

Homeschooling Teens

by Sandra Hurst

Everything to do with homeschooling depends upon the style of education a family chooses and the level of control the student is allowed to have in his or her own education.

In my view, young people in their teen years need to take control of everything they can and be in charge of their own choices and progress. It is an axiom at Upattinas Resource Center that:

"The fatal pedagogical error is to throw answers, like stones, at the heads of those who have not yet asked the questions." -Paul Tillich

This saying has served me well in raising my own children as well as working with teens both in a day school and a home school setting.

The fundamental question, then, seems to be how to believe in young people enough to allow them to come to the questions in their own time and their own way. As adults, we also wonder whether they will ever ask the questions we want them to ask, as well as those questions that will serve to bring them to learn the important things "everyone" knows they need.

Let me suggest that first we need to ask, "Who is everyone?" and "How do they know what anyone needs at any given time?" If "everyone" includes all adults, parents, teachers and other people who have lived longer, then we must take a hard look around us and ask still another question: "Why?" These are the questions teens ask of us and themselves as they decide whether and when to come to any kind of learning they have not initiated on their own. It behooves all of us to know the answers to these questions and to allow those answers to be honest. "Because it will be good for you later . . ." is seldom an acceptable answer.

If the family belief system requires that a student study certain things at certain times and in a certain sequence, the student must understand and agree with this concept. In this case, the work to be done includes collecting materials and developing the venue for study that will give maximum space, time and availability of resources both in the home and within the community. Developing a schedule which includes enough play as well as work, plus meaningful volunteer or work projects, seems to be self-evident. Most people have many good ideas about courses to take and resources to use for a more structured home education, once they decide to do it. Listing these things is not the purpose of this paper, although we do have such lists available at our center.

In working with teens, most people are concerned with how to bring them to learn, or how to accomplish the requirements that we believe are there - either imposed by the government or by our own ideas.

It is my belief, after some 25 years of searching and experimenting, that young people really do know what they need and will do it if they are given the time and opportunity to follow their interests and dreams. This, of course, necessitates a great deal of faith and trust as well as support from a wider community than just the family, and here is where everyone gets "homework" to do. It is important for all those who are a part of the home education of the student to try to help the extended family and community to understand an approach that allows this freedom of choice.

Grandparents, other relatives, neighbors and friends often need to be informed about home education, especially when a student has the freedom to go outside or be involved in self-motivated activities which do not look like school. Sharing the books that inform us plus articles from various

media sources can be a great help. Inviting the student to talk with others about what they're doing, including recreational activities, with honesty and enthusiasm, helps others to see positive growth and development. Sharing actual academic progress is also helpful. Students can talk about the books, movies and art work they're exploring - singing the praises of the freedom that allows them to take as much time as necessary to become totally involved in a project. They can follow that up by analyzing for others how that experience fits into the various subject areas people think should be learned. For example, building a car of a certain vintage requires an understanding of a time in history, reading and comprehending instructions, and resourcing, through the use of books and catalogues as well as through asking others. It also includes electronics, measurement and calculation in math and being responsible for the laws regarding safety, both in the construction and future use of the car. What a rich curriculum!

When it comes to satisfying an evaluator that a student has done what is required, the student must be creative with the use of language. Again, it depends upon what is being asked. When we evaluate in our center, we look at this type of project as a portfolio presentation. A folder or notebook containing notes from sources, diagrams of wiring, calculations of cost, interior decoration ideas, and perhaps before and after photos, all constitute a worthy presentation which encompasses several "required" subjects such as those listed above. The law does not require that a certain subject be approached in a certain way. It may say Science, for example, and while it is true that this is not classical physics, it certainly is practical physics, which is taught in many schools.

If a student wants to study classical physics, or any other subject for which there is a prescribed body of knowledge, we must be sure that it is understood that there is something called Physics which includes much more than what is entailed in building a car. It would be a great disservice to anyone to say that they had learned the many aspects of Physics in this way. On the other hand, with a car behind them, and introduction to the fact that much of his or her learning has been in physics, a student may look at the subject with less trepidation and have more courage to approach the classical subject. In this case, we now have a student with two science credits available - one in Practical Physics and one in Introduction to Physics, thus fulfilling two of the science requirements.

We can find examples such as this for every prescribed subject. At Upittinas School, we find ways to describe much of what young people do so that it fits into the required areas. But what about those students who do not want to do anything we recognize as "schooling"? Here is where parents and teens are challenged. As John Holt once wrote in a letter to me:

"The whole idea of 'not doing anything' is a little slippery. There are times in my life when, to the outside eye, I would seem to be not doing anything, but I may in fact be doing some very important thinking and reflecting. How can we be sure this isn't true of young people, who have many difficult things to think about - which they are surely not encouraged to think about in school."

