

Words of Advice from Experienced Homeschoolers

Compiled for the National Home Education Network

Congratulations on deciding to continue to build your family the way you already are. My only piece of advice is to remember that each child is unique, a piece of star-stuffed gathered, and they come pre-programmed! So the greatest challenge is simply to love them for who they are -- free yourself of preconceptions, and learn to listen as well as you can, for they are gifted teachers. And I'll bet you already knew that! David Albert, Washington

I'm fond of telling folks that the what and how will come if they do one simple thing: Observe the children as they play and learn, get a "feel" for the best way to go about this to "fit" the individual child. The children themselves give us remarkable clues, if we as parents have but the wisdom and patience to interpret them. Linda Dobson, New York

Part of being an "experienced homeschool" is privilege of offering advice to new homeschoolers. I have sometimes wondered if what I am offering is what the person needs to hear. I have realized that the very basic, yet most important thing I want to share with new homeschoolers is that their children are whole and complete.

Dr. Wayne Dyer addresses this issue in one of my favorite books, "What Do You Really Want For Your Children? -How to Raise Happy Kids." In one of the chapters, Dr. Dyer tells a story of a mother who was always thinking about what her daughter would grow up to be. Her child died at 4 years old. She said she realized too late that her child was total and complete just the way she was, she was never going to be anymore than what she was at that moment. It is a sad story, but one that has made me think deeply about how I trust and treat my children.

If you can look at your children and know that they are complete whole beings, right now, it doesn't matter at what time they learn something, or if they ever do. Today, they are whole and complete. They are giving as much as they can and learning as much as they can. Today they are alive, loving and learning. Trust them. Inspire them. Admire them. Krista Lica. Florida

Learning at home means not only having time to enjoy learning but to enjoy life and enjoy being a family. It means having time to just sit quietly by a campfire till midnight and not say anything until the mood and the words are right. It means having time to find out how to be the best person you can be. Homeschooling is giving the ultimate gift to your family and yourself: the gift of time. Kathy Wentz, Colorado

Don't be a slave to your curriculum (if you use one.) Just because a math lesson has thirty problems in it does not mean your child has to do thirty problems! If the child understands a concept, will more practice make him/her understand better or will it just waste time? In dealing with state requirements to have a plan, you can gain more flexibility by providing a skills list, i.e., "by the end of the year, the child will be able to give a synopsis of the state's history at an age-appropriate level." That frees you up to accomplish the feat any way you and your child like. Another, related, hint is to jot down everything your child does THIS year and tell the state that is what your child WILL study NEXT year. That way, it's already done and you don't have to

worry about how or when to do it. Most homeschoolers are functioning well above "grade" level anyway, so lagging reports a year behind shouldn't be any problem. The state gets what it wants, and you can let your children study according to passion instead of plan. Chris, Iowa

Children need the opportunity to experience the world personally, using hands, bodies, and all the senses, as well as the mind. These experiences could include water, sand, mud, plants, animals, cooking, repair, all aspects of family life, social relation -ships, privacy, books, art, construction, crafts, dance, model building, sports, drama, math, communication, machinery (including anything from crowbars to computers), music, science, spiritual belief systems, literature, history, travel, and more. Paper and pencil representations of reality (i.e. packaged curriculums or dependence on workbooks) are occasionally a valuable tool. Used excessively, such materials are a flavorless substitute for the real thing. Ann Lahrson Fisher, Oregon

Don't do "school at home." You have the freedom to appreciate the unique gifts and learning styles of your children. Enjoy your family! Janie Bowman, Washington

Buy an electric pencil sharpener! Dionne Ray

Relax and trust your children and yourself. Lillian Haas, New Jersey

1. Start with the child, not the resource
2. Ask for your child's input, regardless of their age. I have always been surprised at how well my kids know what they need and how they want to go about getting it.
3. Don't buy anything expensive the first year.
4. Kids don't have to finish everything they start - sometimes they come back to it (even years later) and sometimes they don't.
5. The child is in charge of the learning -- always, regardless of what resource, method, or philosophy you employ or hold.
6. Homeschooling is a long-term adventure. There are few things that have to be accomplished by a particular age.
7. School schedules and school resources were developed for ease of teaching not for ease of learning. Big difference.

Christine Webb, Oregon

Beginning to homeschool is a lot like going on a new diet. You have a lot of plans, you are very sure of yourself, you spend a lot of money on materials, and you just KNOW that other people NEED to know how important and correct what you are doing is. And, just like with the diet, your friends will react according to their own feelings about your diet: positive if they had success with it, and perhaps a bit resentfully if they did not.

There will be those that will even take a slight pleasure in your mis-steps. Success, in that first heady year, may depend on whether you surround yourself with successful 'dieters' or not. No need to avoid your old friends, though, just try not to gloat!

