

# The Successful Homeschool: Some Key Ingredients

## On the Importance of Friendship and Fathers

by Susan Tardiff Lloyd

A couple years back I attended the wedding reception of a childhood friend, a devout secularist. Although I preferred to banquet alongside old Uncle Hermie I was thoughtfully placed next to my chum's pagan college roommate – an avowed Womyn, Hear Me Roar. (Something about being the same age; either that or her mother had finally devised a way to get me back for trying to convert her daughter.) We quickly found that we had nothing in common except being opinionated in English. As the conversation proceeded it came out that my husband (who was dutifully propping up his napkin) and I not only had four whole children but we were also homeschooling them. Gads! The womyn volunteered that some relative of hers was also doing that but that she and the family were decidedly against it for social reasons – visions of Boo Radley pacing behind boarded up windows and what not. She wanted to know what compelled people like us to do it. There were so many, I told her. “Top reason,” she commanded. After meditating for a minute I said, “I guess I just like the people.” She was dumbfounded. She expected me to say, “I don't like the schools; I wish to hide my kids from the world; I am a certified genius and so are my kids,” or words to that effect. “In fact,” said I, as she retracted her canines, “the social issue is what led me to homeschool in the first place.”

When I started out just seven

---

*Susan Tardiff Lloyd lives in Allentown, PA with her husband Greg and five daughters.*



Friends and fathers are integral parts of the team that supports the successful home-schooling mother.

years ago our Catholic support group didn't formally exist. I owe my initial courage to a mother with ten kids who spent an afternoon with me. We waded through a swamp of books, none of which I remember. What really made the impression were her sweet kids, her cluttered dining room (and the fact that she couldn't stand it, though it was clean), and the cake she had baked for my visit. I thought, “This woman has no time for me but she believes enough in homeschooling to put herself out for me. I want to get to know her.” Thanks, Marie. She and a few other mothers were among the first acquaintances I formed when I moved to Allentown.

We were seeking the same thing, friendship with other at-home moms and the desire to pass the Faith on to our kids. Besides that we loved art, literature and learning. And yes, we wanted to spare our kids the world's pressures while they were young and tender just as a gardener nurtures his

seedlings indoors until they are strong enough to withstand the climate. Later, a few of us got together a little one-page newsletter to include other Catholic moms in the valley in our social outings. Soon they began including us in their plans and Chalice, our support group, was born. We now have over forty families, half of which are active participants and close friends. It isn't a club with by-laws and rules, just a loose group of friends who like to get together for prayer, parties and field trips.

Often I get phone calls from mothers who have questions about getting started in homeschooling. The first thing I tell each one is to meet the other moms. The next thing I do is invite her to come with me to one of our events. Then I introduce her to the other moms, especially the ones who have kids who match up with hers. These are the first, most important steps. After that there is plenty of time for her to find cur-

ricula, read comprehensive how-to books, and familiarize herself with state law.

Now, why do I focus on the mother's social relationships first? Isn't homeschooling about kids? Yes, but the reality is that homeschooling rides mainly on the mother and at times it is a heavy load. The mother has to be strong and to be strong she has to be happy. As heart of the home, she is supposed to create a peaceful, joyful environment for her husband and children. She is supposed to love her job. But if she has no support – especially from other women facing the same challenges – she and the home will suffer. If she fails, there is no formal system to back her up. On the contrary, the only organization in place is the one she must create and maintain. This is no power trip but the burden of authority and it is sure to be overwhelming without emotional and practical aid. One mother referred to it as a juggling act: housework (endless because of the continual presence of the children), home-cooked meals, time for husband's concerns, financial sacrifice and the education of several children of different ages and learning styles. Factor in a new baby and a postpartum mom and you have a very typical scene from a homeschooling household. The doorbell rings. Mom doesn't want to answer it. Please, God, don't let it be a Jehovah's Witness. Outside is a mother, who went through the same thing just last year, holding a home-cooked meal. The weight is lifted, not only by the chicken soup but also by the act of sisterly compassion.

Socialization with other homeschoolers is also crucial for children. Kids need a connection with other kids going through the same form of education and who share their Catholic faith. They need to feel like they are not "the only

one" but in good company – company they trust and cherish. Schools hold all kinds of attractions – clubs, sports teams, the presence of their peers. These things create an identity for adolescents – which is why they wear team jackets or dress alike in the latest fads. They haven't yet discovered their own individuality, talents or worth. They need the safety of the group even more than adults do. Homeschoolers are no different. If they experience too much isolation they may end up rebelling. They're not the stuff of martyrs yet; they're just kids. If we homeschoolers want our kids to find their identity within Catholicism we need to provide a Catholic social environment.

When I was being raised in the 1970s I was the only kid in the class who wore a hat to Mass, the only kid who was excused from the grape juice/love loaf "Mass" held in the school cafeteria and the only kid who couldn't sing "Jesus Christ Superstar" in the choir. My classmates called me "the walking Bible" and "Jesus Freak." Did it make me tough? Yes – after the manner of Purgatory fire. It also made me want to hide my faith. It wasn't until I attended a small Catholic college that I discovered the joy of having comrades in faith. It gave me my first taste of the Communion of Saints (not that any of us were) as well an appreciation of my parents' strict upbringing. We grew up in the Faith together and formed lasting friendships.

