

BEING A HOMESCHOOL DAD CAN MEAN BEING A DIFFERENT KIND OF DAD

by Patrick Farenga

Because I'm a father of three girls, I see the world differently than my friends who don't have children. Because I'm a homeschooling father, I certainly see education differently than most of my friends who do have children. Having different views from the rest of population sometimes puts me in the minority of dads overall, and, further, supporting unschooling puts me in the minority of homeschooling dads, but I've learned to be comfortable with my minority status. Yes, homeschooling continues to grow, so there are "more of us" out there, but let's face it: the total number of homeschooled children in America represents just about 2% of the total school age population. 98% of the children in America may think there is something lucky, even cool, about their homeschooled friends not having to go to school, but most of the parents of those 98% think the parents of that 2% homeschool population are certifiably nuts.

In my work as a publisher, consultant, writer and speaker about homeschooling, I often find myself acting as a homeschooling apologist to the parents of the 98%. It is easy for me to come up with the facts, figures, and arguments that describe homeschooling from the point of view of mother and child, because so much homeschooling data and literature looks at what goes on with the kids and mothers during homeschooling. But dads are often invisible in homeschooling research. Perhaps this is deliberate - many of the men I know don't like to be publicly seen as being "different" from the mainstream, or perhaps it is a flaw in the assumptions of the researchers - dads only count in these studies to provide marital status and income data, or if they are spending time teaching their children school subjects. But being a homeschool dad can be a much more meaningful and nurturing role than being the conventional patriarch — if you are willing to try.

During my twenty-one years on the road at homeschooling conferences and in my work at the John Holt Associates office, I've met lots of homeschooling dads. I've known a few who handle all the homeschooling chores while their wives work, a smaller number of men who are single parents and homeschool, and many dads who take responsibility for certain subjects or activities. Science, math, and sports are what dads most often take charge of in home schools, according to what I hear. Some homeschool dads are politically active on behalf of homeschooling, and some organize conferences and events, but still, based on my experience, it is women who do the brunt of the organizing work in homeschooling and women who make homeschooling happen, in every sense of that phrase.

Perhaps this is because I've met a large number of dads who think that homeschooling is "a mom's thing." Often the decision to homeschool in these families is primarily made by the mother, with grudging acceptance by the father who privately maintains an earnest hope that this is "just a phase" and that soon his kids will be in school "like the rest." Other than a few family meetings, these homeschool dads are no more involved in homeschooling than if their kids were in conventional school. Dad, it is often rationalized, has to work, put food on the table, pay the bills, etc., so he often has little energy left for family activities. It is comfortable, and socially easier, for dads to stick with our conventional roles as fathers, but dads can miss out on some incredible opportunities to grow personally, as well as part of a couple and family, if we limit our involvement in homeschooling.

We know it can be socially difficult for our children to be different than their peers by being homeschooled, but I think it is just as hard for grown men to be different than their peers who send their children to public or private school. More so than our children, it is we men who need to unschool ourselves, to let go of our assumptions and expectations about living and learning based on how we lived and learned in school. Being a homeschool dad can mean being a different kind of dad, but it isn't going to happen just because you decide to homeschool. For instance, dads can make conscious efforts to bring their children to work, or

on business trips, rather than just on the one day of the year set aside to “Bring your child to work.” Dads can openly show their love and respect for their partner’s efforts to homeschool so it becomes something you publicly support together, rather than just a project Mom is doing with the kids. We dads can demonstrate before our children our beliefs and moral behavior by sharing our actions, personal concerns, and thoughts about social issues as much as we can, rather than keeping them to ourselves. I am deliberately choosing examples that don’t involve instruction in academic subjects because we all know how to do that, having been in the student’s seat ourselves for many years. What I want to emphasize is that homeschooling dads have the opportunity to think of homeschooling as more than just instruction and grades, and family responsibilities as more than just paying the bills and putting the kids through school. Homeschooling can break stereotypes not only about education, but also about what it means to be a parent. Being a homeschool dad automatically makes you different from the vast majority of fathers in the world today. Don’t be embarrassed by the difference – celebrate it!

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