutes to decide what he or she wanted to do, and then me getting fifteen minutes to choose what I wanted us to do. Sometimes the children choose rough and tumble games, sometimes more quiet activities. After their choices, I would usually choose to read to them.

The agreement has evolved over time. Our current "summer vacation" schedule calls for me to take the kids for two hours a day at 3:00, giving Susan a time to herself that she can count on. We also have a family clean-up-the-house time after supper. The rest of my time is basically mine to allocate how I wish. My two hours with the children are split between one hour when the kids decide what we do and one hour when I decide what we do. The kids look forward to their special time with me and they often plan in advance what they want to do during that time. Last summer, during my time to choose, we would cook supper over a campfire or read about the history, archaeology, and religion of Israel (*The Source* by James Michener). Molly (age 2) did not like listening to such adult books, so I usually would keep her busy while we read by getting her eating, swinging, or playing in the sandbox.

I am sometimes finding some of the children's playtime choices to be unenjoyable times to endure -- but at least such times only last at the most for about fifteen minutes. Other times I have found to be quite enjoyable, as when we played variants of chess all through many playtimes last winter.

I have always been a game-player. I have competed in chess tournaments and bridge tournaments and in general I am quite intrigued by games of strategy. As

a child I remember fondly the many times when my sisters and I used to play bridge with our parents. I also remember that when friends would come over we would usually get out a deck of cards or a board game.

In many ways Susan and I are quite compatible, but not when it comes to playing games. Her childhood memories of playing games are not so pleasant. A few times I have dragged her into bridge games, but only with great difficulty.

Well, anyway, last winter we were all playing "variants" of chess during our play time. Molly, at age three, was into it more than anyone. You may wonder what I mean by "variants" of chess and you may wonder how a three year old learns to play chess. Let me go back to the beginning.

I taught Jesse, who is now nine, how to play chess when he was about four. I have hoped to develop game players in my family who I could play with. Jesse learned to play chess over a period of about two months. We started off very simply, with just pawns and kings and rooks, so that Jesse could learn to move those pieces without feeling overwhelmed. Jesse and I played a number of games with only those pieces. When he felt comfortable with the movement of those pieces, we gradually added queens, bishops and finally knights. Soon we were playing with the full complement.

One problem we had, at first, was that Jesse hated to have any of his pieces taken. I still think that there is something death-like about the loss of a piece and it is very difficult to lose them even for the short span of a single game, even if your opponent has lost many more pieces. Jesse and I eliminated this difficulty by frequently playing a chess variant called "jail" chess. The only difference between "jail" chess and regular chess is that when you take an opponent's piece in "jail" chess, you don't remove it from the board, rather, you put it back on an available empty square of your choice. Gradually, as Jesse became more comfortable with losing pieces, we graduated into playing more normal chess. Often I would handicap myself by taking off several of my pieces to make the game more equal. Jesse did not like losing and to keep him playing, I made sure that he seldom lost.

When Jacob, now six, was three, I taught him to play in about the same way I had taught Jesse. At first he simply joined in my "jail" chess games with Jesse. He moved the knights, which Jesse and I called "magic knights." Essentially he was allowed to move the knight anywhere he wished on the board.

One day, I started him, as Jesse, a few pieces at a time. He learned quickly, having been involved with those "jail" chess games. One of his favorite

opponents was our monkey puppet. Monkey has long been a favorite part of our playtimes since Jacob was born, and is constantly doing outrageous things, much to Jacob's delight. Before Monkey begins playing, he always claims to be a "very tough" chess player and claims that he has "never lost" a game. Then during the game, he often tries to slip Jacob's pieces off the board or put his own pieces back. Somehow he is always caught. When Jacob finally wins, Monkey chases him around the house trying to get his king back. Once Jacob let Monkey win on purpose. Jacob doesn't mind the few times that Monkey wins, though he has trouble when Jesse or I beat him.

Until recently, Jesse and Jacob haven't played much chess with each other. I still remember the catastrophic game that they played when Jacob was three. Six year old Jesse had given himself a handicap: He started with just a king and one paun so that he surely wouldn't be able to win. Then sheepishly he proceeded to advance his paun down the board, turn it into a queen and win. Three year olds don't take losing well.

