

## **Networking with Local Area Homeschoolers**

*By Mary May*

Finding or creating the right support network for you and your family can be quite an undertaking. And, once it's found or created, the urge to stay within your own group can be overwhelming. After all, this group fits your family, makes homeschooling easier for you, and gives you encouragement and support when you need it. However, there are several reasons to reach out and connect with other area homeschoolers, support groups, and activity leaders.

First and foremost is the vital need for tolerance and appreciation of how unique and different we are as people and homeschoolers, while continuing to recognize that we are all bound together by the common bond of educating our children outside the traditional system. By forging bonds based on those principles, we go a long way toward creating a cohesive and connected homeschool population.

Foster communication and connection among different homeschoolers and support groups eases the planning and implementation of all sorts of support related activities. From Homeschool Information Nights to conventions to email lists, wonderful opportunities can be formed for your area's homeschoolers through cooperation and networking.

Homeschoolers across the country have used many different techniques in a quest to further communication and understanding among homeschoolers in their community. These efforts range from events designed solely for homeschool activity and group leaders to events celebrating homeschoolers and homeschooling in general. While very different in scope and form, each effort shows a drive to forge bonds among homeschoolers.

In my own area, a fairly small county of approximately 100,000, I was surprised by how little I knew of the surrounding homeschool groups. I certainly knew of each group's existence (and knew of other activity leaders), but knew very little of what each group offered or what their criteria for membership might be. This level of knowledge hampered my ability to direct homeschoolers to the group that might best serve their needs. In addition, this lack of information made it difficult to prevent misinformation from arising out of the different philosophical or religious differences among the groups.

Seeing that we could all benefit from increased communication, I decided to organize a gathering for homeschool support group and activity leaders in the county. To keep the meeting from being perceived as an agenda-driven attempt to create a "super leader" or advocacy/umbrella group for all the area groups, I set up a relaxed, informal "Leaders' Tea". The Tea itself was simple to organize and even easier to host. The sole purpose of the meeting was for each of us to get to know the others better and end up with a better feel for each group and its offerings. Not only did this occur, but we also found that we could accomplish things together that none of our groups might have attempted to do on their own. One participant of the Tea offered to design a brochure listing all area support groups to be distributed at homeschool info nights, at libraries and other central locations, and to group members. Each support group listed shares a portion of the cost and assists with distribution. Several other projects were also discussed and a new meeting scheduled. Working toward several very worthy goals as an outcome of the Tea is important, the most valuable outcome of the Tea was the respect for-and recognition of-not only our differences, but also the common ground that we all share, regardless of educational or religious philosophy.

Carol Moxley and the Tarrant Home Education Association in the Fort Worth area of Texas found another informal, fun way to gather homeschoolers together to meet and learn about each other. For the annual Texas "Home-Ed Week", the Tarrant Home Education Association offers a park day and a used book sale. Initial reactions to the invitations were a bit mixed. Carol notes, "Some groups chose not to respond at all, while others cautiously accepted the invitation, and several enthusiastically spread the word among their members." The mixed response didn't stop the Tarrant Home Education Association though. The homeschoolers who chose to participate had a wonderful time. With lovely weather, good company, and lots of opportunities for the children to play, the event was a resounding success.

With the proper setting for families to meet while the children played, the Tarrant Home Education Association added the element of a used book sale. "Lots of folks rid themselves of learning materials they no longer needed, and others found new treasures for their homeschools." "Most importantly though," Carol concludes, "friendships were formed and bonds grew that might not otherwise have found the chance. Local support groups now have more open communication."

Hallie Penthany of New Hampshire found a wonderful way to forge connections among area homeschool groups by starting an email list for the support groups' newsletter editors. Excited upon taking over her small support group's newsletter, Hallie quickly set about disbursing information to group members about activities, field trips, and other opportunities for homeschoolers, particularly those without Internet access. During her own search of the Internet, she found that large homeschool groups across the country often had a well-organized system for planning field trips and other activities. That type of group and organization was hard to come by in Hallie's area. "With small groups scattered here and there, especially ones with such wide age ranges of children, there just aren't that many field trips and activities planned. Attendance is often low, because there aren't trips that fit into every family's schedule, or which interest everybody's children."

