

What We Have Learned

Many parents find home education to be a learning experience for themselves, as well as for their children. This chapter is a summing up of some of the things that we have learned about how to best create a learning atmosphere in our home.

Reading Aloud is the Foundation

Almost all our homeschooling activities begin with reading aloud. Our children have learned the alphabet partly by listening to alphabet books. They have been inspired to write from listening to other children's stories. They have become interested in arithmetic after hearing biographies of famous mathematicians. They have become connected to the past through reading stories and biographies of people who have lived in other times. We are raising children who love books.

First Steps Must Not Be Rushed

Perhaps the biggest mistake made by schools is their rushing of children into reading. First graders in school who hardly know the alphabet get very frustrated when there are lots of words on a page. As a result they come to think of themselves as dumb, and they come to hate reading. At home, we allow reading to unfold at a slower pace. Once a child has begun to read, our cardinal principle is that the books should not be too hard. Hard books can be frustrating and overwhelming, and children don't learn when they are frustrated. (There is one exception to this rule: When children choose to read difficult books to themselves, they do not get frustrated by the hard words.)

There are a number of ways to determine before hand whether a book is difficult. Short words are easier to read, as are short sentences. Books with few words on a page are less intimidating. Large print is easier to read. Sometimes it is hard to find easy enough books. Since beginning reading textbooks often start off very easy, we often alternate between several different beginning reading textbooks when our children are first learning to read. As soon as possible, though, we've helped our children discover that they can read REAL books, not just "readers."

Finding a Regular Rhythm

We have been almost surprised over the years to realize how helpful a definite but flexible structure can be in our homeschooling.

Keep Sessions Enjoyable

We try to keep homeschooling times enjoyable so that our children will look forward to them. When our children make mistakes, we don't always correct them. Mistakes can be a good sign. or maybe just a sign that the child was answering a different question. The willingness to risk making mistakes -- just like when baby Hannah tries her darnedest to talk to us with her gurgles and oohs and ahhs -- is often the forerunner of success. Mistakes show that children are putting in the mental effort to figure things out. If children continue to put in the mental effort, and get the natural feedback of response and further modeling, the mistakes will eventually take care of themselves.

Children learn to talk without being corrected. A child who says "I is hungry" will eventually figure out how to say "I am hungry." When reading, a child who attends to meaning can notice when things don't make sense so that he can find his own mistakes. In writing, mistakes can be corrected on the second or third draft for essays that are being prepared for an audience. A computer word-processing system helps our children do second and third drafts because the whole piece does not have to be rewritten -- just the mistakes need to be changed.

When a child is reading or writing and comes to a word that he does not know, sometimes we will tell him the word, sometimes we help him figure it out himself, and sometimes we will tell him that we think he can figure it out himself. If a child is reading, and there is word after word in the text that he can't figure out on his own, then the book is too difficult.

The trick is to keep your child from getting frustrated while gradually increasing his independence. At first, when he is reading or writing or doing math, you are snuggling with him. He may be sitting on your lap or sitting right next to you. You are looking at the book or paper over his shoulder. You are telling him when you think he can figure out a word on his own. Gradually, you want to fade yourself out of the situation. You want to get to the point where you can be sewing or washing dishes or working with your other children and are just available to answer his questions. One home-schooling parent, Dan Wilcox, described this process as "getting out of your child's head." When you are telling your child whether or not he can figure out a word, you are telling him that you know what he can do better than he does. When you step aside you are telling him that you trust him to be in control of his own reading (or writing). If he asks you what a word is (or how to spell a word), there comes a time when you no longer say, "Try to sound it out yourself." There comes a time when you treat him just as you would an adult that would ask -- you answer him gracefully.

Use Real Life Situations

Our children are motivated by real purposes. They will write letters that will really be sent, articles that will really be read, and books that will really be bound and treasured. They will add columns of numbers for real checkbooks and add up scores for real card games. One eleven year old took off into reading when she began to read to children that she was baby-sitting for. Many children read on a regular basis to their little brothers or sisters. Other children enjoy reading aloud on tape, and then sending the tape off to friends or family.

Recognize Accomplishments

These days at supper Susan is always telling me what Jacob or Molly just read. I have to play a guessing game. When I guess all sorts of easy books incorrectly, they finally -- with great delight -- tell me what book it was. They appreciate my interest.

Another way we recognize our children's reading accomplishments is through our "stairways of books" where the kids write down the titles of books or chapters that they read. More important than any "gimmick" like that, though, is our readiness to discuss their books with them, share our feelings about them, listen to their retellings (Jesse's voice was breaking this morning as he told me about the ending of *Old Yeller*, and why he thought it was more similar to *Where the Red Fern Grows* than to the ending of *The Long Journey*).

We recognize their growing abilities in math by letting them take on real work that involves those skills. Jacob is proud that he gets to sort out the checks for our newsletter bank account as Jesse adds them all up.

Establish a Collegial Relationship

We find we get on best with our children if we meet them as colleagues -- equal partners in learning, rather than know-it-all adults versus dumb kids. We share how we learn, how we solve problems, what types of books appeal to us, new insights we have into all subject areas -- and we listen to their ideas on the same things. We don't pretend we aren't adults who have been around a bit longer and so know a bit more, but we try to balance this with a readiness to see their thinking and hear their ideas. They often astonish us with their questions and insights.

There is no audience more delightful to read for than homeschooled children. Our children chuckle out loud with delight at humorous passages in books that I

read with them, and we just naturally stop and talk along the way, making remarks about the pictures or the story. There is an art to listening which home-schooled children just naturally pick up and that we might do well to emulate. When we listen to our children read or when we read their writing, we try to respond first to the story -- not just to their "errors." After all, they are patient with us when we are reading aloud and come across maybe a foreign word or a strange name that we don't know right off how to pronounce. They are patient with our stumbles.

We share our writing with our children. We let them know that it takes us several drafts to get a letter or story written, and that we often heavily revise a piece or make mistakes along the way.

When they ask us questions, we don't pretend we know all the answers. Often our search together for answers helps our kids learn not only the answers, but also how to find answers. As colleagues in learning together, we share our children's vibrant interest in the world, past and present.

In Sum

We have found that these approaches have worked positively with our own children. (When we lapse into other ways of interacting, our kids let us know VERY quickly if it's NOT so positive!) We hope we've spurred on some new thinking for you and your family, and that you'll find this adventure of learning with your kids to be worth the taking, and worth giving it your best.