Now-a-days, Jesse as a mature nine year old seems to imitate me when he plays with Jacob -- he sort of lets Jacob win. I watched them play a game together last night. Jesse started with several fewer pieces than Jacob and proceeded to checkmate Jacob. Jacob, at six, stood looking at the chess board, biting his lower lip, then Jesse moved one of his pieces away from the checkmate. Jacob moved up his knight. Jesse pretended not to notice that his king was being attacked. Then Jacob took Jesse's king.

Molly, at three, is the quickest study of all. Before I actually started to teach her how to play chess, she renamed all the pieces. The king was the "daddy," the bishops were "cookies," the rooks were "lollipops," the queen was the "mommy," and the pawns were "children." In about a week's time, she moved from playing with just kings and pawns to playing with the full complement. Molly enjoys jail chess, monkey chess, and all the other variants of chess. Our latest is monkey blindfold chess, where Monkey pretends to play blindfolded but really keeps peeking over the top of his blindfold.

I expected Molly to have the same trouble if her pieces were taken as Jesse had had as a three year old. I thought this would be intensified as she readily identified the pawns as children. This was not the case. Molly, being much more in tune with worldly affairs than the boys, has already asked us many questions about death. She has been aware when baby goat kids or kittens have died, and she has no trouble with the temporary removal from the board of plastic chess pawns. But chess for her is not all death and competition. This afternoon when I got home from work I found her in the livingroom playing with the chess pieces

by herself; the black and white pawns were together on the edge of the board having a party.

So now you know some of the variations of chess that are going on in the Richman home and how I am engaged in my long term plan to develop more game players in the family. Let's see now, in about four years the three should be old enough for us to start playing bridge!

Sibling's Special Time with Each Other

My special time with the kids inspired another special time -- Jacob's special time with Molly. When Jacob was six and Molly three, Susan wrote...

Jacob, my 6 year old middle child, now has a job. He makes about \$1.00 a week at it, his pay-day being Friday afternoon. I'm his employer. His job? Babysitting for our 3 year old Molly while I have a concentrated 50 minute piano practice time with 9 year old Jesse. This new arrangement is working happily for all of us. Although Molly would sometimes understand about not bothering Jesse and me at the piano, and play happily nearby or look through books or draw, too often we'd have an unhappy (OK, miserable) scene where Molly would work herself into a rage trying to climb up in my lap, bang on the keys, knock our books off, etc. Also Jacob would sometimes seem to drift about during this time, often rather vacantly gazing off into space curled up in an arm chair. I'm of course not saying kids shouldn't have peaceful quiet times like this, but it was seeming to me that Jacob wasn't particularly gaining either. He would rarely play actively during Jesse's piano time, but seemed to just be in a suspended "waiting room" vagueness. And at times all of our exasperation levels were rising dangerously, and all my patience and Jesse's would be lost.

Jacob's new job is solving all these problems. Now in his third week of WORK, Jacob is even beginning to plan ahead his "special time" with Molly -- "Maybe tomorrow Molly and I could make up a pretend store," etc. Molly is getting familiar with the whole idea, and often runs over to grab Jacob's hand, ready to go off to HER special time with HIM. They've been building with blocks, dressing up in outrageous outfits, playing pretend games with dolls and stuffed toys, imagining all sorts of dramas. They've baked cookies and muffins together without any help from me (Jacob is our resident creative baker, his forte being carob EVERYTHING, no recipes needed and it almost always is edible...). They've laughed and giggled and been HAPPY now during this former wasted part of their day.

And Jacob is also happy about earning his own money. He's planning on buying a few small apple trees for our future orchard and has also purchased a small set of colored

pencils and spends much time delightedly counting his money. (He hasn't needed any workbook pages or pretend money to learn about pennies, nickels, quarters and dollars -- he uses the real thing!) I know many, many families don't feel comfortable or right about paying their children for jobs around the home, and prefer giving kids an allowance so the kids can have some money. My boys have always been bewildered about the idea of allowances, and have never wanted one, and they DO do many jobs for NO pay (and fairly cheerfully). This job is an extra special job that I especially appreciate Jacob doing, and the pay (25 cents a time IF Molly doesn't come to bother us before the time is up) does seem to help Jacob take this work very seriously and proudly. And as for allowances, Jesse recently said he thought allowances were sort of like "Welfare for Kids" (we'd just been reading a kids' book on the history of the social welfare system in our country) -- and that he'd rather work for his money.

