

"Not That It's Any Of My Business, But..."

Dealing With Criticism of Your Decision to Homeschool

By Laurae Lyster-Mensh

On the day my family decided to take the plunge, we had never met a homeschooling child or family. Five years ago the Internet was still slow and cumbersome, and there were no books in the local library to guide us. We felt very alone, very frightened, and very brave.

There was no public opinion of home education yet because it was still so odd as to put it in the category of people who live on houseboats or work in the circus. Until recently, we were all considered something between anti-government wackos or saintly ascetics who deserved whatever oddball children that resulted from such an upbringing.

Now, however, our lifestyle is centered firmly in the public eye. Now everyone has an opinion. And everyone expects us to have a response.

Each situation, and each family, has its own perspective. As a veteran homeschooling mother I know from experience that criticism comes from different directions, and require different strategies to turn criticism into support. My experience has proven that the best responses include the following elements: confidence, humility, information, and alliances.

Family

I do not know of a family that educates at home and has not had at least a little criticism from family members over the decision. This is logical, and happens over larger and smaller life choice issues. Family is closer, and therefore more emotionally involved, than our friends and neighbors.

Our mothers can often take our choice hard. Choosing to do something different than she did can be perceived as a criticism of her choices. The more different, the greater the threat. Our parents may fear that our new lifestyle will change their relationship with their grandchildren. They may also fear that you are entering into a fringe lifestyle that they cannot understand or join into. Reassurance that the important things in the grandchildren's lives will not change can help. Time to observe how this new way of doing things actually affects the children is also helpful. And, involving the grandparents in the actual teaching, even by email or letters, is also a great way of building bridges within the family and getting support.

Siblings, like our friends, sometimes feel put on the spot by our choice to homeschool. In the first flush of our decision, we can alienate those around us who cannot or would not make the same choice. In our newfound enthusiasm, we often make stronger rejections of our former lives - and therefore theirs - than we later will stand by. Reassurance, again, can help in this relationship. Letting siblings know that you are confident in your decision, and that it is a very personal decision, may keep feathers unruffled.

Our own children, especially those in the family that are not homeschooled, often present a challenge as well. Older siblings, and those with shared custody, will have concerns about your previous choices and about their place in the family. A change as significant as homeschooling will alter all the relationships in the family. To expect to make such a change without concurrent shifts is unrealistic. Siblings need to feel comfortable with the family's decisions. For the unsure home educated child, peers who are positive about homeschooling can be wonderful allies in getting support. Getting the non-home educated kids involved in the educational activities of the family can also turn doubters into allies.

Our children know our weak spots, often better than we do. Homeschooling gives them abundant opportunity to access your buttons. It is easy to get locked into battles and to lose perspective. The parent working outside the home is an important ally during stressful times like this. Keeping that line of communication open and well-oiled is essential. Getting time alone every once in a while is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Your children will not necessarily always be supportive of homeschooling. They get curious about the other way and can become seduced by media images of school life that are neither accurate nor balanced, but they don't know that.

Two things that have helped our family in this regard are: surrounding our daughter with as many confident homeschooling families as possible and spending less time being excessively fair about the homeschool versus school issue. Our daughter needed to feel normal, and may have been confused by my initial reluctance to act proud of our family's new lifestyle. I don't go out of my way to brag, now, but I am definitely more of an advocate that I used to be.

Another common family concern is the reaction of former spouses and their extended families. Homeschooling is an intimate lifestyle, and can threaten fragile truces between former family members. As an atypical educational choice it may also invite scorn from a relatives that are inclined to find fault. Negotiating with ex's and their partisans is difficult over any issue. Homeschooling has often been the loser in custody battles. Only a focus on the benefits to the child should sway parents with best interests in mind.

The dangers in family criticism of the decision to homeschool are complex. More than one family has become permanently estranged over the issue. The greatest danger is not just over agreement with it, but also in our increased need for extended family support. There are financial and logistical vulnerabilities inherent on relying on reduced income and giving up the hours of care children are given at school. We take on more than just the education of our children: we become full-time caregivers.

Emotional support from extended family is not necessary to us as homeschoolers, but it is a great asset. The inevitable doubts and outside criticisms are easier to overcome when our closest relatives are in our corner.

A last note on our spouses. Either parent may initiate the idea to homeschool, but often the enthusiasm is not equally shared over time. Support inside the marriage is essential not only in theory but also in practice. Full time parenting is exhausting work and often thankless. Clear communication and frequent reinforcement can go a long way toward keeping the primary homeschooling parent sane and the support parent with the program.

Friends

Homeschooling is just common enough for everyone to have heard of it, but not common enough that every new family has a friend to show them the ropes. Our existing friends can present a challenge in terms of criticizing us for homeschooling and even sabotaging our efforts. Their reactions can range from condescension to being intimidated by us. Friends are also a great potential allies and public relations spokespeople.

