

## Ten Good Reasons to Homeschool

by Greg Sherman, Ph.D.

My three children and I were standing in line at the grocery store the other day, and a woman behind us started conversing with my thirteen year-old daughter Grace. At some point in the conversation, I overheard the woman ask Grace what grade she was in and what school she attended. Grace responded innocently that she was homeschooled, and that she wasn't exactly sure what grade she would be in if she went to school. The woman looked over Grace's shoulder and directly into my eyes. She wrinkled her brow and asked me, very casually, with perhaps a hint of skepticism, "So, why do you homeschool?"

Why do we homeschool? My wife Shelly and I have homeschooled our three children for the past 10 years, and in our experiences, people such as old friends, new neighbors, relatives, and even total strangers have asked this rather large and complicated question in a nonchalant and often cynical manner. I'm certain most homeschooling parents would agree that responding to the "why" question is not something that can be accomplished succinctly or casually. After all, the question is big. Really BIG.

Unlike many homeschooling parents, however, I am also asked "why" regularly by teachers, school administrators, university faculty members, and education graduate students. I represent one of those conflicted homeschooling parents whose professional experiences are rooted in public education. In fact, both my wife and I began our educational careers in the classroom. Shelly was a primary grade teacher, and I taught junior high school science. After spending almost 10 years teaching in the public school classroom and attending graduate school, I acquired a great deal of valuable educational experiences while earning degrees in the fields of educational media and instructional technology. These fields of study are defined by many "why" questions related to learning and instruction, and since graduating I have been involved in a variety of research projects designed to find answers to instruction-related problems. In addition, I have taught university courses and worked as an educational consultant in the areas of evaluation and instructional design. Although I have grappled with a variety of teaching and learning problems throughout my professional experiences, the question "Why do you homeschool?" has been one of the most difficult education-related question for me to answer truthfully. In fact, over the years I have developed no less than four different types of answers.

My first three answers to the "why" question are specific to the type of person querying me. I have different answers for parents of children in school, homeschool parents, and educational professionals. And then I have my fourth answer, my TRUE answer, which up until now I have rarely shared with anybody, primarily because it is rather lengthy and opens the door to a heavy degree of argument. Ninety-nine times out of 100, the person asking the "why" question isn't really somebody I want to argue with anyway. I present my four different answers below with the hope that they may provide some measure of inspiration for other homeschooling parents. Although I am far from normal, I'm confident that my different responses, as well as the reasons why they are different, reflect reactions to similarly-uncomfortable situations experienced by other homeschooling parents.

The most common type of inquiry has been from a parent with a child in school. To these people, I usually present a very short and innocuous answer designed to be as non-confrontational as possible. "Well, my wife and I used to be classroom teachers, and we have always dreamed of such small class sizes! Anyway, can you believe the weather we're having? And how about that ozone layer thing? I mean, is it shrinking or growing?" I have found that it is often necessary to change the subject quickly, otherwise I'm stuck

listening to total strangers defend their decision to place their kids in school, defend their need for two incomes, and then ask me if I'm worried about issues associated with my own children's socialization experiences. It still amazes me that people I barely know will readily draw me into such intimate and personal discussions. And worse yet, the defensive nature of the conversation inevitably yields to the expression of guilt on behalf of the person who has children in school. Guilt, defense, and the probability that I'm messing up my children – all from somebody I may have just met.

I direct a different response entirely toward other homeschooling parents I meet. I may be a little paranoid, but I often feel as though fellow homeschoolers ask me the "why" question in an effort to categorize my family. Perhaps I feel this way because I have a tendency to categorize homeschoolers I meet for the first time based on their response to the "Why" question too. So my response to the question from a homeschooler is usually something like "Oh, we homeschool for many different reasons. What are some of the main reasons why you have chosen to educate your children full-time at home?" Often, the first response provided reflects the fundamental, philosophical perspective of the asker. I have received a range of responses, from "My child was having a terrible time at school!" to "My husband and I want to provide a true Christian upbringing for our children." Once I get a feel for where other homeschooling parents are coming from, I can then share a little bit about my own perspective without opening the door to argumentative and defensive posturing by people I don't know very well. Don't get me wrong, I actually enjoy a healthy argument with my friends and colleagues, especially when conversing about educational problems and issues. But it usually takes me a long time to get comfortable with others before inviting them into the confidence of my educational philosophies. Besides, I'd rather spend time getting to know new parents by asking questions about their children and their previous life experiences.

