

ISSUE 4



Should Parents Homeschool Their Children?

YES: Chris Jeub, from "Homeschool" and "Reasons for Home-schooling." *Focus on the Family* (2006)

NO: Carole Moore, from "Why It's Not Right for Us," Scholastic.com (2006)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Chris Jeub, writer and president of Training Minds Ministries, is a former public school teacher with 11 children, all of whom he and his wife have homeschooled. Naming several famous homeschooled individuals, such as Winston Churchill, Benjamin Franklin, and Florence Nightingale, he argues that the home is the best environment in which to teach children, for social, academic, family strengthening, and religious reasons. Homeschooling, he maintains, frees parents to impart their own values to their children without concern for how these beliefs might clash with what is presented in the public school system.

NO: Carole Moore, a freelance writer, discusses how she weighed the options of home vs. public schooling and argues that even though homeschooling might offer some benefits to children, in the end, children who are homeschooled provides a distorted view of the world at large. Children will, she writes, make good decisions and bad decisions as a part of growing up, and whether they are homeschooled or public schooled is not the determining factor in whether they grow up healthy and well-adjusted.

Education for children in the United States was not originally required; it was up to parents to decide whether and how to educate their children, including whether to send them to school. In 1850, however, Massachusetts became the first state to pass a law requiring "schooling" for children. Some of this took place in school buildings, and some was done by parents at home—but requiring that children be educated became more and more commonplace as time went on. And as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, there were proponents who believed that school-based education failed children, and that children were better off educated at home.



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According to the Home School Association of California, the home-schooling that took place between then and the 1970s tended to be a bit more clandestine and to be found in rural areas. The early 1980s saw the emergence of homeschooling publications and groups that were associated specifically with conservative and religious (in particular, Christian) ideologies. Fearing the “godlessness” of public school, members of these groups received ongoing support for teaching their children at home. As we moved into the 1990s, homeschooled children in the United States increased, with a federal government survey in 1999 estimating that nearly 900,000 children are being homeschooled in this country, a number that can only have increased over the past eight years.

In your opinion, what are the benefits to children attending school with other children and being taught by a trained teacher that they can't receive being taught at home? What are some of the benefits, do you think, of teaching children at home, within the context of one's own family values, and without the distractions of other people, noise, and social pressures? There are clear arguments on each side, some of which are expressed in the following selections.

Chris Jeub's reasoning is outlined by topic areas, in which he describes his perceptions—having been a schoolteacher himself—of the ways in which homeschooling benefits children, as well as parents, more than traditional education in a shared classroom environment. Homeschooling, he argues, gives children much more freedom to pursue individual interests, and parents much more leeway to integrate religious messages into their teaching, something a public school is not allowed to do. Carole Moore considered homeschooling very carefully, and acknowledges some of the potential strengths, some of which center around safety issues for young people. In the end, however, she chose not to homeschool her own child, and argues that doing so creates a much more sheltered life for young people, which does not reflect the reality of the world at large.



Homeschool

Introduction

She innocently asked, "So, where do your children go to school?"

Of all casual questions one teacher could ask another, this one always creates butterflies in my stomach.

"Well, uh, my wife and I tutor them," I say. Then I try to think of something to change the subject. But I never think of anything quick enough.

"Tutor them?" she might say, squinting her nose and ruffling her brows as if I had held a cockroach up to her face. "You mean, you home school them?"

These situations inevitably lead to an hour-long apologetic on why we educate our kids at home. This should not surprise me. Home schooling is still unusual and a bit radical. Teachers and others in education—or in any field, for that matter—naturally question new, innovative practices.

But home education is not so rare anymore. Twenty years ago there were roughly 15,000 home-schooled students in the United States. By 1991 the U.S. Department of Education figured there were 350,000 home schools in the U.S. and 40,000 in Canada. Today estimates stretch over 2 million home schools nationwide.

The world of education has had to adjust to this exploding movement. There are many magazines and newspapers for home schools, numerous home-school curriculum distributors and countless home-school network and contact groups. Why do parents choose to teach their children at home?

Social Reasons

Home-schooling parents believe that children can learn basic life skills—working together, sharing, showing respect for others—without formal classroom experience. The students can develop social graces by being involved in community and church activities.

Pat Farenga, publisher of *Growing Without Schooling*, a catalog of home-school resources, has written: "Group experiences are a big part of education, and home schoolers have plenty of them.

They write to us about how they form or join writing clubs, book discussion groups and local home-schooling groups. Home schoolers also take part in school sports teams and music groups [in nearby public schools], as well as

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Chris Jeub

in the many public and private group activities our communities provide. These young people can and do experience other people and cultures without going to school."

Our children have many church and neighborhood friends. Our community has a home-school contact group where they often get together for field trips and outings that give our kids more than enough socialization. We have gone on camping trips, facilitated soccer tournaments, traveled to speech and debate tournaments and coordinated educational classes.

But not all socialization is necessarily good for a child. Certain social plagues like drugs, alcohol, premarital sex, violence and gangs damage a child's growth and development. A home-school environment frees the child from the increasingly persuasive peer pressure prevalent in many schools.

