



# Why Homeschool?

by *Laura Berquist*

Usually when I give a talk or write an article I address questions about how to homeschool – what methods should be followed, what texts should be used, and how to deal with the sorts of problems that are likely to arise. But there is a more important question about homeschooling that must always be kept in mind: why are we doing this work?

I think the answer has at least three parts. The first, but not the most important, part of the answer is that homeschools can provide better academic formation than standard schools. The knowledge and concern of the teacher for the student in our homeschools is far superior to that found in traditional schools. The amount and quality of the one-on-one tutoring found in homeschools could never be matched in a classroom with thirty students. All the data available confirm that children learn better in such a situation. For one thing, they are helped when they need it but not when they don't. So they learn how to learn.

One of my friends sent her tenth-grade son back to high school after five years of homeschooling. She watched him anxiously for a week, wondering how he would find the new environment. She was concerned about his academic formation for the past five years, wondering if he had been adequately prepared for

the mainstream academic environment he would now encounter.

After a week, she asked him, "Tom, how is it? Are you able to keep up with your class?" His reply startled her. "Oh, mom, it is so easy. It's great; you don't even have to think! In math class you go into class and the teacher explains the material. She does a couple of problems on the board and asks for questions. Then she puts a problem on the board and we work it out at our desk while she does it on the board. Finally, she gives us some problems to do, and walks around the classroom helping us out. I never had it so easy before."

Tom was pleased, but his mother was not sure the exchange had been a good one. When he had been schooling at home, he had worked out the problems on his own, coming to his mother for help only when he couldn't figure something out.

This is an important ingredient in the success of homeschooling. Homeschooled children become active learners, self-movers in their education. Our goal in education is to form children in such a way that they learn how to think. We couldn't hope to teach all the information in all the subjects, but that doesn't matter if we teach our children how to learn for themselves. Homeschooled children are more likely to accomplish this, because they are active in their own education

from the beginning.

In a recent study, the Educational Resources Information Center Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation at the University of Maryland showed that homeschooled students score much higher on standardized tests than the national average, in every category and in every grade level. On the average, homeschooled fourth graders score about one grade level above fourth graders in traditional schools. By eighth grade, the median performance of homeschooled students is almost four grade levels above that of students nationwide. Even compared to children in private school, homeschoolers score on average about fifteen to twenty-five percentile points higher.

Locally, in the early days of our homeschooling, a group of us wanted to have our children take standardized tests. A nearby Christian school graciously allowed us to take the tests with their students. Before the test the principal called a special meeting with the homeschooling parents to impress upon us the need to take these tests seriously. He said that there would be no distinction made between the test results of the school and those of the homeschoolers, so his school's standing would be at stake.

After the test scores were received, one of the mothers in our

group asked if the homeschoolers had made a difference in the test scores. “Yes,” was the reply, “they considerably raised the scores.” That was the last pre-test meeting that was ever held.

These test scores reflect that fact that the homeschooler’s education is better because he actually learns what he learns. He doesn’t go on to the next step until he has mastered this one. That’s clearly an advantage for younger students; it continues to be an advantage for older students. Such a student becomes accustomed to thinking logically, clearly seeing the next step, and being able to articulate it. His teacher may not be an expert in her field, but she knows when a sentence makes sense and when it doesn’t, and she holds her student accountable for that. She may not have mastered calculus, but she can make sure her student is getting his algebra lessons right. If he is not, he has to re-do them until he does.

Additionally, the homeschooled child generally has a better curriculum. It is put together by one intelligence (yours), so it is truly integrated. It is chosen with the particular student in mind. Most of us use some curriculum provider for the high school years, but we retain the final decisions about courses and course content. In a standard school, the curricula for various courses tend to be chosen without reference to the other courses. A particular text for a course is chosen by the teacher, or a board, deemed to have the most expertise in this area. That’s reasonable, but what if that decision-maker doesn’t have expertise in other areas, and chooses materials that contradict the syllabus of other courses? The student is left with a sense that truth is relative, or at least obscure.

I’m glad that the test scores back up my statement that the homeschooled child receives a better

education, but I would think it was true even if the scores didn’t reflect the difference. Education is, finally, about good intellectual judgment. Homeschooled children develop their understanding of foundational principles in each field, and they are required to apply those principles consistently in every subject. For example, they learn the fundamentals of algebra, and in every lesson they are responsible for bringing those principles to bear. No one is going to bail them out by giving the answer if they don’t know it. They learn how to construct a sentence and in every subject they are held to that knowledge. If the sentences don’t parse they have to be re-done until they do. I know that’s a better system for developing intellectual judgment than any other.