I offer my third type of response to educational professionals. As a faculty member and instructional technologist, I have had many occasions to work closely with other faculty, teachers, school administrators, and education graduate students. Through my interactions, the subject of my children inevitably arises and, consequently, our decision to homeschool is questioned. I am very careful about how I respond to other educators because I don't want to undermine my own professional goals, which include trying to help improve an institution that is very resistant to change. I also want to protect my perceived objectivism regarding educational issues. Since I work closely with students and colleagues who might be immersed in activities that, in my estimation, perpetuate the educational status quo, I want them to regard my differing perspectives and opinions as being relatively unbiased. So I tend to respond to their "why" questions as a researcher. "As teachers, my wife and I have always wanted to experiment with a variety of methods and strategies. And our children happen to be the only guinea pigs we could get permission to experiment on for twenty continuous years. You could say we're part of a grand social-educational experiment. You'll need to check the prison records over the next couple decades to decide whether or not we succeeded." This response usually leads to interesting and positive discussions about the nature of educational research, and the values versus limitations of conducting personal ethnographic studies. At least it diverts the conversation away from the topic of homeschooling. Again, I welcome the opportunity to discuss homeschooling with anybody. But too many colleagues and students have accused me of "copping out" of problems associated with public schooling. According to their logic, I can't be part of the solution if my children are not part of the problem. What may be hard for them to grasp is simply that I value my children much more than I do my profession. And this is not something I ever want to address in a classroom full of practicing teachers, most of whom are parents themselves.

Three different answers provided for three different types of people asking why my wife and I choose to homeschool. Three different answers, and none reflecting the REAL reason why we homeschool. What

follows is the answer I wish I could give to anybody asking me why we homeschool. It is an answer that does not make light of the role education plays in the life of our family. It is an answer that has been formulated from years of learning, teaching, and homeschooling. It is an answer born in the classroom and the dining room. It is a multi-faceted response to that “why” question that begs to be argued. In fact, it is an answer that includes 10 really good reasons why we homeschool. These ten reasons include: learning, instruction, time, identity, control, socialization, shelter, college preparation, family, and religion.

Reason #1: Learning. The most important reason why my wife and I chose to homeschool was simply that our values about learning were quite different from those of the schools in which we worked. One of the fundamental responsibilities of all teachers is to decide what is important for their learners to try and learn, followed by arranging the classroom environment (activities, events, and information) to ensure that the intended skills, knowledge, and/or attitudes will be acquired by all the learners. My wife and I believe that all learning should be worthwhile; that is, the outcomes facilitated within any learning environment should reflect: 1) skills that will be useful in the real world outside school, 2) skills that are needed in order to acquire other, more useful skills, 3) skills that the teacher wants the learners to learn in order to enrich their lives (and the learners will have opportunities to use these skills in their life if they choose), or 4) skills that the learners really want to learn for themselves. Applying these criteria to the standards mandated by our local school district revealed that many of them ranked rather low on the “worthwhile” scale for our particular children. But more importantly, my wife and I continue to develop a list of skill sets that we feel are very worthwhile for our children, and these outcomes would never define public school curricula. For example, every day we arrange our children’s learning environment to facilitate such skills as making good decisions about personal nutrition and exercise, prudent money management, conflict resolution, dealing with grief, effective communication (including listening, speaking and writing well), loving God and neighbor, caring for living things and the environment, choosing to incorporate many forms of art into their expressions, doing science, minimizing consumption for its own sake, enjoying cooking, gardening, working with computer-based technologies, playing, and critically analyzing the news. Although some people might feel that these outcomes could be adequately addressed in addition to school, I disagree. It seems that every day, we barely have enough time to experience our planned instructional activities. Yet every day, other big and important worthwhile skills reveal themselves to us.