Another thing Hallie noticed about her area's homeschoolers was the fact that many of them subscribed to several different newsletters hoping to find activities and field trips that fit their families. Seeing a need, Hallie organized and began an email list for newsletter editors in her area. Together, before newsletter deadlines, they share information on field trips organized by their respective groups that are open to other homeschoolers. Each newsletter editor then incorporates this information into their group's newsletter. "My hope for the future is that more activities will be planned by families, even if they know others in their own group won't be interested, and that more families will have the opportunity to gather in an environment that isn't related to a specific religious community or a particular way of homeschooling."

Homeschool Information Nights are another popular way to assist new homeschoolers in finding the information and support that they need. They can also be a wonderful way for the area's support networks to work together, either by assisting with organization, or perhaps by providing speakers or resources. Shay Seaborne of Virginia's Family Oriented Learning Cooperative (F.O.L.C.) intends to replace her group's more intensive Homeschool Open House with the easier to plan and implement Homeschool Information Night. Why an information night at all? "It can be difficult for prospective homeschoolers--especially those not connected to the Internet--to find full and accurate information on homeschooling, or encouragement for starting the process," Shay explains. "Several people in my support group, now comfortably and confidently homeschooling, have said that they felt lost until they were able to obtain the information we provided, and the real, live homeschoolers with whom to speak."

Many factors come together to make the Homeschool Information Night a wonderful introduction

to homeschooling: Posting flyers everywhere a prospective homeschooling family might frequent, booking the area library, gathering high quality materials from various publishers (Shay recommends picking those top-notch publishers with quality publications; Home Education Magazine and Growing Without Schooling were two mentioned), printing and distributing handouts of interest to new homeschoolers, as well as providing speakers and experienced homeschoolers to staff tables. Shay has also engaged a member of another support group as a speaker. She found this homeschool mom, whose homeschooled her daughter subsequently attended college, to be a valuable asset. "She's very knowledgeable, and offers a real boost to newbies' confidence."

Shay ultimately sees Homeschool Information Nights as "an opportunity to provide thorough and accurate information, and to greet potential homeschoolers, as well as answer questions for those new to homeschooling. Also, our visible presence, as contributors to the community at large, helps to improve the image of homeschoolers, and create goodwill toward us."

Most states have a large, statewide homeschool support group that puts on a convention every year for the state's homeschoolers. While nationally known speakers and large curricula exhibits can be very appealing, they can also be a bit intimidating. Smaller, more accessible "mini-conventions" are springing up in homeschool communities across the country in response to the need for more immediate, local, "close-to-home" support, information, and encouragement. "One reason for the need of a mini-convention is having a venue for encouragement to come via your community. When you go and hear a speaker you may see them in the grocery store the next day," notes Cindy Jandt of Washington. Cindy Jandt and Rhonda Quayle hosted the Kitsap County Mini-Convention for five years before handing over the convention to another long-time homeschooler in the area, Charlyn Armstrong, a few years ago.

"Homeschooling becomes more everyday and normal-not big, national, and scary-when the information comes through an avenue like a mini-convention," continues Cindy. Finding local homeschooling parents and activity leaders to speak at their convention was very important to Cindy and Rhonda and continues to be important to Charlyn. "I wanted to see as many local homeschool moms speak as was possible. I believe that all of us have something to offer each other, not just the "famous" speaker types."

Mini-conventions can be a valuable tool, not only for encouraging new and veteran homeschoolers in the community, but also for showing a community of homeschoolers how much value there is in their local "talent" and what incredible support and information there is to be had over the back garden gate. Several other benefits discussed by Cindy and Rhonda were: the practical ease of making connections that are local, and thus more easily fostered, finding out about local resources, and being able to just drop in on the convention for an hour or so (rather than planning out a whole weekend with the accompanying expenses and travel time).

Having at hand such interesting, unique and fun ways of connecting area homeschoolers ultimately provides a wonderfully united community. Should the need ever arise for legislative action, a communication network has already been established, and area homeschoolers can take action with greater numbers and impact. The same is true for creating classes for homeschooled children, working to get retailers into the area that might benefit the homeschool community, and getting the local library to carry more materials for homeschoolers to use. When you reach out to break the ice between homeschool groups, you help to instill respect, tolerance, and appreciation for all the differences that make us unique, while strengthening the bonds that make us stronger.