A second part of the answer to the question of why families should homeschool lies in the social formation of our children. In addition to receiving a better education, homeschooled children in my judgment are better socialized. Socialization is the process by which an individual learns how to fit into a group, how to be part of a social

unit, how to interact in a community. It should involve an awareness of the needs of others, an ability to see the common good and act in accordance with that. In my experience homeschooled children are truly socialized, learning how to get along with those they live with, how to be polite to adults, and how to be charitable toward other children. Some “experts” talk about their fears of lack of socialization skills in homeschooled children, but the

opposite seems to be the case. The home environment provides the kind of security that allows independence to grow. It encourages real social skills. And it is more in keeping with reality, because it integrates young and old.

The homeschooled children I know are at ease in a variety of situations. They converse with adults. They respond pleasantly to their brothers’ and sisters’ friends. They don’t divide the world into “them” (parents and other adults) and “us” (the peer group). I remember the day one of my adolescent children discovered that her cockatiel had successfully hatched an egg. Her immediate, natural reaction was to share this wonderful news. After telling all the members of our family, she asked me if she could call one of my friends, a woman who also raised birds. “Mom, I’m sure she would want to know.” As I gave permission I reflected that by the time I was thirteen I had already passed the point at which my mother’s friends occupied the same world I did. I didn’t dislike them; it just would never have occurred to me to tell them anything.

*Education is, finally, about good intellectual judgment. Homeschooled children develop their understanding of foundational principles in each field, and they are required to apply those principles consistently in every subject.*

There is absolutely no evidence that children in schools are learning comparable social skills. What they seem to be learning, at least in many schools, is promiscuity, foul language, drug use, and gang warfare. Even in good schools the role models in a large group of children tend to be other children, who don’t know much themselves, as opposed to adults who have learned to live by the rule of charity.

Friendships are important in the

formation of a successfully socialized individual, but dependent friendships are detrimental to that process. The herd instinct developed and encouraged by the usual school environment contributes to the peer dependence we see in many school-age children. This dependence is actually an impediment to successful socialization, because friendship, common action, and successful family life all require an ability to think independently. Without independent judgment one has little to bring to a relationship.

A family is a good place to learn how to live in a community. In a family a child is surrounded by love, which breeds confidence. He sees the importance of his contributions, because his contributions make it possible for the daily life of the family to continue. And he learns that working out one's differences is possible and important.

I have often thought that sending a child to school because of disagreements at home is likely to teach him not to expect to work out disagreements. He learns that the way to deal with controversies within the family is to leave the family. Everyone experiences a certain amount of conflict with those closest to him. Successful socialization teaches us how to deal with such conflicts. I'm convinced that this is better taught at home.

Other life skills are better taught at home as well. My husband is a tutor at Thomas Aquinas College, and three of my children are currently attending the college. I have had an opportunity to note who is responsible and mature and who isn't. Who attends class regularly, faithfully has his work done, and obeys rules? In other words, who are the good citizens, the students interested in the common good? The homeschooled children are consistently among those in this category. I



think this is because children who are homeschooled, especially during high school, learn to think about the common good. They know that the whole world doesn't revolve around them and their desires. They have chores within the family, and they usually have younger siblings who require some care. When the dynamics in the family are right, older children see themselves as helping raise the younger members of the family. They have responsibilities with regard to both work and family.

Children in school are forced to think about themselves almost exclusively. They haven't got time for anything other than their own concerns. They need to be away from the family most of the day, and when they are home they have homework. Family chores and family time almost always disappear.

This lack of time has an impact on other parts of life as well. Since 1983 my family has attended daily Mass. In that year a close friend of ours developed brain cancer, which he died of two years later. When we heard about Norman's cancer, my husband decided that we were all going to go to Mass together every day to pray for him. We did, and life improved in so many ways. We were up early every day, and we got home from Mass revitalized and ready to start the day's work. Our schooling improved, in large measure just

because we got started earlier. (Probably grace was even more a cause.)