Reason #2: Instruction. Instruction is learning’s partner. As previously stated, instruction represents the manner in which activities, events, and information within the learning environment are arranged in order to make sure the students learn what the instruction intends. The art and science of arranging learning environments is called “instructional design,” and good (effective) instructional design is seldom employed within most classrooms, either by the teacher or by the materials available to schools (i.e. textbooks). Here is an example of what I mean. Suppose a fifth-grade teacher wanted students to learn skills associated with the Civil War because questions about the Civil War were to be included in the fifth-grade standardized test (of course, whether this constitutes a worthwhile reason to learn about the Civil War is another matter). Some skills would most likely be categorized as verbal information or “declarative knowledge,” such as stating names, dates, places, and labeling pictures and descriptions of specific events. In order for students to effectively learn such skills, certain strategies need to be incorporated into the learning environment in accordance with good instructional design principles. These include the creation of a meaningful, purposeful learning context (i.e. creating simulations or games); help in relating new terms and definitions to preexisting knowledge; the presentation of a variety of concrete examples; practice using the newly-acquired skills in the same way they will be assessed in the future, with immediate feedback; and opportunities for learners to summarize the key ideas emerging from the learning experience (i.e. the generation of a concept map).

These strategies, among others, have been proven to help people learn verbal information skills. Helping people learn other types of skills, including intellectual skills (i.e. rule application), motor skills, and attitudes necessitate the use of different types of strategies. Unfortunately, many teachers never receive adequate instruction themselves over the design of effective learning environments. And making matters worse is the fact that books and other learning resources are rarely developed by competent instructional designers.

In addition to a lack of effective instructional strategy implementation, many classroom teachers fail to take full advantage of the different media that can be used to help define meaningful learning environments. For example, cable television presents a wide range of very well-produced and motivating programs, and computers offer the world's largest collection of information resource via the Internet as well as providing opportunities to create and publish a variety of multimedia projects. But learners in typical classrooms seldom have enough time to devote to interacting with television and computers, not to mention literature and other forms of art and information that require from learners a relatively high degree of sustained mental effort. I'm not necessarily blaming teachers, because policy decisions, limited resources, and the need to spend a great deal of time addressing information related to worthless standards often prevent teachers from using television, computers, and literature as viable means of effective instruction.

Compounding all of the instructional problems described is the common practice by many high school and even junior high school teachers of implementing the college model of instruction, in which they direct most of the in-class activity, and information is regarded as a commodity dispensed solely by the teacher and books, leaving the learners responsible for figuring out what to do with it. People who think this is an adequate model of instruction should reexamine their college transcripts. Chances are, they'll identify a number of classes taken that they would be hard pressed to recall anything substantive or lasting that was learned.

Reason #3: Time. If I had to pick one phrase that summarily communicates why we homeschool, it would simply be "school is a waste time." This isn't to say that people don't learn important things in school, or that school is a total and complete waste of time. It is simply that, from an instructional perspective, too much of the precious time allotted to childhood is wasted in school, primarily because of the two reasons stated above (poor instruction, and learning outcomes that are not worthwhile). A simple way to conceptualize the amount of time spent engaged in meaningful, purposeful and effective learning-related activity is to think about a typical student in a typical day at school. Imagine how much time this child might spend throughout the school day practicing worthwhile skills while receiving personal feedback. Although there are other factors related to effective instruction, none are more important than practice with adequate and timely feedback. I have actually used a stopwatch while observing classrooms to measure the amount of time individual students spent actively engaged in practice over worthwhile skills throughout an entire day in school. Believe it or not, I have never observed more than 30 minutes of effective practice experienced by an individual learner within the six hours constituting a school day. It was usually closer to 10 minutes. On a more grand scale, I asked education graduate students (enrolled in one of my instructional design courses) who took four years of Spanish in high school to complete a basic assessment of conversational Spanish skills (translating common Spanish phrases into English). In most cases, their scores were not significantly higher than those of the students in my class who had never taken Spanish. I then helped them calculate the amount of time spent in high school studying the Spanish language. Five hours per week in class, plus two hours per week doing homework, multiplied by 36 weeks per academic year, multiplied by four years. This equals 1008 hours devoted to Spanish. I asked my students if they felt this was a good use of their time during their teen years, considering their level of Spanish proficiency as

adults. Most agreed that, in fact, it was a rather significant waste of time.