And, of course, Jesse and I are having much more productive piano times now that Molly is not trying her darnedest to "disturbe" us. We know now we can count on a long stretch of concentrated time to work together, without feeling we're in the middle of a three ring circus. Might be something for some other homeschooling families to consider when dealing with several children at once.

One caution -- one of Howard's early memories from childhood was of a day when he was, for some reason, bugging his mother while she was doing some sort of work, and his mother, in exasperation, finally offered to pay his older sister Janice a dollar if she could just DO SOMETHING with Howard for a while and keep him out of her hair. Howard was terribly affronted, and felt that at least HE should have been paid too. He certainly didn't feel like cooperating with the scheme. I think Howard, at the time, was a good bit older than Molly -- she is not quite aware of money matters particularly, although she knows she IS Jacob's job. But for her, at this age, this just makes her feel special and important. Very important to work these things out positively, so that it doesn't feel like blackmail or trickery.

I can imagine this might also be a possible help to the mothers who've written that they feel overwhelmed and very stressed with NO free time to call their own, especially when their husband's work doesn't allow him time to take the kids for a spell. Perhaps the older CHILD could take the kids for a while if this were clearly proposed and discussed with them, and parameters set together...

Moving Towards Positive Traditions

There's a big question that's always popping up when I open the day's homeschooling mail, or talk with families at a homeschooling gathering. It's this -- "But how STRUCTURED are you in your homeschooling???" It's a main question mothers are

always asking each other, and we probably don't usually give very satisfactory answers. We may blithely (or embarrassedly) say, "Oh! we're not structured at all!" or conversely "Oh, we use the such-and-such curriculum and really have to have a tight schedule." What we all are probably hoping for, though, is a real inside look into another family's homeschooling. We'd love to see a "normal" day in someone else's home -- who decides when everyone gets up? Is the day a set routine, and if so, who set it up, and is everyone happy and cooperative about it, or snarling and fighting it the whole way? Do the kids on their own move from purposeful activity to activity, or is Mom trying continually to wheedle them into a "learning" activity? Does the mother at least need to be part of things in an active way, especially in transitions from one subject to another -- or are there really no subjects, but just real living and learning? What is the rhythm of the day, the ebb and flow? How "much" gets done -- and who decides if this is enough? How much regularity is there to the day? How much is each day unique? And is regularity boring or freeing?

I've come to feel that it's impossible to really ever see what happens at another home -- when we visit we change the day's expectations entirely (and rightly so!), and we're not seeing the "normal" day. All the more reason why we need to write and talk and share with each other about what our day-to-day is really like (including the occasionally inevitable tantrum -- from child or parent!), as well as the good discoveries we've all made in learning to live with and guide our children.

Here's an update on our own lives:

I wrote earlier about the plan we began using just a year and a half ago to help organize our homeschooling day. (A new organizing idea seemed really necessary as we were in a transition time after making a house move.) It basically involves a card charting system that Jesse can use to plan his own use of time, within parameters I've helped him set. He has total say over WHEN certain types of activities will take place -- he can choose to have his piano time before lunch or just after breakfast, or whatever. But he can't choose not to play piano at all (this is certainly not to say that we don't "forget" at times in the delight of doing something else, but still this daily expectation keeps us on track). Jesse also helps choose just what it is that he'll actually DO in each area he sets up in his day, and I know that this freedom to decide makes him not balky about the whole plan. I seriously listen to any suggestion he has, however outlandish it may seem to me at first. I sometimes offer other suggestions, and we work out something we can both feel happy about. And my knowing that he has visualized that he will devote time in these areas keeps me from being naggy with him (cuts down on the "Now Jesse, when are you ever going to do your writing????"). Another important ingredient is flexibility, and our growing ability to balance out our active time and quiet time, and to know when to change the day's plan mid-stream.