The positive side of socialization—building respect and communication, getting along with and relating to others—is wonderfully fulfilled in a home-school setting. Behavioral psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner concluded that "meaningful human contact" is best accomplished with few people.

Academic Reasons

While some parents choose to teach at home to promote positive socialization, others make the decision for academic reasons. Any teacher will agree that the smaller the class size, the more learning takes place. The one-on-one tutoring atmosphere is the healthiest, most productive and most progressive atmosphere for a student's academic success.

Take a look at some famous home-schooled students: Andrew Carnegie, Charlie Chaplin, Agatha Christie, Winston Churchill, Charles Dickens, Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Florence Nightingale, Woodrow Wilson and the Wright brothers.

People ask how parents—especially parents with little or no post-secondary education—can teach children every discipline available to public school students. Although I have my degree in English, am I qualified to teach math or science to my kids? My wife has a business administration degree; is she able to teach the language arts? With sufficient information and dedication to the task, we certainly are.

Even if parents do not have an abundance of academic training themselves, they can find solutions to fill the gaps. For example, many home schools will team up with other home schools to exchange skills. I traded skills with another home school family by going to their house once a week to teach English to three of their sons. In return, their mom taught algebra to my two oldest daughters.

Most communities today have enrichment classes students can sign up for much like college students sign up for electives. Here in Colorado Springs, the High Plains Christian Home Educators support group has hired a full-time administrator who coordinates 60 classes for over 200 students. Cooperatives such as this are becoming more popular as home schooling grows.

But education is more than individual academic courses—more than teaching what the teacher knows or training students in a particular skill. It is

actually passing on a worldview. Separating the disciplines—as if English had nothing to do with math, and science was unrelated to civics—promotes a fragmented vision of true education.

A wise man once said, “A good teacher teaches himself out of a job.” When I taught English in the public schools, I was not merely repeating what I learned in college; I was teaching students to love and passionately engage in the language arts. And when I taught, I integrated all disciplines—history, science, social studies, even math—into my lessons. Treating any learning discipline as separate from others misrepresents real life. Real life is interdisciplinary, and home-school instruction lends itself to a cross-disciplinary approach.

Students have the freedom to pursue their interests and strengths. They also receive the attention needed to improve skills in their more difficult learning areas. Pat Farenga explains the benefits of solitary reflection: “Children, like adults, need time to be alone to think, to muse, to read freely, to daydream, to be creative, to form a self independent of the barrage of mass culture.” Granting such a time presents a struggle in traditional schools, but home schools allow such freedom.

Family Reasons

Home-school parents see their role as the single most important responsibility they carry. The family helps to build strong minds and healthy personalities.

Along with strengthening the family and setting firm foundations for kids, home-school parents discover some personal pluses. Wendy and I are now much closer to our kids, more in touch with their needs and feelings. Alicia and Alissa attended public school through first- and third-grade respectively until I completed college and Wendy returned home from full-time work (to unpaid full-time work).

While Alicia’s grades were excellent, she needed to be home for security’s sake. Alissa, on the other hand, loved the social contact at school but struggled in basic writing and reading skills. Wendy and I noticed positive changes immediately in Alicia’s esteem and Alissa’s academics. They both became more confident. I can only accredit this improvement to the loving and affirming atmosphere of the family.

Religious Reasons

It is no secret that public schools have not taken religion seriously. Fear of church and state laws keep some schools from even mentioning the influence of religion in American life. Instead of recognizing religion as part of our culture, civil liberties organizations have fought hard in the courts to make religion illegal in the classroom.

This has been too bad. With the exclusion of religion many parents have felt compelled to go elsewhere—even to their own homes—to teach their children basic moral and religious truths to provide a well-rounded and liberal education.

Teaching our kids at home frees us to handle religious questions and spiritual training without worrying about public school issues. While some districts restrict the discussion of religious influence in history, literature and science, home schools can incorporate the impact of spiritual beliefs into all curricula.

Mutual Respect

Home schooling is being recognized by professional educators and by society as a reasonable educational option for families. Some public schools and private schools have formed alliances with home education groups and have adopted programs that suit the home education lifestyle.

Home schooling is not so much a rebellion against public schools as it is a choice made on social, academic, family and religious grounds. As educators and home schoolers get to know one another, we will see that we share many of the same goals for our children.



Why It's Not Right for Us

I became interested in homeschooling a few years ago when a friend told me how much she loved it. A former cop turned writer, I approached the editor at the newspaper where I worked and convinced him to let me write a series on the topic. I interviewed dozens of homeschooling parents and students. All told, including the work on the series plus my own follow-up research, I spent over a year studying the possibility and debating whether learning at home would be best for my kids—a daughter, then age 10, and a son, age 8.

I learned that many families homeschooled because they didn't like the secular curriculum. Others complained that classes were dumbed down, which caused boredom and restlessness in bright students. A lot chose to remove their kids from what they perceived as an unhealthy social atmosphere. All were convinced they'd done the right thing.

They explained the differences in the types of homeschooling to me: Some followed rigorous religious-based curricula, while others used the same materials as their public schools. A few, called unschoolers, followed nothing but their hearts and let the kids themselves pick what they wanted to study. Many bartered with other parents on subjects requiring special expertise, such as trading French instruction for piano lessons.