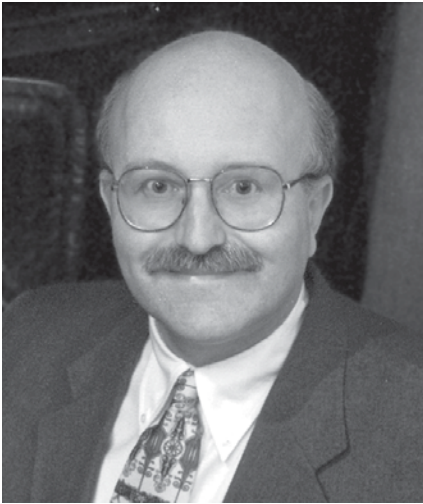
A word about fathers. I've already said that the burden of homeschooling rests mainly on Mom but don't discount Dad. Dad is Mom's best friend on this earth, brought together by God for the purpose of mutual support and the rearing of children. Dad is not meant to be an onlooker but the leader of whatever goes on in the home. But many

fathers have reservations about homeschooling. "Is my wife smart enough? Will Junior be a Mama's boy? Can he go to college? How will he get a job?" Don't get me wrong. I don't blame Dad. It's in his nature as the provider to want to see his children do well in the world. The late, great Dr. Bill Marra noted this dilemma in the now famous "cardplaying talk" he often gave at curriculum fairs near the end of his fruitful life. "Some fathers would rather see Junior to go to Harvard than to Heaven." Guilty silence pervades the room. "Barbarians!" he would thunder, breaking up the room in laughter. Dr. Marra knew, as does every wife, that homeschooling cannot work smoothly unless the husband backs the idea one hundred percent.

It's not that she needs help with the actual teaching. Most husbands just don't have the time or energy after the workday's done. It's that when hardships happen – and they are plentiful – even the best fellow, if he hasn't really bought the plan, will pressure his wife to quit. Add in the fact that kids know when Dad and Mom are divided and can be counted on to take the path of least resistance. But if Dad believes in homeschooling and believes in Mom he will establish himself as the school principal. He will help Mom work through pedagogical and discipline problems. He will see to it that she gets relief and rest. He will take her out to dinner. He will bring her flowers. He will love her all the more for her effort.

Okay girls, how do we sell him the idea? Just exactly the way we bought it ourselves, through friendship. If Dad comes to homeschooling social events and gets to know the other dads, he will see that homeschoolers are normal people. He'll let go of his anxieties about

*continued on page 73*



In this inaugural column, I have addressed questions of relevance to parents of teens. I look forward to answering your questions in future columns.

*Q. Serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, often first manifest themselves in adolescence. In past centuries, where were the “mental illnesses” that are now given various diagnostic “labels” by the mental health professions?*

A. In medicine, an infectious disease has a causative organism that can be isolated microscopically (bacterium, virus, or prion). The patient either “has” the infection or does not “have” it. In surgery, diseased tissue can be excised and microscopically examined to determine definitively what the disease

*Dr. Walters, a practicing psychiatrist, is a homeschooling father. Formerly a Protestant evangelist, he is an adult convert to the Roman Catholic faith and assists at a traditional Latin Mass in Michigan. He is medical director of a suburban county community mental health system, and is a member of the American Psychiatric Association, the Catholic Medical Association, and the Michigan Psychiatric Society.*

## Children and Behavior: Faith and Psychiatry

by Bruce W. Walters, M.D.

process was (e.g., cancer, benign tumor, or inflammatory process). But in psychiatry, the diagnostic categories are artificial: they are culturally defined (increasingly they are politically defined), and the diagnosis depends on the judgment of a human examiner. The current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) provides “labels” based on objective criteria (i.e., what is observable, ignoring motivations). Many psychiatric disorders do seem to have a definite biological component, which may be hereditary. Examples include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder. So-called “personality disorders,” on the other hand, seem to me to represent a state of entrenched rebellion against one or more traditional moral principles (such as a lack of forgiveness manifesting itself as a tendency to blame others for one’s problems; selfishness manifesting itself as narcissism or grandiosity; or unbelief in divine love manifesting itself as intractable bitterness).

Decades ago, in earlier editions of the DSM, these disorders were more accurately termed “character disorders,” but the implication of personal culpability is no longer politically correct. Personality disorders tend to respond less well to medication, since they represent learned (or permitted) dysfunctional behavior patterns. In earlier times, in Christendom, communities were small, personal, and flexible: they strove to accommodate a person’s eccentricities, within the boundaries of Catholic morality and social teaching. The government was a person (a king or noble) who feared for his

own eternal salvation. Modern society, by contrast, is actually much less flexible, and does not as easily tolerate those who are significantly abnormal (“normal” essentially meaning “average” and therefore acceptable to large corporate and bureaucratized systems).

