

From Diapers to Descartes: A Journey of Discovery

by Laura Derrick

Imagine first-time parents, suddenly at home alone with their precious infant, struggling to make sense of this overwhelming new responsibility. From diaper changing, to feeding, to understanding their baby, they are faced with a steep learning curve. Within a few short weeks they will have changed hundreds of diapers. They will have dressed, bathed, fed, and comforted their child so many times that these essential acts will have become second nature. They will almost certainly be better at interpreting their baby's cues, and responding with what she needs, than anyone else on the planet. What's more, they will have accomplished all this without the approval or assistance of a child development specialist, and without anyone looking over their shoulders. They didn't need such intervention. Human parents and children are perfectly designed for this natural process of learning and growing together.

Most families come to homeschooling as a conscious, informed choice. But for all their thorough investigation and careful consideration, the reality of homeschooling may seem no less daunting than bringing home that new infant. That big yellow bus goes by and their child isn't on it, and reality sinks in: "We're on our own here!" As with any major change in family life, what follows is a period of tremendous growth and learning, much like those early days of parenthood.

These fledgling homeschooling parents are not inexperienced for long! Having taken back responsibility for their child's education, the parents now embark on an intricate journey of observing, engaging, responding, adapting, and creating a new kind of life with their child. The parents discover their child's learning styles and organizational needs, evaluate strengths and weaknesses, and make note of particular interests, aversions, and abilities. But far from being a clinical process, these observations are made naturally, in the context of living and learning together.

A homeschooling parent becomes familiar with a variety of methods of home education. Phrases like school-at-home, unit studies, unschooling, co-ops, the tutorial method, classical education and learning clubs become part of their vocabulary. They may do research into learning disabilities or giftedness, or other special circumstances. They will undoubtedly stretch their book budget and library card to the limit, and cruise the Internet for hours on end, reading voraciously about teaching, learning, and alternatives to conventional approaches. No other teacher could have such a vested interest in the success of this particular child. No other teacher could care as much. Most parents attend one or more conferences during that first homeschooling year, participating in education and vendor workshops. They go to curriculum fairs, peruse educational supply catalogs, and review countless curricula and other learning materials. Chances are they will join a support group, seek advice from experienced homeschoolers, and share with other families at informative meetings and social gatherings. They will choose, use, and adapt materials and methods to suit their needs, often gaining experience with a variety of different styles and resources rather than a single, pre-planned curriculum.

But homeschooling parents can't just sit back and relax, because their children are growing and changing. And as the children change, so must their resources, activities, and perhaps even their style of homeschooling. What worked last year may no longer be appropriate. As the children's needs become more complex, parents become sufficiently resourceful to tackle the more difficult educational challenges. For most families, this learning and growing becomes as natural and inevitable as life itself. They engage themselves in a life of learning that continues as long as they are homeschooling, and even beyond. Parents will amass an astounding amount of knowledge and experience as they homeschool. Though they are primarily self-educated and uncredentialed, they are well educated

nonetheless. Like classroom teachers, homeschooling parents learn about learning theory, learning styles, motivation, developmental phases, choosing appropriate resources, and how to create a successful learning environment.

Homeschooling parents are their own best resource, helping each other learn about not only homeschooling-related subjects, but a whole host of lifestyle and parenting topics as well. They share information online, at conference workshops, at support group gatherings, in newsletters and homeschooling magazines, and in informal discussions. Spend a year on an online support group or on a homeschooling related message board, and you will log hundreds of hours of continuing education. The information gleaned using this interactive will be individualized covering much broader topics, in more depth, than any teacher training program.

This vibrant, growing, and successful community is blazing an educational path and way of life that attracts new members by the thousands each year. Its strength lies not in its children's success stories, but in its members' commitment to help and support each other, family to family.