The kids' education seemed balanced and academically sound, but most appealing was the bond they shared with their parents. My own daughter, anxious to grow up, nibbled at her ties to me, with her younger brother fast on her heels. I wondered if homeschooling could bring us closer.

Still, as I spoke with homeschooling families from one coast to the other, certain troubling questions bubbled to the surface—many of them familiar to me from my days in law enforcement.

Our community is nowhere near a major city. Still my children went to elementary school with a girl whose father committed suicide in her presence, kids with both parents in prison, and youngsters who couldn't read, yet knew all the words to filthy rap songs. As a police officer, I often dealt with adolescent drug dealers, pregnant teens, and runaways—kids whose lives were out of control. Certainly the largest majority of them were enrolled in public schools, but not all. Some of the most troubled kids I dealt with came from homes where they'd been very sheltered.

I remember one teenager in particular. After years of alternately being homeschooled and attending a very strict, small, church-based school, she

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moved to a public school—where she spiraled out of control. She drank. She took drugs. And she had sex. Her parents were appalled; that was not how they'd raised their daughter.

Some would blame the influence of the public school system. They'd say she made friends with bad kids. And they'd be right. But that wasn't the only reason she got into so much trouble. In my opinion, her problem went much deeper: she didn't know how to handle the sudden combination of freedom and exposure to a side of life she'd never personally confronted. Her parents had talked about these things. She'd heard about them in church. But talk alone isn't a substitute for reality, and the forbidden often looms sweet and tantalizing by virtue of its mystery.

Academics form only part of the equation when it comes to teaching life skills. Kids need to know how to write a persuasive essay, but they also should learn about real life and, in the process, develop the skills they need to cope with it.

My daughter, who now attends a public high school, has made good choices in both her academic and social lives so far. We've talked about sex, but nothing I've ever said to her has provided as strong a deterrent to casual, early sex as the girl in her class with the ever-expanding belly. Nothing makes my daughter more aware of the effects of drugs than seeing burnt-out kids. And nothing brings home the consequences of drinking and driving than the empty seat of a boy who did just that.

They're tough lessons, but ones she will never forget. Seeing the aftermath of negative behavior with her own eyes impresses her much more than simple words or even our own good examples.

Do I like that my children are exposed to life's underbelly? Of course not. I'd much prefer to bring them up in an atmosphere of innocence and trust. But we can't raise our children in carefully controlled environments and expect them to instinctively know how to handle evil. Pretending that it doesn't exist won't make it go away.

Homeschooling would have built a wall around my kids and kept them safe—for a little awhile. Ultimately, they would have had to go out into the real world. Public school has exposed them to bad influences as well as good ones. I believe they're stronger for having had to make tough choices. And going through it together has strengthened our relationship, making it easier for me to start letting go of their hands.

POSTSCRIPT



Should Parents Homeschool Their Children?

There is limited research available about how effective school-based education vs. homeschooling is, much of which cannot control for the myriad factors that come into play. In schools, factors include teacher experience, school and district leadership, the socioeconomic status of the community in which the school is located, and more. In homeschooling, issues include whether a parent can afford financially to stay home and devote the time and energy necessary to homeschool effectively, whether the parent(s) can facilitate a social life for their child(ren) that is comparable to their school-based peers, and whether the child(ren) can still access nonacademic activities such as organized sports, theater, and student clubs.

Ask young people who have been homeschooled whether they liked it, and you will receive a range of responses. A Web site, www.faqfarm.com, asked people to comment on what they felt the longer-term effects of homeschooling were; here is what several people had to say:

"I was homeschooled for 1st-9th grade. I attended 10th and part of 11th grade. I took my proficiency test and attended community college on and off for 6 years. My younger brother was homeschooled from 1st-8th grade and attended 9th-12th grade. He did not attend college. Almost all the kids I hung out w/ were homeschooled also. We were both socially impaired by it; our parents made a point to keep us in sports and try to keep us socializing w/ other kids. But it wasn't enough. Most of our friends were also homeschooled too. Some of us turned out OK, some didn't."

"I am 30 years old now, and was homeschooled through junior high and high school. . . . Part of the answer to [the] question is this: Socialization with adults is improved, while socialization with peers is hindered. . . . There are so many social do's and don'ts that are very arbitrary and are pounded home by peer pressure, teasing, cliques, etc."

"I homeschooled through junior high and high school. I agree that there are some social disadvantages to homeschooling, but I think that they can be avoided or changed. I realized when I was 15 that I was awkward around most of my peers and so I worked really hard at changing that. If parents are careful to involve their children in social groups the kids will be able to learn the necessary skills. I was lucky; there is a big homeschooling community where I live, with many children to interact with. . . . I am now in college and I don't have any qualms about participating in social groups with other students, whether homeschooled or not. If done right, I don't think homeschooling interferes a whole lot with social skills." (from http://www.faqfarm.com/Q/What_are_the_long-term_effects_of_homeschooling).

Do these quotes reinforce your beliefs, or change your mind?

Suggested Readings

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