Making new friends in the homeschooling community is not as easy as it may sound. Homeschooling families come in as many varieties as orchids and, by the very nature of their unconventional lifestyle, can appear judgmental. Often we have less in common with each other than we do with our friends who have kids in school. Finding, or forming, a strong support group is a good protection for both your perspective and your self-esteem.

Peer support can mean the difference between success and failure in that first fragile year. I believe surrounding yourself with supportive faces early on can give you the confidence to take the inevitable criticism that well-meaning friends will hand you. I have one close friend who has been adamant about our wrong decision for all five years of this adventure. Recently, we had a visit where the discussion strayed into that old argument. I realized that five years of disagreement had not ended the friendship, and we were no closer to agreement. We still respect each other despite it.

Authorities

The educational establishment, in general, has an investment in distrusting homeschooling. The majority of homeschooling families share the enmity. Luckily, homeschooling is legal in all fifty states and so is public education. Beyond the theoretical issues, though, there is a certain amount of oversight that educational authorities have over home education. This should also be seen as mutual.

When my husband and I opted out of sending Liana to third grade we had been the chairs of the largest fundraiser of the year for her elementary school. In a gesture that was accepted but clearly bewildering, we continued to do it. I still attended PTA meetings occasionally. We felt that we were still members of the community and therefore had a responsibility to the school whether we had a child enrolled or not. I still agree that it was the right thing to do. I don't believe homeschooling is about pulling out of society or that I should not have access to its services.

Homeschooling families can still participate in the community, and usually do. Performing public service improves our children's lives and makes for excellent public relations. Criticism of homeschooling is reduced when we actively engage. After all, we have nothing to be embarrassed or shy about.

As for criticism of individual homeschooling families by the educational authorities, no family is alone. Aside from the universal legality of homeschooling, there are support networks and even a legal defense fund (HSDLA) to protect the rights of legitimate home schooling families. It also behooves the homeschooling parent to keep up with local laws and support any family that is being harassed.

The Media

The public loves "man bites dog" stories and homeschooling has often fit that bill: "kid learns without school." Generally, homeschooling has received a pass in the media because of skewed demographics and high-profile super-children. That will change in time, many believe. But even while we bask in the good press we must be vigilant about the subtle criticisms: the "socialization" tag line, and the ubiquitous 'expert' that balances the article with her "concerns."

Strangers

Strangers present an interesting challenge, especially in public places. An important thing to keep in mind is that few of these strangers mean to criticize. Our own defensiveness can turn a "why aren't you in school today, honey?" into a challenge when it was really just an attempt at conversation.

At other times the proclamations of people on the street can be a gift - an opportunity to brag. "Don't you miss other children, dear? And "What about socialization!" can be a perfect opportunity to educate an entire grocery line by letting your child list the fifteen projects and sports they participate in. As with many prejudices, most citizens' opinions are not deeply held, and one positive encounter may turn the tide

Countering Criticism

It all comes down to four things: confidence, humility, information, and alliances.

Confidence in our choice to educate our own children is our greatest asset in getting support from family, friends, and public opinion. Projecting our confidence eases the concerns of those that care for us and stops short those that feel threatened by us. When we phrase our choice as a positive, rather than a rejection of institutionalized education, we elicit support and defuse criticism.

Another part of confidence is letting it go when others are critical of our lifestyle. It isn't about converting other people: it is about what is best for your own family.

Confidence also sends our children the message that what they are doing is positive and admirable. When the inevitable peer magnetism makes them wonder about their lifestyle, your ongoing conviction can secure their support as well.

Humility is necessary, too, in a society in which we are a minority and largely an unknown. The best parents I know are humble about their successes and not judgmental about others. Righteousness wins few converts. Results do.

A good statistic goes a long way as well. Stating facts with confidence and humility can turn a skeptic in one conversation into an admirer in the next. Information, rather than emotional advocacy, also short circuits uninformed critics.

Making alliances - with family, friends, and in the community - is a good idea for you and for homeschooling in general. Asking for help may seem to make you vulnerable but it can, in measured doses, draw reluctant family into the process and give them a sense of ownership in the children's education. Offering help, through volunteering and being there for relatives, creates connections as well. A home-based lifestyle gives us a flexibility that other families do not have. Using that flexibility to forge relationships is a wise investment.

My family has learned over the years the value of confidence, humility, information, and alliances. We see now that we were needlessly strident and shrill at first. We were too proud, not well enough informed, and too independent. We suffered the silent disapproval of people we loved for longer than we should have. With time we relaxed and learned to make the people around us understand and support our choice to homeschool.

I am (humbly) proud to say that we enjoy an excellent relationship with family, friends, the authorities, and the larger community now. Criticisms happen, but rarely.

The most interesting response has come from the least likely source: my own mother. A lifelong elementary teacher and now a Professor of Education at ISU, my mother took three years to say a word about her granddaughter's unorthodox education. "I was concerned at first, but when I see how she is turning out - who can criticize that?"

In the end, my daughter was the ultimate teacher. Without a doubt, results are the best response to criticism.