It isn't just the amount and type of learning that doesn't take place IN school because of ineffectual instruction that leaves me such a strong sense of time wasting. I also recognize that quite a bit of learning cannot occur OUTSIDE school because of the limited number of hours in the day. When our oldest daughter Grace was ten years old, we moved to a small rural town in Virginia. It was difficult for us to connect with other homeschoolers. Grace felt particularly isolated and disconnected from the world, so we decided that she might benefit from attending the local school. After less than a full semester, we had to remove her. It wasn't that she was turning into a monster, or crying every morning as she left for school. It was primarily that she spent a great deal of her time at home completing math homework and working on other school-related projects at the expense of practicing piano and playing with her siblings. In fact, she stopped enjoying the piano. Rather than taking time through her day to practice playing and experimenting with music, Grace had to fit in basic music lessons between homework and chores. She really had no time for piano, or performing in plays, or playing games. Other people may rightfully disagree with our priorities, but my wife and I both feel that enjoying and performing music, playing in the outdoors, cooking, performing in the theater, learning ballet, and immersing ourselves in long and complicated games with siblings and friends is much more important than 99% of the math we were compelled to try and learn in school. I know that some people are capable of doing it all: school, music, theater, ballet, soccer, family. But not us.

Reasons #4 & #5: Identity and Control. Another very important reason why we homeschool is because we want our children to develop clear pictures of their own individual intellectual identities, and we want them to know how to take full advantage of the fact that they are always in control of their own learning. As a classroom science teacher, I noticed that too many of my students had difficulty learning some of the important critical thinking skills associated with being able to act like scientists. Many were happiest when they had the correct answers told to them, rather than really thinking for themselves about scientific problems and their possible solutions. I may have been over-generalizing, but I attributed their noticeable lack of intellectual creativity to bad habits developed and reinforced in school. I think the elephants in the following story represent an excellent metaphor for understanding the dangers of restraining the creative thinking process of students throughout their classroom experiences:

Once upon a time, a boy and his family went to see a traveling circus. During the performance, Jumbo the Wonder Elephant passed her trunk through the open windows of a clown-filled Volkswagen and lifted the entire ensemble two feet off the ground. After the show, the boy waited around to meet some of the performers. He found Jumbo and her trainer behind the main tent, happily munching on hay (Jumbo that is, not the trainer). Jumbo had a small chain around one of her hind legs, and the chain was staked to the ground. The boy asked the trainer why Jumbo was chained to the ground, and the trainer replied that the small chain was used to prevent Jumbo from wandering into the parking lot and denting cars (and their occupants). The boy couldn't believe that the thin chain could prevent Jumbo from wandering off, considering the Volkswagen incident he had witnessed during the show. He asked the trainer about the chain, and the trainer replied that Jumbo could certainly rip the chain out of the ground and walk away, but she didn't realize that she was capable of breaking the chain because when she was a baby, a similarly-staked chain was used to restrain her – and even though she's grown considerably stronger and bigger, Jumbo didn't know any different once she felt the chain around her ankle.

I often wonder how many of the problems I have encountered in my own life have been the result of phantom mental shackles that continued to bind my own potential. Hmmmmm.

Reason #6: Socialization. In my experiences, concerns about socialization constitute some of the most immediate response to homeschooling by the general public. People seem to think that it is potentially harmful to isolate children from the 30+ hours per week of social interactivity that occurs between same-age peers with minimal adult supervision in school. But it may surprise most people to learn that concerns about socialization are one of the most important reasons why we choose to homeschool. As I previously detailed, people learn primarily through the process of practice with adequate feedback. Based on my observations, children in typical homogenous classrooms need to provide their own social modeling and behavioral feedback as they interact with each other throughout the school day. And in many cases, I have clearly seen that children are not usually the best teachers of constructive communication skills (listening, asking for clarification, evaluating without criticizing, etc.) or skills associated with conflict resolution. Stripping away the surface social behaviors observed among members of homogenous groups of children often reveals a more basic set of behaviors that are more in communion with the social order depicted in *The Lord of the Flies*. And why not? With a ratio of 25 or 30 students to one teacher, the children themselves must establish most of the rules of childhood. We homeschool so that our children can receive adequate instruction over learning how to interact constructively with people younger, the same, and older than themselves. And my wife and I are present a good deal of the time to provide modeling and practice with adequate feedback over socialization skills that will be very useful for them throughout their entire lives.

