

A young girl with blonde hair in pigtails, wearing a red and white polka-dot shirt, is sitting cross-legged on a bed. She is holding a large, open yellow book and looking down at it with a smile. The bed has a white sheet and a pink floral patterned blanket. In the background, there is a white headboard and a colorful abstract painting on the wall.

Why we chose homeschooling

*A living and loving article changed Umm Zakariyya's life 14 years ago.
She takes an insider's look into the world of homeschooling.*

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"Have you read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sun*?" my son asked me. "Um, no," I replied, embarrassed. "What about *Around the World in Eighty Days*?" The questions continued, and again and again I was found lacking. Truth be told, I've hardly read any of the classics except those that were set works in school. He told me how much I was missing out on, suggested books that I should be reading, and called the likes of Dickens "cool".

I started as a school teacher 14 years ago, impassioned with the possibility of what education could and should be. Perhaps, without being ranked according to the marks they produce, all children would excel and thrive. Perhaps, with more opportunity for hands-on learning and exploration, they would retain the same sense of awe of learning that a toddler displays. But, as the months progressed, I found my suggestions dismissed by an administrative body that was more interested in the paperwork I was churning out, in files that they barely glanced at, than in the programmes I was implementing in my classroom. And I found my energy being sapped by paperwork and by balancing a school register as a large portion of my workload.

I learned to gauge the effectiveness of a lesson by looking into the eyes of learners that consistently scored Bs or Cs on the exam: if they understood the lesson, we were on track. I deferred the questions of the brighter learners, hoping to get to these in a day or two, because to answer them at that time would confuse the rest of the

class. And as for those learners whose eyes indicated that they didn't understand, I hoped to get to them into our remedial class on the weekend. So, here I was doing what I had become a teacher to hopefully change: educating for mediocrity and labelling learners according to the grades they produced. And I couldn't see any way around it. Even more disconcerting was that even those students who had scored As in their tests, would very soon forget the material they'd swotted.

I asked myself: "Is there another way to get an education, other than through schooling?" Pregnant with my first baby, the traditional system was not something I wished to sentence my child to for 12 years. Then the answer came. Another teacher who had similar concerns about where to enrol her own daughter for school had been given a copy of *living and loving* that featured an article on a homeschooling family. "Could this work?" she asked me. This was our "Aha moment", as Oprah would say. When I resigned from school to have my baby, I kissed school goodbye – not only for me but for my unborn children.

FINDING A COMMUNITY

We spoke about homeschooling to everyone who would listen. On a radio show, I heard of the Pestalozzi Trust, the home education advocacy group in Pretoria led by Leendart Van Oostrum and his wife Karin. Having produced South Africa's first Master's thesis in Home Education, Leendart backs his advice with solid research evidence. Through the Trust's newsletters, home educators' meetings and Yahoo support group, it linked us to the homeschooling community. Some parents were homeschooling from the start, while others had sent their kids back to school. But I started to notice a common thread in their reasons for homeschooling:

TEACHING SKILLS RATHER THAN JUST CONTENT

"We wanted our sons to understand the possibility of becoming independent, self-motivated learners," says Lynn*, a statistician

and mother of two boys. "Rather than following the subjects of the state curriculum and teaching subject matter, we place emphasis on the tools of learning, which essentially are language skills, mathematics and science, interspersed with philosophy, logic and world history. We're educating our children for a future that may have careers that don't exist now, and we feel that we can best prepare them by teaching them how to learn, rather than just swotting content."

MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

We all know that children walk, talk and potty train when they're ready. Why do we then expect that by age six or seven, all children will suddenly be uniformly ready to start formal academics?

"Michael is an eager learner, but I knew that with his high energy levels, he wasn't able to sit for six hours a day in a classroom," says Heather. "I took the chance of seeing where a year of homeschooling would lead us, and we haven't looked back. At home, there's no expectation for him or his brother to sit still for hours on end. They're allowed to lie on the floor, stand, and move while doing their reading, for example. While Michael squirms at the sight of maths workbooks, his brother Adrian churns out worksheet after worksheet, so they're following different programmes."