The problem for adults, and those teens who are concerned about the idea of "measuring up," is in the interpretation of the regulations and evaluation of what is done, including "hanging out." When we think about those regulations, it is easy to allow them to become an albatross around our necks. However, while the regulations do provide for the usual subject areas used by the public schools and they do expect progress, they do not delineate the content of areas nor do they presuppose a certain level of accomplishment. In some districts the superintendent will ask for something equivalent to the district's expectations, but even that is not too difficult, especially when we take into account the reality of what is happening for the majority of students in our public schools. Although many young people learn many things in wonderfully rich programs, the vast majority learn whatever they retain

in very little time during an otherwise boring and unfulfilling day. It is probable that these students are already learning much more outside school than inside.

When I say this, most people wonder whether learning done outside of school, during the "hanging out" time, is valid or valuable. Again, let me quote from John Holt's letters, sent to me as I struggled with this in the early 1980s, especially in relation to some teens in our program whose parents had virtually given up on them:

"...I also wonder what's the difference between being at home and 'hanging out' at home? ..If they're not supposed to be at home or on the streets, where are they supposed to be? Of course it would be nice if they could be doing something interesting and useful - but society doesn't provide many of those opportunities. ...I suspect that what you mean is that they're not doing any of the things you think they ought to be doing. Such as what? Chances are they weren't doing them when they were going regularly to school, either. But anyway, what are these things you think they ought to be doing, and how do you know, how can you tell that they aren't doing any of them?"

One of the things we worry about when reporting to the authorities, is whether we are being honest in describing these aspects of growing up, even if we can, in fact, accept them ourselves. I find it easy to label much of this time, and even have students evaluate it for credit, as electives in Human Development, Relationship Skills, Personal Growth, etc. These are legitimate electives which may also be used as Social Studies. In many schools there is a venue for such classes - those in which students hang out together in a classroom with a teacher, thus legitimizing such time.

So what are the things we fear about our teens and their "education"? We fear that they will not learn enough about the important skills necessary for living a prosperous and fulfilled life. Perhaps we should ask ourselves when we learned these same skills. And how did we learn them? It would seem that all the skills to function well in the world of math came to many of us in elementary school. We cement them with practical experience in jobs and in the use of real money in real situations of responsibility. Algebra and geometry are truly wonderful and interesting subjects and are certainly important for college bound people. That in itself will be the reason for studying and learning them in much less time at home or with a tutor, rather than in a classroom where many students are bored or otherwise engaged.

We fear that young people will not know about our history or the great literature of the ages. I've asked so many adults when they actually got interested in these things. Almost to a person they said, "When I was older and history had meaning in my life" or "Oh, I could never stand Dickens!" What a pity - to leave Dickens behind because you were forced to read his works before you were ready. Our center and my family's experience with taking students on trips leads me to believe that there is no greater teacher of geography, history, or government than travel. What is now available in visitor centers at our national parks and monuments is far more interesting and accurate than what's written in many history books. The biographies of important people, novels of various historical eras, Black, Native American and Labor Union history centers and theaters - all these places and books provide a richness of experience that far surpasses the textbooks we have available. While travelling (barring car-sickness), we have found that young people read and often share many different types of books. It is also a good time for writing - logs, diaries, poetry, letters, collaborative stories - and for telling family stories.

Many fear that our young people will not do well on SATs or other college applications. Those of us who work with alternative kinds of education, including home education, are finding that more and more of our students are not only admitted to colleges, they are invited to apply. We've even had

students who have climbed the ladder to National Merit Scholarships without grades or grade levels. It takes work to fit the anecdotal descriptions of portfolio work into the little boxes in the applications, but it can be done. There are also many books and computer programs with a vested interest in your child's success that help young people do well.

Most families who engage in home education know that social growth is not at risk because of the many activities they are involved in with their children. But what of teens, who are often stretching away from the family unit and the more organized socialization of their early years? In our experience, young people do socialize with each other, wherever they are and in whatever type of situations they find themselves. Through conferences, churches, YM/YWCAs, sports and neighborhoods, young people find each other and develop friend groups. Even those who go to the mall and drive around in cars listening to music are developing social skills and learning about the nuances of society and their place in it.

It is important that young people understand the value of making their own decisions when it comes to learning. They need to be part of the decision making about what constitutes appropriate record keeping. They need to be honest in describing what they have done and in keeping their own records. They need to know that they are trusted to do what will serve them in their growth and development. And they need to know that they have the freedom to decide many of these things for themselves, while keeping in mind that they have the responsibility to keep track and take charge of compliance with legal issues.

There is nothing quite so useful in growing up as taking charge of our evaluations, in school as well as in the work world. If teenagers can learn to do this without fear of authority, but with respect for the positive things it may represent, they will have learned something many adults are still not able to acknowledge out of their old fears. They will have the courage to interface with others about their performance, and to stand up for their rights with an understanding of how various systems work. They will also be able to evaluate those systems and decide on which ones they choose to become involved.

We must remember that one of the jobs of a teenager is to become a separate individual. This is one of the most difficult tasks anyone faces, and it is not often acknowledged as an incredibly important learning experience that must happen during these years if it is not to become a problem later. It takes time and leisure, space to think and to dream. It means taking the opportunity to make mistakes as well as to succeed and to find ways to interface positively with family, friends, public agencies and the rest of the adult world as a single person who is separate from family and friends - a unique individual.

Upattinas School
Glenmoore, PA