

# Introduction

This book is for homeschooling parents who are looking for new ideas and people who are thinking about teaching their own children.

Many parts of this book first appeared in the journal my husband and I edit, *Pennsylvania Homeschoolers* or the late John Holt's magazine, *Growing Without Schooling*. We wish to thank Susannah Sheffer, the editor of *Growing Without Schooling* for permission to reprint from our many contributions to that excellent journal.

**This book is written in two type fonts. Susan's writing is in ordinary print while mine is in boldface. While it is a joint effort of husband and wife, we do not sit down together to do the writing, rather, one of us types when the other is with the children.**

**We have been homeschooling for ten years (our children are Jesse, 10; Jacob, 7; Molly 4; and Hannah, 6 months), but this book is not just about us. It is also based upon our interviews with, and letters from, other parents who have helped their children. I have been especially interested in following a number of homeschooling children who've begun to read "late" by school standards. I conduct interviews with their parents and follow their progress of these children.**

## Susan's Background

Ten years ago this summer our son Jesse was born, and that's also when I officially dropped out of school teaching. I was always something of a misfit as a teacher in schools, but I didn't quite know then that I'd find my niche as a parent, teaching and learning with my own kids at home. By the time he was 2 1/2, Jesse was firmly announcing that he'd never go to school -- no nursery school, no preschool, not the school where his father taught. No school. About that time I was visiting my mother in Georgia and happened to catch John Holt on The Donahue Show. I remember my sister and mother saying with disgust, "Oh no! Just see what that crazy John Holt is up to now! Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?" I admit the idea did sound somewhat ridiculous to me then, but I couldn't get the thought out of my head. Homeschooling -- no school. At all. Ever. Continuing to learn with my kids. No rigmarole of trying to set up our own alternative school, with worries about money and staffing.

Soon afterward I found *Growing Without Schooling*, the journal founded by the late John Holt, found one friend who was seriously contemplating the whole idea, and

after a while I convinced Howard that we should do it. He finally realized how much it meant to me, and that it wasn't one of those decisions that you could come back to in eighteen years. Jesse of course needed no convincing at all -- he'd held firm to his earlier feelings about schooling.

It's funny to think of how we fell into doing a state homeschooling newsletter. In March of 1982 I was riding with a friend down to see John Holt at a Pittsburgh television studio. She began saying how nice it would be if someone would gather the names and addresses of everyone in the audience that day. I agreed wholeheartedly. Then she said someone could even send out copies of that list, so we could all stay in touch. Again I said, "Great idea." She continued, saying it might also be nice if someone could have a file of sample curriculums and letters people had written to their school districts. I agreed again, thinking of course that *she* was thinking of doing all this herself. I was trying to encourage her in it. Then she added that maybe someone could periodically write up something about what was available in the file and send it out -- like, perhaps, a sort of newsletter. Again I told her that was a great idea. Then she looked me square in the eye and said, "And we all think YOU should be the one to do it!" What could I say but, "Great idea!" And so it began -- a little two-page notice at first, then five pages, then we began getting more responses from readers and more contacts from new folks, and things just grew and grew. As a friend told me, I've really found my niche now.

I sometimes look back at myself as a paid teacher in schools and shudder. I was so green, so unaware, so young. I fancied myself as someone who liked to read aloud to groups of kids, for example, and felt I did it pretty well. But though I tried to stock my classroom with good books, the truth is that I had never read most of them. Or at least hadn't read them like a *parent* reads children's books, over and over again until you know every nuance of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* or *Frog and Toad are Friends*. Not like a parent who can leisurely discuss the latest read-aloud over breakfast or toothbrushing, or who can tie it in neatly to an outing (we've seen any number of "prototypes" of Mike Mulligan's *Maryanne* out rusting away). And I think what a joke it was to imagine that I, as a teacher, actually knew any of the children I taught. Compared to what I know about my own children, I knew nothing about the kids who came to my classroom. Their backgrounds and home lives were blanks to me. I didn't know where they'd been, what they'd read, what they wondered about. How different to know a child intimately, my own child.

Publishing *Pennsylvania Homeschoolers* has broadened our family so much. We've certainly gained every bit as much as we've given out, and more. When I think of the pallid, complaining conversations of the smoky teacher's lounge at school, and compare them to the friendly, open, in-depth conversations and letters with homeschooling parents we've become close friends with, there is just no comparison.

And our kids have friends through this wonderful homeschooling network that's formed in the past ten years. We've been with families that open up whole new worlds to us -- the ballet, owner built homes, piano, science projects we'd never thought of, sculpting with old apple logs, growing orchards of dwarf trees.