When a child resists a subject, one is tempted to apply pressure, but sometimes children may need another three months before revisiting the subject. Or you may need to adjust your methods. This isn't possible in school.

RESISTING PEER PRESSURE AND BUCKING THE TREND TO GROW UP QUICKLY

Two weeks into Grade R, and Maya refused to hold her mom's hand as they walked to school, confessing that the other children had teased her about it. As the year continued, she became more and more distant from her family and irritable with her younger brother who adored her. During the holidays, her behaviour improved but

THE TIME FACTOR

Homeschooling may seem daunting, but homeschoolers manage with the help of some "homeschooling hacks":

Combining grade material: Even if a younger sibling isn't ready to answer written questions, he's usually able to follow and understand the discussion, so many parents teach all or a few of their children the same content at the same time. At school, content gets repeated yearly or every second or third year, so what is revision for one child may be enrichment for another. Another surprising benefit is that you may find an older child explaining a subject to a younger sibling.

Preparation is key: The bulk of preparation lies in selecting the texts and books you'll use, and in downloading worksheets. Some families do this weekly, monthly, or in a blitz over about 10 days at the start of the year.

Time of the day: No one says that you have to teach in the mornings. Do what works for you and your child.

Work around your own work: The majority of homeschooling parents are stay-at-home or work-at-home moms, or those who work part-time. There are, however, also homeschool dads.

Let them figure it out: Using a worksheet or textbook, most children are able to figure out what they need to do by looking at the examples, depending on their age, how they learn, and what sort of books they're working with.

One-on-one takes less time: Firstly, we're not teaching 30 children. Secondly, in our first year (grade one), we found that a two-hour session four days a week was sufficient to keep up with the three "Rs" at school. Over the years, we've increased this to three to four hours a day.

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would change when school re-opened. Her parents decided to try homeschooling, and within a short period, they felt that they had their daughter back.

Children who attend school spend 70% of their wakeful hours with children their own age, which gives enormous weight to the influence of the peer group. Homeschoolers spend the majority of their wakeful hours with their families, and most are enrolled in a number of sport, art and language programmes that widen their social circle. They interact with people of all ages, which is called tribal socialisation.

Many outsiders consider homeschoolers to be the archetypal helicopter parent: overprotective and unable to let go. "We don't want to protect our children from the world; we want to be the ones to introduce the world to our children," says Selma, Maya's mother. "For as long as possible, I want them to be children, without being exposed to adult themes too early."

MIGHT AS WELL ...

"With Outcome Based Education requiring projects assigned for weekends, my daughter would bring assignments home close to exam time, when she should have been studying. I noticed mistakes in the marking, and found that I was doing so much tutoring and correcting. I decided that I might as well do it when it was convenient for me," says Shenaaz, an engineer and mother of three.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Initially, we found the myriad of choices available to be daunting, but over the years, we've found this to be a source of celebration. Our idea of what a "school" could be, has changed; there've been times when schooling has taken place on my lap, in the library, in the fynbos-covered mountains and other places.