One of the funniest things about people voicing their concerns to me regarding socialization is that they will often talk to me about their concerns after complimenting me on how well my children conversed with them. And I have received nothing but praise from the elderly people who wish my children well after receiving their meals delivered, as a family, through the Meals-on-Wheels program. My children get practice socializing with the elderly because they have the time to do so, and I don't know anybody who would see this as a problem. On a related note, there has been some pride recently in the homeschooling community because homeschooled children have won both the national spelling bee and the national geography bee. I watched these children on television, and like many others I was impressed. But I thought the most impressive thing wasn't the knowledge they communicated. I thought the most impressive thing was their composure. They took the time to think about their answers, and they spoke with clarity and confidence in front of a national audience. In my opinion, these homeschooled kids passed the socialization test with flying colors.

Reason #7: Shelter. One of the criticisms I get occasionally during discussions about homeschooling is whether or not I'm concerned about the fact that our children are sheltered too much from reality. If I could be painfully honest during these discussions, I would respond that I am very concerned about sheltering my children from reality, especially the reality defined by the culture of school. Bullies physically harm smaller, weaker kids in the reality of school. Individual differences are rarely valued in the reality of school, and children in school are regularly abused emotionally by their peers if they possess personal characteristics that stray too far from the norm. The values of consumerism (i.e. wearing the right clothes) and status associated with money are the realities of school. Deadly concealed weapons are a reality in school. And an accelerated sense of sexuality and dating are a reality in school. I understand that these are also realities outside school, and my children will someday claim membership in this reality. But not today.

Reason #8: College. Our homeschooling environment could be regarded as "college prep," but not because we push our children academically. On the contrary, my wife and I recognize that admission to college isn't a race, and the days of childhood are precious and numbered. But even though we don't see our children as

adults-in-waiting, we do want to prepare them for success in college because we know that a fruitful college experience may help them reach their own personal professional goals as adults (if college is indeed a path they need to take). We feel that our homeschool environment is really helping our children prepare for college because they are learning how to manage every aspect of their individual lives. They won't need to try and figure out how to take care of themselves through the feedback and modeling provided by their peers in college. It has been my experience that students who struggle to learn the skills necessary to take care of themselves while in college wind up wasting an awful lot of tuition money as they fail to learn what their classes intend.

Reason #9: Family. Perhaps the most profound reason why we homeschool is our desire to truly appreciate the daily sanctity of family. Growing up in a large urban community, my wife and I were both immersed in the fast-paced world of endless activity that revolved around school, church, and extra-curricular experiences. Looking back, we both agree that our sense of family was greatly compromised by the lack of shared familial experiences. Time is a precious commodity, and it is much more worthy of family than many of the non-family experiences that filled our days growing up. The fact that we gather around the table morning, noon, and night is a testimony to the genuine value we place on family, and we hope that our children will continue to grow in appreciation of family and make choices to include us in their lives when they mature into adulthood.

Reason #10: Religion. Finally, we homeschool for religious reasons, not because we want to make certain our children are sheltered from secular ideas, or because we want them to be able to pray whenever they want to pray. No, we characterize religion in a rather broad sense. Our daily rituals define our faith, and vice versa. We homeschool because it is part and parcel of our faith experience. Serving others, praying together, and living lives that are not defined exclusively by the values of our society all reflect the important elements of our religion. In fact, all the facets of our educational philosophy manifest themselves into the rituals, habits, and priorities that are inseparable from our faith journeys.

Why do we homeschool? Some day I hope to figure out how to answer this question truthfully, no matter who asks. I suppose the best way to summarize my honest response would be to say "what we practice we learn, and what we don't practice we don't learn." If this were all I said, perhaps people might regard me as eccentric and mysterious.

If I were really clever, however, I would have directed the woman in the grocery store to ask Grace, Lucy, and Patrick why they were homeschooled. I have no doubt that their answers would have provided the woman with more insight than anything I could have offered.

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*About the Author: Greg and his wife Shelly homeschool their three children, Grace (13), Lucy (11) and Patrick (9) in beautiful Flagstaff, AZ. Greg earned his Ph.D. in Instructional Technology and currently works as a consultant for the Arizona K-12 Center and Northern Arizona University as an instructional designer and technology integration coordinator. Contact Information: Greg Sherman, Ph.D., Technology Integration Coordinator - Center for Excellence in Education/Arizona K-12 Center, P.O. Box 5774, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5774; Tel: 928.523.9415 E-mail: [greg.sherman@nau.edu](mailto:greg.sherman@nau.edu)*