So I look about me and think of ten years of changes and how good it's been. I've seen Jesse grow from a toddler pointing chubby fingers at pictures of cows to a competent reader who finishes a book in two days because he just can't put it down. Jacob is almost 7 and always experimenting, concocting new "mixtures" and inventions and discussing air pressure and vacuums and trying to read all the signs he sees around him (this, a child who I know the schools would have quickly labeled LD). And Molly, now four, is writing stories daily, absolutely fearless about putting thoughts into print, and drawing astonishing pictures all the time. And now baby Hannah is here too, and we are all watching her with delight as she invents Bronx cheers and chortles away to us in baby jabber (the "whole conversation" approach to talking, I call it!). I remember once writing in a journal, when Jesse was about 18 months old, about how exciting it was to show him the birds that came to our feeder. I wondered what good things we'd be learning when he was 4. It's gone on long beyond that now, and it's still very exciting.

## **Howard's Background**

**I met Susan when we were both in college taking courses in teacher education. After we graduated and got married, Susan worked at her first career, as a teacher in a Catholic school, while I went back to graduate school to get a Masters Degree in reading instruction. This degree helped me to get a job teaching reading in a public school, and when Jesse was born, Susan began her second career, this time as a mother.**

**I remember when Susan first began to mention homeschooling. I opposed the idea at first thinking that such a decision might put us into conflict with my school district and might cost me my job. I asked Susan why she couldn't do homeschooling activities with our children after they would come home from school. She showed me an article in *Growing Without Schooling* about a mother who had tried, but whose children came home from school too burned-out to do anything resembling school work. Finally, I gave my consent to homeschooling, a decision that I have never regretted.**

**Even if our children were not growing up to be literate, even if they were not growing up to be kind people, I would appreciate homeschooling because it has helped us be a close family. Also, many children in schools find that they have to**

choose between their peer group's values and their parents' values. Some choose their peer group's values and become strangers to their parents. I do not think that our children will ever be strangers to us.

Also, our decision did not cost me my job. We were able to make a cooperative agreement with our school district, and now I am not so much different from the many public school teachers who send their children to private schools.

When I was fifteen I once met my father at his job. He was a college professor and I attended the last ten minutes of one of his classes. I felt that there was a nice respectful atmosphere in that room and I decided then and there that I, too, would become a college professor. So, as I continued to teach during the day, I began to take night courses at the University of Pittsburgh working toward the doctorate in education which I obtained a few years ago.

My doctoral dissertation applied an artificial-intelligence program to the understanding of children learning sight words. Since completing my doctoral work I have been engaged in an extensive exploration of the artificial intelligence literature and hands-on programming of artificial-intelligence models on my home computer. I am now engaged in testing a program that I have just written which learns phonics. Through this work I hope to come to a better understanding of how children learn. Despite the many successful school reading methods, no one really knows how children learn phonics, and, certainly, no one knows how some three and four year olds teach themselves.

As a reading "expert," parents often come to me with questions about how they should teach reading at home. At first, I didn't know what to tell them. I knew many methods that work in schools but did not know whether they would be suited to the home, so I began to interview parents and children in order to find out how reading is learned at home. If there is a pattern it is this: The child begins his first steps into reading when he is being read to. He may be sitting on his mother's lap, or closely snuggled next to his mother. When he first begins reading himself, he is often in the same position. Whenever he needs help, his mother is there to help him and give him security. Later, he is sitting next to his mother, perhaps on a couch, and he is getting much less help. When he can't get a word he points to it and she helps him. Soon, he is reading at the kitchen table, while she is preparing supper. When he can't figure out a word he spells it out loud for her. Eventually, he is off by himself silently reading a book of many chapters.

**Even after he has learned to read, he still snuggles with his brothers and sisters as his parents read aloud, sharing literature, math, history, and science, and family togetherness.**

## **This Book**

**Chapters two, three, four, and five are about children's reading. They are arranged chronologically, beginning from when children first begin to listen to books that are read to them, and moving until they begin to read fluently to themselves. Chapters six, seven, and eight describe some of the informal and formal ways our children have learned writing and arithmetic. Chapters nine, ten, and eleven discuss some of the structures of homeschooling including achievement tests, curriculums, and the structure of the homeschooling day. Chapter twelve summarizes what we have learned about what works within our home. At the end of the book we have included Jesse's fifth grade curriculum as an appendix.**

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