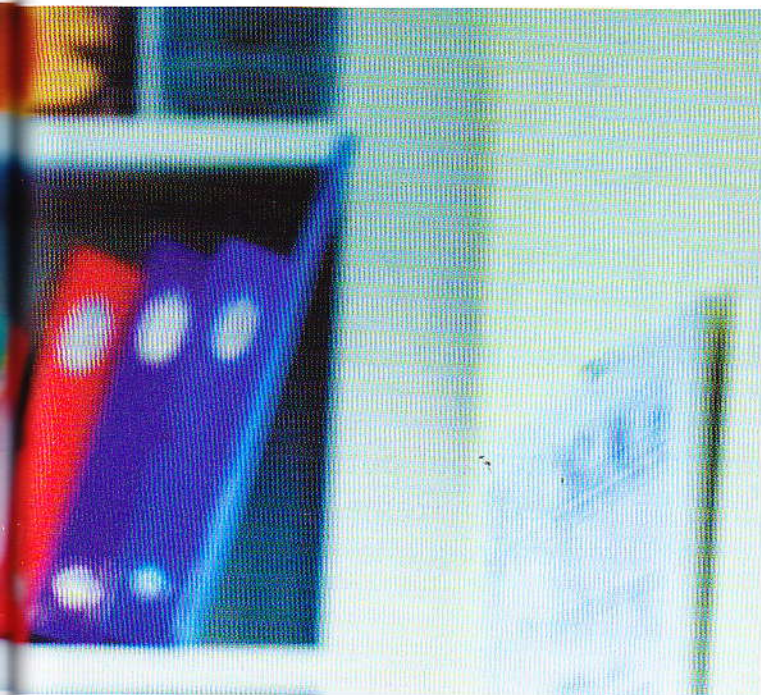
As our 14-year-old son increasingly defines his own goals, it may be time to make peace with traditional schools, as they seem to offer the most efficient way for him to achieve what he needs to pursue the profession of his choice. However, I don't see this as an option for my second son, because he has a unique style of learning that we can better cater for at home.

Our aim was never to institutionalise homeschooling, but to reclaim the right to define our own educational objectives for our children, to personalise these to their unique learning styles, and to retain their thirst and passion for learning.

* With the exception of Leendart and Karin Van Oostrum, all names have been changed.

BOOKMARK THIS:

The Pestalozzi Trust:
<http://www.pestalozzi.org/>
Homeschool Hub: <http://ww3.homeschoolhub.co.za/>



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is homeschooling legal?

Yes it is. However, the Department of Education requires that children be registered as homeschoolers, and it only recognises curricula that are based on the state curriculum. Homeschooling families following other curricula have the option of joining the Pestalozzi Trust which offers a legal defence in times of conflict.

Will my children be able to go to university?

Studies show that homeschoolers are twice as likely to go on to tertiary studies. In South Africa, you'll need to follow the state curriculum for Grades 10 to 12, and register with an examination board to write matric. You can also pursue a foreign school-leaving qualification to apply to university.

Do you need to be a qualified teacher?

Educating is an extension of parental care. There's very little that you can't teach your children, but if you have trouble with a subject, you can always hire a tutor.

What about socialisation?

Socialisation occurs more naturally in a real-life setting. For homeschoolers, this occurs through neighbourhoods, communities, sports, art and other classes.

What about cultural programmes like drama or team sports?

For these, homeschoolers must join clubs, the same way school-going children do. Some homeschool groups arrange sports days, elstadofoos, prize-givings, etc., and some families form co-ops where each family takes turns to host a science class or art activities. These events provide a holistic learning context, but for playing and socialising, homeschoolers go on playdates in their neighbourhoods – the same as all children do! **I&I**

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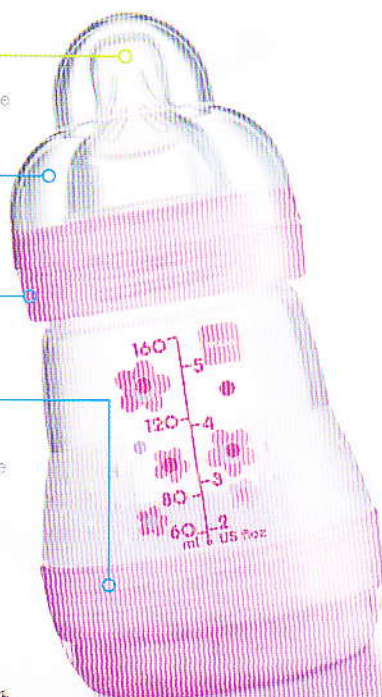
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