Laurae Lyster-Mensh, Virginia

One piece of advice I always give, and the thing that often gets TOTALLY left out of "what you need to get started" is that new homeschoolers should spend some time thinking about what education, and "being educated" means to them. Where is it that they're trying to go? What do they want to accomplish? What's important to them about the process? What's important to their children? What kind of life do they want to have together? It's so easy to confuse learning with schooling - many people have never even thought about the difference - and it's awfully hard to avoid the trap of bringing school home (even when they know it isn't working!) when you haven't considered other journeys. Laura, Texas

Homeschooling is an individual thing, every family is different, every homeschool is different. Don't think that your homeschool needs to look like your friend's, even if her kids are wonderful and you want your kids to be just like hers! You have unique children, specially gifted by God. Each of your children is unique too, so don't expect the same approach to work for each of your children. One child may do wonderfully with Saxon math, and the other one hate it. That's okay! Work with their strengths.

Remember too that you will make mistakes, you will have bad days, and you will not cover everything. Learn from your mistakes, forget the bad days, and take comfort in the fact that if your kids know how to learn then they can learn anything they want to. We sometimes get caught up with the fear that we will somehow fail our children if we "miss something". You will! Don't worry! If you have a budding artist, go heavily into history of art, artists, and art, and ensure a familiarity with basic science. If you have a budding scientist, then bend your studies in that direction.

Don't be afraid to abandon something in mid-stream if it was a mistake. Better try something new than to slog through bad material. Remember too, you own the books, they don't own you. If your child is getting 100% on his math, there is no reason to do 30 problems a day every day. Pick and choose the ones he needs work on and occasionally review the familiar ones. Likewise, if you feel that you are wasting your time with "busywork" in the curriculum you probably are! Drop the nonsense and keep the meat. Most families try several different approaches before they find one that works for them and their family.

Above all, trust yourself and your instincts. You know your kids better than anyone else! You are not homeschooling for your in-laws or neighbors, but for your kids. Dia Garland, Nebraska

The first thing I would tell a new homeschooler is to relax and try not to panic. I recall that in the first few months following my daughter's removal from private school for homeschool that I regularly felt in a state of panic that she wasn't making the adjustment. By that I mean that she was not internalizing that her school friends couldn't come places midweek with us, that she couldn't go to the school to "play" with her friends, that she was not jumping right in and doing what she heretofore had not done in school: sit and do worksheets and busy work. Although I thought that I was not recreating school at home in my initial panic I actually did. I sat down with my daughter and we read and did some worksheets and other "school". I was greeted with the same reaction I got when she brought school work home-crying and general frustration and lack of completion. So, what was the point I asked myself?

In January, following her first four months of home school my daughter plateaued. She became more tractable, more interested in learning in general, and more responsive to me and our situation. One full year after her coming into homeschooling we are involved in "child led learning" and she reads a great deal. I still

worry occasionally that her fundamental learning is not being met, particularly in math, but she is learning a great deal and I am constantly amazed at her perception and recall of detail. So, through great effort, I have relaxed. I think that had I internally felt that this would be the path our road would take I would have relaxed much sooner.

So that is my advice to a new homeschooler-relax.
Tracey T., CA

As someone who's still looking into the different ways people homeschool their children, I'd recommend trying to talk to (this is hard to say) people who use different methods of homeschooling. For example, they should talk to someone who uses a curriculum package, someone who believes in a classical education, unschoolers, etc. This way they can see some very different ways of homeschooling and figure out what they want to do. Marie, California

When I was nearing the start of "official" homeschooling, I was nervous, because I feared criticism from my family. I wrote down *everything* we did, thinking that would "prove" that what I was doing was educational and beneficial. Now I realize no amount of "proof" is going to convince critical people that homeschooling is the best education for my child. The skeptical and curious will ask genuine questions, and listen with an open mind. Some might even read a book or magazine article as a way to understand more fully. But the critics are not likely to change their minds. The best we can do with such people is to stick to our convictions -- to homeschool according to our beliefs and knowledge of our children -- and to do what we must to protect ourselves and our children from the harshest critics. It's not always easy, and we might have to learn new ways, but it's what we must do for ourselves and our children. Shay Seaborne, Virginia

If there is one advice or word of wisdom to new homeschoolers when they enter a new home school group is to be patient. In general people are always taking you in as a person and slowly they will then find common interest. Then slowly friendship will happen. Friendships and acquaintances are coming and going, it is also always good to say to ourselves that no one has the same value system and the more different we all are and think the better.

Emanuelle, California (originally from France)

You and your imagination are your own best resource. Hug your kids. Make it fun for all of you. Keep your sense of humor. Be willing to learn along with your kids. Don't worry about "doing it the right way." Everyone is different so be flexible. Do it the right way for yourself and your kids. Have faith in yourself and your kids. Jean Reed, Maine