

Learning About Learning

The First Step In Homeschooling

Christine Webb

Get Started: Answer the Right Question!

You've made the big decision to homeschool but there seem to be so many questions that need answered. What style will work best for us? Do we use a curriculum? What about assessments? What do we do if our child doesn't want to do what we think is best? How do we decide what is best? It goes on and on, and each answer just seems to bring on its own set of new questions.

Before you begin to answer any of those "how to" questions, sit down in a quiet place and ask yourself one simple question: "What do I believe it means to learn?" Take some time to really reflect on what learning means to you. You may believe that it is a set of facts to be memorized and then recited back and tested. Or maybe it is a joyous exploration where the journey toward mastery is its own reward. Most likely, if you are like most of us, it is something in between.

Think about a time you learned something you were really motivated to tackle: how you went about it, what motivated you, what resources you used, what kind of environment you worked in, what level of expertise you had before you began. You chose the subject, you chose the resources (maybe with some help), you figured out what level of help you needed and you worked on it until you were satisfied that you had mastered it satisfactorily.

We all learn in much the same way. Something motivates us to want to learn a particular thing. We choose materials we can understand but that aren't too hard or too simple. We use resources that make learning easiest for us - books, videos, tapes or perhaps an expert. We work until we have mastered the activity, and we know at the end whether or not we've learned it well enough.

Motivation, resources and assessment. These are all tied together to make up a successful learning experience. Our children use exactly the same process for learning as we do. Although each child begins with a knowledge bank that is his or her own and may have a unique learning style and ability levels, creating a creative and supportive environment for that learning to take place in couldn't be simpler.

Become An Observant "Watcher"

Creating this environment starts with knowing how your child learns, her ability levels, and what motivates her. These are the essential pieces to the "beginning to homeschool" puzzle. With this in mind, it is probably becoming clear that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to learning isn't going to help to build that environment very effectively. That kind of learning environment was created for ease of teaching, not for optimal learning.

The only way to determine who your child is as a learner is to become a patient and observant "watcher." Watch and listen. Carefully collect pieces of your child that can be stored in your mind and in your heart. Learn to know yourself and to know your child. It's really as simple, and as complicated, as that. If you don't spend the time to know how you each learn, how you approach life, how you react to stress, even how you each prefer to wake up in the morning, you'll struggle much more than you have to in order to homeschool successfully. Because, at each stage, it will be you and your child, working together, that will make this adventure successful.

First, you'll need some basic information about your child's learning style. Is she active and talkative? Does

she learn best from interacting with another person or from watching videos? Is he shy and inwardly directed with a need to touch everything he works with? Active or more still? Vocal or quiet? A toucher? A picture-drawer? There are many excellent books that outline learning styles in a variety of ways. Buy one or two, check them out from the library, or do an online search. Learn as much as you can about learning styles because this will be the basis for the activities and resources you help provide.

Next, figure out when your child's peak learning times are. I have a daughter who is a real night-owl and whose most alert and creative periods are between 11PM and 2AM. It isn't always possible that she can work at that time, but that's what she prefers and when she does her best work. Consequently, she is often a late riser so we plan accordingly.

Finally, you will need to discover what attracts and motivates your child. What are her interests? What kinds of learning experiences draw her in? Children learn because there is something that attracts them, that draws them into the learning experience, and then motivates them to become involved.

Plans For Success

Once you have collected enough information about how your child learns best you can begin to create a learning environment that will make learning a joy.

First, help your child learn things he is interested in. You will have a more interested and involved learner once you recognize that, regardless of what you want, your child is the one who ultimately decides what he is going to learn. Most skills we think of as "basic" can be learned through a variety of learning experiences. Math can be learned through construction or sewing projects and in the kitchen. Reading can be learned by being read to, by reading computer game hints and through tackling serial thrillers. Writing can be learned by having online penpals, by writing book or software reviews, or by writing a family newsletter. Skills will develop when the content of the learning reaches out and grabs a child with such intensity that they must learn these skills in order to continue learning about the subject at hand.

Second, have resources available that are at, or just slightly above, your child's current ability level. Forget about grade-level. It is an outdated and unhelpful notion for homeschooling. If you know what your child already knows you will be able to help her find resources and experiences that will allow her to succeed as she continues to gain knowledge and skills. She will build on all the things she already knows and, if you help her out, she will be able to work above her current ability level and stretch to new heights.

Third, keep a journal as an assessment tool. Write regularly about what your child is doing and learning. At some point you will probably panic because you will be sure he isn't learning anything because you don't have test scores or numbers on papers. We all do it at one point or another. Your journal will help you chart his progress in ways that make sense to you. Take pictures or videos. Make a memory book. Create a portfolio or a wall that he can fill with all his favorite work. Look at it often and notice his progress. True assessment compares progress between one point in time and another.

Finally, be an integral part of your child's learning life. Learn to listen carefully and to work and learn together with her. Be a model of active learning for her. Continue to be that careful observer and watch her as she works, because what worked last year or last month or even yesterday may not work tomorrow. Children grow and mature and their needs often change as that happens.

Put It All Together

If you make your child your focus right from the beginning, creating a learning environment filled with resources that honor your child's learning styles, abilities and level of understanding will come naturally. If you encourage learning that is motivated from a sincere interest, and help your child build on what she already knows, you will be amazed at the depth of learning that takes place. And if you include your child in the decision-making part of your learning lives you will become partners who work and learn together - and that is the real answer to all the questions about how to get started homeschooling.