

Dear New Homeschooler

From Mary McCarthy, long-time homeschooling mom:

First, welcome and congratulations on your decision to homeschool!

So you've gone to the library and checked out all the books on homeschooling. That's good. Except after you've sat down and read them all you're more confused than before because no two "experts" agree on how to homeschool. Don't worry about it, you will be homeschooling your own children in your own way.

Don't be scared off by the ones that tell you how your children can grow up to be Nobel Prize winners. It's possible (anything is possible) but not probable. Your goal is happy, educated children who like learning.

Don't be scared off by the ones that tell you that you must have an impeccably clean house and be well organized. If that were so there would only be one or two homeschooling families in existence. Face it, with kids home all day - doing the most interesting things - a mess is inevitable; enjoy it!

Don't be scared off by the ones that tell you that a strict schedule is necessary and must be adhered to. Life isn't like that. It would be great if it were, but life is unpredictable. Enjoy the surprises. Think of them as opportunities.

Notice that the most stringent books are written by men. Now I'm no sexist, but if they're not doing the housekeeping, they ought to stick to whatever it is they do best.

Notice how many ordinary people have written books about their successful homeschooling program. They're just like you, having once stood in those same shaky shoes. That's what you should be getting out of all those books: That ordinary parents, just like you, can achieve success in homeschooling. Each one found little tricks and experiences that helped them, and may help you too. But the basic message is that they all succeeded.

So who am I with all this unsolicited advice? Just a Mom who's made Plenty of Mistakes in the last 15 years of homeschooling. Not to worry - I still have plenty to make, and so do you.

You will have doubts, plenty of them! Can I really educate my child? You taught them to walk and talk, dress and feed themselves, understand right from wrong. How much more difficult can ABC and 123 be? Look back - you've already done the tough stuff, and without a curriculum!

Support groups are not mandatory. If you're very fortunate you'll be able to locate a group near you that meets your needs. If not it's not the end of the world. You can still throw the kids in the car and head for the museum, aquarium, park Renaissance Festival or whatever. You could start your own group, or just go ahead and educate your kids without a group. Sometimes it's better for new homeschoolers to focus on the family at the beginning rather than trying to juggle a family and a group.

The next biggest challenge is deciding on a curriculum. You can make it up as you go along with lots of help from the library or purchase a curriculum-in-a-box with everything from pencils to report cards. Most new homeschoolers like the security of the curriculum-in-a-box but also find it restrictive and, over time, hard to stick with the regimentation it mandates. If you're typical, by March half of it will be lost under the beds and in the garage. The kids will help you lose the least interesting things in it. ("Oops! How did that get in the trash?") Listen to them, it's their education and they are ready to run with it.

Anything that requires tears (on anyone's part) isn't worth the effort. Put it away for another day (or year). Learning is supposed to be a lifelong enjoyable process. Try and figure out why it isn't working and either experiment with a different way or drop it altogether. Accept that none of us is overly proficient in everything. Nor are we ready to learn something just because our curriculum guide says we are. Maybe you don't have a rocket scientist there, just a very interesting little person who has ideas of their own about what's necessary to learn. Three hours of tears and cajoling to accomplish one workbook page of nouns does not teach nouns. It teaches "I hate workbook pages of nouns." Try putting the workbook away and doing a couple of books of "Mad-Libs." Much more fun!

What if you have five children all at different grade levels? First off, throw away that grade level thing. It's a way of comparing children, and in a home setting just isn't necessary. Then see if you can combine several children in one subject. I've never seen it written anywhere that children can't work together on learning. The added responsibility and confidence that comes from having the older ones help the younger ones is a more valuable lesson than any forgotten math. A large part of home education is just learning to work with the flow, rather than whatever you think it should be. Allow each child to pursue interests on their own. You may have one that shows up at the same time every day at the kitchen table ready to go and flies through lessons with very little supervision. That gives you time to locate the one still running around in their underwear and "blanky" with a book, hunting for the cat so the book can be read under the proper circumstances. Each child is different. It's just a matter of parents learning to respect and encourage the individual.

Relatives! Unfortunately most of us have them. And most of them thought we were strange long before we announced we'd decided to homeschool the kids. Smile, be kind, and be firm in your commitment to home education. Some just need to see the progress, others will think you're totally incompetent. Include them all. They often make good mentors, so don't be afraid to ask Grandpa to show Junior how he does something he's really good at. Hopefully Grandma will be flattered by your request to show the kids how to do something she's experienced at.

The ones you can't win over, or those who snub you - well, there's not much you can do about the actions of some people so just accept them and get on with it. The trick - with all the relatives preying on your doubts - is not to lose your focus on the children and their education.

You will have those days. It's okay. Even if you weren't homeschooling they would happen. Recognize that not much is accomplished under those circumstances and don't force things. In spite of what you've been led to believe homeschooling parents are not perfect (trust me on this one). Life will occasionally hand you a disaster. I've noticed that in times of hardship some people will send their children back to school. But most homeschoolers include the children and pull together as a family.

Decompression is a homeschool term used to define the time between taking the children out of public or private education and when they start expressing an interest in their own education. Parents also go through this unsettling period, but it's normal, so don't panic or force the issue. The longer the child was in the formal education system the longer the decompression. For teens it can be a year of teeth-grinding, nerve-wracking aggravation for which you will be rewarded many times over. Promise.

Do you need to know every subject to "teach" (I hate that word!) your children? Absolutely not. If that were so I wouldn't look so blank when a son tries to explain computers or the hydraulics of a 747 or whatever to me. It's best to just learn along with them and to appear interested. Learn phrases like, "That's nice, dear," and "Did you do this all by yourself?" and "Do the neighbors know?" These will come in handy.

Ask stupid questions. It's important for the child to feel accomplished at different things. It's okay to ask a child for help - humbling, but okay.

Ignore the myths about supermoms. We've all heard the stories about those proud parents with life size replicas of the space shuttle in the backyard, but until you actually see one don't fret about your kid having only recently figured out how to wire a light bulb to a battery. I think some parents tend to exaggerate.

There's a very strong tendency for new homeschoolers to jump in with both feet, eyes covered and try to do everything all at once. It's normal. We just want everything for our kids, but it leads to very early burnout. When you feel the strain starting to wear, back off. Take a month off and relax. Don't forget that you're a student at this too, and you deserve time for yourself. Your children will love you for it. If the kids are happy and interested in learning then you are doing this homeschooling thing right.

Before you know it you'll be sitting there watching the children learn all on their own and suddenly it will dawn on you that there wasn't anything like your homeschool program in any of the books you read. Congratulations! Now you're an expert!

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