The accelerating pace of change, the dehumanizing impersonality of corporate big business and centralized bureaucratic government, and the abandonment of traditional morality, are three important causes of much of the apparent “mental illness” in modern times. The natural biological and spiritual rhythms (night and day, winter and summer, work schedules subordinated to religious feasts) are suppressed by electrification, climate control, and secularization. Men are expected to function like machines (in particular, like computers). Today, those who “hear voices” and “see visions” are *ipso facto* deemed to be “psychotic.” Most often hallucinations seem to be a reflection of the culture in which the individual has been immersed, hence the demonic (self-deprecating) content of most contemporary hallucinations. It is unclear whether the tendency to hallucinate (without hallucinogenic drugs) might in some cases represent a gift of enhanced sensitivity to the supernatural world – partly because scientists who have studied psychosis have always presumed (as an article of scientific dogma, without proof) that the supernatural world does not exist except, perhaps, as a production of the human brain. Hallucinations are at least inconvenient, and potentially a serious threat, to the prevailing secular humanist, mechanistic world

view that undergirds the emerging New World Order.

In earlier times, souls who were thoroughly immersed in a Catholic culture, and who heard voices or saw visions, often heard and/or saw angels (Isaiah, the shepherds at Bethlehem, St. John in the Apocalypse, the children at Fatima), saints (Joan of Arc), or the Blessed Virgin Mary (Juan Diego, Bernadette Soubirous), and were in some cases prophets or great saints. To what extent their experiences were related to what modern secularists call “hallucinations” is quite simply unclear. (One fears that if such great souls lived today, their “hallucinatory” experiences would cause them to be referred by Church officials for psychiatric care.) What is clear is that, by immersing one’s soul in the graces available through the traditional Catholic faith, one can minimize the potential negative impact of any “mental disorder.”

*Q. What is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder? Is the use of medication ever really appropriate?*

**A.** Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a diagnostic category created by the consensus of experts serving on a panel for the American Psychiatric Association. It describes a constellation of behavior patterns that interfere with academic performance and/or are disruptive to others. Psychostimulant medications are often effective to improve attention and concentration, and to reduce hyperactivity. Psychostimulants can be of significant benefit to certain students who must adapt to modern classrooms but who have an innate style of attention that is incompatible with modern educational methods. These medications include Ritalin (methylphenidate) and Concerta (slow-release methylphenidate), Adderall (amphetamine), and Cylert

(pemoline). Many Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) children can be effectively taught in the homeschool setting without medication, if firm discipline is coupled with creative flexibility. The one-size-fits-all, assembly-line nature of consolidated mega-schools fits some students and not others; those who do not “fit” are identified as “problems.”

ADHD students tend to scan the whole environment continually (and, as one expert has suggested, in the past would have made excellent hunters, warriors, or spies). “Good” students tend to focus on only one thing at a time (and in the past would have made good farmers or craftsmen). Hence, ADHD may arguably be primarily an artifact of modern educational systems and methods. But students who have no choice but to “fit in” may indeed benefit from these medications. Some students are so extremely hyperactive that even in an ideal traditional Catholic classroom or homeschool setting, a psychostimulant medication may be helpful. The issues are complex, and must be decided on a case-by-case basis with appropriate professional consultation. In many cases, of course, other behavioral issues (e.g., parental separation, defiance of authority secondary to inadequate parenting, or excessive exposure to disordered peers) complicate the picture. There is also some evidence that the very process of television viewing (not to mention the content), with its rapid-fire shifting of images, may be a causative factor in some ADHD-like symptoms. I do not hesitate to prescribe psychostimulants when appropriate, but seldom are medications a complete solution to complex problems. ✕

*Questions for Dr. Walters may be sent to The Latin Mass or directly to him by e-mail at [bwalters@cass.net](mailto:bwalters@cass.net).*

## The Successful Homeschool: Some Key Ingredients

*from page 71*

Junior growing up to be Boo Radley. He’ll realize that the more he participates in his children’s lives, the better off they’ll be. The men in our group play father-and-son sports on Sundays. My husband meets with some of the fathers every other week and together they study the Catechism (Trent, no less). After that they drink coffee and feed their faces and joke about S.W.M.B.O. – She Who Must Be Obeyed. They attend the Christmas parties and the potluck suppers and some of the field trips. The result is a unified happy family that socializes with other unified happy families. A mother should never underestimate a father’s role. His contribution is essential and, I might add, most necessary. Did I mention that she can’t do it without him?

Homeschooling is a challenge, but compared with twenty years ago it’s the life of Riley. We owe everything nowadays to the perseverance of those homeschoolers who went before us. We only have to read how-to books. They had to write them. Some of them went to jail for the freedom to educate their own children, or moved their families from place to place at great financial hardship. They did it all with very little support from the community around them. Loneliness came with the territory but they bore it for the sake of their children. They were the pioneers. By and by they attracted others to homeschooling by their example and because of them, in most places, isolation is history. Call them support groups or call them friendships; just don’t try homeschooling without them. We all need a little help from our friends. ✕