

Things That Worked: From A Homeschool Graduate

was asking my mom what topic I should write about for my column this week. After writing for The Times Examiner for ten years, one tends to run low on new topics, y'know? But Mom had a great suggestion: Why don't I list things that she and Dad did in our homeschooling that worked? And she even gave me permission to list things that didn't work too! So here we go. In no particular order: Things That Worked In Our Homeschool.

For kids twelve and under, never assume they remember how they're supposed to act in public. On the way to the public event (church, a concert, visiting Grandma) remind them of your family's rules. Ours consisted of such items as don't jump on the beds, don't air the family laundry concerning who was disciplined last, and let someone else get a word in edgewise (our family was all girls), and that sort of thing.

Never give your kids the only set of keys unless you personally supervise them until the keys are given back. Never mind how I know this.

Ages ten and under will not remember anything of value from field trips. The only thing we remember from such exciting adventures as Sea World, the San Diego Zoo, Sturbridge Village, and Colonial Williamsburg was the food. (My sister Raquelle can tell you about the ice cream sandwich she had at the zoo. I can tell

you about the burgers at Williamsburg.) So if you're thinking of blowing a lot of money on a field trip for the under-ten crowd – think again and go to the local park instead. And be sure to bring along some yummy food if you want them to remember anything.

Use items around the house to teach academics. You don't need an expensive chemistry set – just let them try baking cookies with you. After playing with the eggs and managing to leave most of the raw egg on my hands instead of in the batter, I found out how valuable eggs are for making cookies. Dad taught us some great lessons in physics with just a simple set of Legos (I'm talking about plain old squares and rectangles – no gee-whiz action figures or pre-made gas stations.). My uncle, who was into geology, took us on a walk through the woods and explained the various types of rocks and minerals common to that area. Those are the lessons that stuck with me, because they explained how real-life things that I was familiar with really worked.

Note: Do not use large and potentially dangerous items around the house to teach physics. I learned a lot of physics from leaving the tractor in neutral on a hill, but the end result was rather expensive. (I refuse to provide any further details on the grounds that it's embarrassing.)

If your children truly can't handle a certain subject, don't push them beyond exposure level necessary for life skills. We discovered early on that neither Raquelle nor I are wired for Chemistry. So we studied the basics and then moved on to other subjects. (And yes, we've managed to handle real life without years of Chemistry!)

On the other hand, if the ability is there, don't listen to your kids' whining when they want to quit.

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Teach them that God has given them a gift and it's up to them to exercise good stewardship and develop the gift. You never know how it will be used. Here is where I briefly mention that Raquelle and I begged to stop organ lessons (and wound up as paid church organists a year later), whined about doing higher math (and I ended up being a paid math tutor a couple years later), and I actually tried to pay Mom to let me quit harp lessons (we recently released our 6th harp CD).

Have your kids do chores. Chores teach kids that life is full of responsibility. Chores teach kids that being a family requires teamwork. Chores can be used to help kids learn how to do a job right the first time. Chores are good for teaching self-respect in a job well-done. Chores help your kids to not be afraid of hard work. Start them young – and let them see and understand that you have to do chores too.

Don't be afraid to take a day off for something special – or just for fun. Just because the government has set a school schedule for its little minions does not mean we homeschoolers have to slavishly follow it. If the day is particularly nice, go to the park or woods and do a nature walk. If the chance comes to help out an elderly person at church, take the day off and teach your kids about putting love for others in action. If Grandma invites everyone for a family reunion for a week in March, let school work run later into the summer and use the family reunion to help your kids get in touch with their family roots. One of my fond memories from my eleven-year-old-hood was sitting out on a blanket in the yard while Mom read a biography of Queen Victoria to us and we crocheted clothes for our dolls. (I wonder if that was the start of my long-time interest in the Victorian era?)

Don't be afraid to explain sex to your kids when they're old enough. Kids should not learn about this wonder of God's creation through movies, peers or other immature avenues. Teach them to be respectful, but not paranoid, of the subject. It's easy to go to one extreme, by acting as if "sex" is a dirty word and should never be spoken of – or to go to the other extreme by casually discussing and joking about it in an inappropriate, disrespectful manner. Let your kids know they can discuss their questions about it with you any time – and make sure this is actually true. Because I always knew Mom and Dad would tell me the truth and be willing to talk about it with me, I never felt the need as a child to get my information from inappropriate sources.

Don't spoon-feed everything to your kids. Instead, help them think through how to find the answer for themselves. It used to drive me nuts when Mom would say, "Look it up," instead of just giving me the answer. But I sure remembered a lot better when I looked it up. I still remember a conversation Dad had with us when I was about nine. Instead of saying, "Music is a language, kids," he started with questions about what languages we knew. By helping us think through what a language was in the first place, it made a lot more sense to us when he wound up with explaining how music is used to communicate.

Your children are not adults so don't treat them that way. Don't ask a five-year-old if he wants to eat broccoli. Don't ask your teenager if she feels like going to church. Don't expect a fourteen-year-old to have the wisdom of Solomon while with his fourteen-year-old friends. Don't let your ten-year-old have free rein in picking out her church clothes (Should I mention the plastic dress-up high

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peaks. I tried to wear one Sunday (2002) but
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(outside) and tell silly knock-knock jokes over and over. Do help their memories by repeating
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instructions to them if necessary. Do take the time to explain things that may be “duh” to you, but
a mystery to little minds.

And finally, as your children grow older, start to let go little by little. You are training them to be adults, so give them chances to try their wings as they grow. There is no perfect timetable for all children because each child is different. Some children may be mature enough to be trusted with a driver's license at age 16. Others may need (or want, for insurance reasons) to wait till 18 or 20. Some ten-year-olds can drive a tractor. Other ten-year-olds shouldn't be let within ten yards of a moving vehicle! Don't get stuck in the rut of Mommy and Daddy are the bosses, period, world without end, amen. Someday your kids will have to be their own boss, and if they marry and have children, they'll have to be their kids' boss. They need to learn the skills of self-government and leadership while you're still around to mentor them. But you have to let go of them enough for this to happen. This is something my parents handled very well and I appreciate it immensely.

I hope some of these things have been helpful for you. The most important thing my parents did was pray for wisdom. They will be the first to tell you that their parenting worked out by the grace of God alone. God is the One who can give you the daily guidance you need to be the best parent you can be. Go to Him for true wisdom.

Heather Sheen is a homeschool graduate who also completed her college degree at home. She enjoys teaching and performing harp, reenacting as a living historian, and working for her father's consulting business. You can read more articles by the Sheen family at www.homeschoolfamilyforum.com.