Basically, we're still finding this way of planning incredibly helpful to us, we're still using it, in fact using it better now than last year. Now this article is not urging you to try our plan (I'd even go so far as to guarantee it WON'T work for you!). It's just what we've evolved over time, and every family has to do their own search for their own positive way to structure time with their children. Pasting on someone else's solution denies you the chance of finding something even better, something more suited to your unique family style. I do think, though, that we can all gain from hearing concretely why some things seem to go very well for certain families, and why some flop. Can point out possible directions we hadn't thought of yet ourselves.

I think, first, our "Setting up the Day" plan has been good for us because it's really become a TRADITION for us -- it's just what we expect to do in the morning. It's become embedded in our homeschooling now, Jesse pinning up his subject area/project cards on his time-line of the day, gathering focus and then starting in on the day's work. Jacob (5 1/2) has asked to have HIS own day now, and though he certainly doesn't use it as regularly as Jesse, it's there on the bulletin board in the dining room now, and will be there when he (and I) are REALLY ready to approach his day this way. By edging into this, he's slowly gaining ideas about planning and decision making. And he's following a tradition set by his brother.

I use the word "tradition" here purposely, as I think it's a key, and because I think possibly the idea of forging family traditions has a more positive ring to it than "getting structured." For some homeschooling families the very word "structure" is an incredibly negative word, bringing up images of drill sergeants and bells ringing to march students off to the next subject. It's a much maligned word, just like "discipline" (which carries images of frowning disapproval and spankings and children who just won't "mind"). For some it's downright embarrassing to admit to "structuring" their time -- I get letters from parents who apologize for not being "ready" to just turn the kids "loose," for not being "John Holtish" enough. They may forget that John Holt was a person who at times in his life made it a tradition to rise at 4:00 in the morning so that he could play cello for THREE HOURS before he would need to go to teach school. He was also fond of saying that there was NO situation that didn't have structure to it, that structure is just a part of life at all levels, from the cell or atom to the universe. Different structures allow different things, of course -- the structure of an amoeba allows it to do some things we can't do, but our more complex structure lets us do many other things. And so it is with our time, too. I remember being taken up short when I read recently that the great composer Bach once said that time was the one true gift of God -- it's the only thing he gives us just once.

So maybe in sorting out our ways of using time, TRADITIONS is something we can positively think about, and see how this idea -- that can work so well in many areas of our living with children -- may have some help to give us with our homeschooling. I

think of the many and varied traditions that have cropped up in our family over the years, often beginning quite accidentally. It's now a tradition that the boys set our holiday dinner table in private, usually layering on several lacy tablecloths, climbing on step stools to secretly reach the fancy china, opening up the old silver chest to get out the inherited real silverware. And the kids all go off to the woods to help Howard tap maple trees in late winter (sweet smells of boiling syrup fill the house now as I write). And they get to open Christmas presents on Christmas MORNINGS, not the night before. And Jesse, and soon Jacob, get to read the important "four questions" at our Passover Seder meals. All the little things that become repeated year after year, treasured and looked forward to, a beginning of a heritage.

On the day to day level, it's also a tradition that we all eat three meals together, and I know the kids feel incredibly adrift and unsettled and visibly unhappy if somehow, say, lunch gets skipped because we've just all snacked the day away. Jacob will moan, come 3:30, "but we never had lunch!." We seem to need these regular joining together times, times to regroup, and then move on to the next round of activities. The kids expect it. It's what we do. Also I think my kids would mutiny if our loved bedtime routine of nightly reading aloud up in their double-bed bunk were suddenly, and arbitrarily, done away with one night. If they got the feeling that this special time was only available by caprice or whim and not by firmly established, long standing tradition. (Likewise I would mutiny if my two hour typing/writing time each day were arbitrarily done away with for too many days in a row, if I got the feeling that I couldn't count on having time alone to think and write... we've structured this into our day, too. We can't forget our own needs.)

We've also found it positive to purposely structure in many NEW traditions. We now have a chart on the dining room wall relegating nightly table setting duties, and a regular system of deciding WHO gets to choose what we have for breakfast, and who will make it (ending -- almost -- the grumpy morning whines of "But I hate cream of wheat! I want cheese eggs!") We also have a long list posted next to our upstairs bathroom sink telling us what we need to do before going to bed (I have to admit here that it was only after putting up this chart that I began being a regular "dental flosser" myself -- before that I always MEANT well, but...you know the excuses side-tracked types are prone too...)

Now don't get the wrong picture of our life -- we love variety and get a lot of it naturally, partly because of all the visiting we do and the good number of folks who visit us here at our farm. I think now that once a family has a strong tradition about how they use time, has established regular rhythms a child can count on and look forward to, it also becomes just fine to "break tradition" for a time. Take a vacation for a day -- or more. We recently spent three hours straight in the afternoon reading aloud from a new book borrowed from the library (Molly was asleep in my lap the

whole time...). Math wasn't completed (or begun...), Jesse and Jacob didn't write a word all day, music was postponed. We are free at home to go on these "binges" when something wonderful comes up. Maintaining a basic rhythm to our days doesn't mean a bit of syncopation isn't a welcome delight. Possibly the syncopation is even more special when the basic beat is strong... who knows. And we always know our way of planning is there the next day, that we can take stock then of where we are and what we need to do. It really is a trick, finding that balance between what rhythms help and give cohesiveness to our lives, and what is just an artificial and totally unhelpful cramping of your family's style. Probably it's most important to get out of the "punishment" frame of mind in structuring your time, but instead look at the ways you really want to USE your limited time well, for things that you truly feel are worth doing. The day we spent 3 hours reading aloud, THAT was what we most wanted to do. We wouldn't have had the heart for anything else.

We also usually find that we have much better days, have more of a good sense of accomplishment, if we all get up EARLY (of course, I hope you understand that we only KNOW this because of the contrast with the days when we're just groggily clearing up the breakfast dishes at 10:15...). Besides just being able to do more in the way of writing and reading or math work or music, if we're off to an early start the kids have more time to PLAY throughout the day, something they of course love. (Jesse is always careful now to plan in FREE time for himself, and not OVERplan his day...) If Jesse gets up early, he will sometimes read for a half-hour even before we have breakfast. And I'm still, whenever possible, arising before Molly to play piano for an hour or so in the lovely quiet of the morning, and I'm not half-bad now at most of the pieces in the Suzuki Book II. I suppose that that is indeed another tradition in our house -- waking up hearing Mommy playing piano downstairs. I think my kids would think it was odd now to begin the day any other way.

Perhaps one of the most positive things we've found about structuring our time well is that we then have the time to really accomplish things, and see improvement and growth. When I only played piano for scattered minutes here and there with Molly leaping up on my lap, it was very hard to see much progress. Once I made the regular commitment to early rising I've been really pleased to see my own learning moving along much faster. So too with the kids. Jacob has learned the rudiments of playing soprano recorder now -- because it's now a (happy!) tradition that we play recorder together every day, for at least a short bit -- complete with ritually marking his calendar after our playing times. (We even find it helps to have a special place to always play -- seems to help Jacob's concentration somehow.) Jesse is learning to read music for piano because we're working at it daily -- and together. Jesse is a writer because he WRITES regularly, and for his own purposes. We all can begin feeling good bursts of self-esteem from all these accomplishments, and feel motivated to

continue and set new and higher goals. We can put stock in things a bit more, because we are more deeply involved in them, we're getting past the "just smattering" stage. (And we all have certainly "just smattered" in MANY things, and that is wonderful fun too, but really focusing is special in another way.)

I think that often we don't notice the real structure in our homeschooling and our family life, because it's just "what we do" and doesn't seem extraordinary or thought out or planned. Maybe indeed that is the sign that you've really found the right fit for your family -- when it all just seems natural, like no structure at all. Rather like a comfortable pair of shoes that you barely notice on your feet. The shoes are there, but they are a HELP to you, not a pinching or rubbing-the-wrong-way experience. And, too, just as shoes get old and too worn or too tight with age, and have to be discarded, so too we regularly need to reevaluate the condition of our family traditions and structures to see if the fit is still right. Make it a tradition, indeed, to change as we all grow.

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