Anyway, since that time we have gone to daily Mass together. All through school my children were able to receive our Lord in Holy Communion on a daily basis. This is a wonderful gift, and something we could not have done if they had been in school. I know not everyone can attend daily Mass. If the Mass times are such that attending Mass means you can't get your schoolwork done, then you won't be able to go to Mass on a daily basis. When you are schooling your children, you are serving God by doing that work well.

However, the general point is that when you are in charge of the schedule, you can arrange time for your children to spend with God. You can make a weekly Holy Hour with your son; you can make saying a daily Rosary a priority for the whole family. Those things are very hard to accomplish when your children are in school.

There is no more important work in the whole world than raising children. We have to see that it is persons, not things, which have the greatest innate and permanent value. Since that is the case, the formation of the soul must be the greatest work that can be done. A soul well formed, and living according to that formation, will see God face to face. Nothing could be more important than that.

The good parents I know, homeschooling or not, expend all their available energy on the formation of their children because they recognize the intrinsic significance of this activity, and know that it is worth every ounce of the energy expended. It is my opinion that this task is more easily accomplished when one homeschools.

The first reason for this is simply time. When children are educated at

home, they spend more time with their parents than they could if they went to school. With more time, parents can teach more doctrine, give good example consistently, and converse with their children.

There was an opinion assiduously promoted about fifteen years ago that parents shouldn't worry about being away from their children for large amounts of time, as long as the time they did have together was "quality" time. "The quality of the time spent together," it was said, "is much more important than the quantity of time spent together." I submit that there is no quality time unless there is quantity time.

To begin with, one cannot "program" important conversations. One can hardly say, "Johnny, I'll schedule an hour on Tuesday for an important conversation." In my experience, most important conversations happen in the context of daily life, where the topics are raised by shared experience. Something in the child's schoolwork, something that happens in the household, or some piece of news, will raise a question. The child's interest and attention are engaged. Then is the time to converse at length and with effect. Such occasions are difficult, if not impossible, to arrange beforehand. But when children are home with their parents most of the time, such occasions naturally arise, and there is the shared experience and the time necessary for discussion.

We want our children to be formed internally. I've said this before, but it is worth saying again. Obedience is no good unless you have their heart, too. The best way I know to gain the heart of your children is to talk to them. Enjoy being with them, make an effort to spend time with them that is mutu-

ally pleasant. When you homeschool, this time together arises naturally, or, if it doesn't, one can make it happen.

Thus, the homeschooled student receives an excellent education, learns real socialization skills, as well as valuable life skills, and has more opportunities to develop a relationship with God.

This last opportunity is the third and most important part of the answer to the question of why we homeschool. We homeschool because it is the best and most effective way to form our children according to the mind of Christ. Christ is the Word made flesh, and it is primarily through words, spoken words, that the Faith is passed on to the next generation. In homeschooling one has the opportunity to speak, in season and out of season,

*...we homeschool because it is the easiest and most natural way to provide a thorough and consistent moral and intellectual formation for our children.*

of the reason for the hope that is in us.

The words we speak must, of course, be in conformity with the lives we lead.

Our participation in Mass, the sacraments, the Rosary, holy hours and good works, are necessary to the passing on of the Faith. Children are malleable and will believe what you tell them if you do it with conviction and keep all the aspects of their environment in accord with that conviction. When we homeschool we have multiple opportunities to have our children share in the practice of our faith.

After my husband and I began homeschooling one of its major benefits became apparent. By homeschooling we were back in the driver's seat with respect to the children's formation. When the children were in school, we had spent

much of our limited, and therefore very valuable, time with the children, either doing what someone else had decided we should do, or trying to undo the damage that had been caused by exposure to values that we didn't share. Once we were homeschooling, we could decide what was best for each child to concentrate on, and we could persist in that aspect of formation, whether moral or intellectual, as long as was needed.

This is one reason for the effectiveness of homeschooling: the opportunity it provides for the integration of all aspects of education and development. It is easier for the child to be rightly and truly formed as a Christian if all the aspects of his formation are consistent with a Christian understanding of the world.

Our reason for homeschooling is not that there isn't a good school near us. Nor do we deny the need for schedule, discipline and

academic achievement. On the contrary, we homeschool because it is the easiest and most natural way to provide a thorough and consistent moral and intellectual formation for our children. ✕

*Laura Berquist is a homeschooling mother of six, author of *Designing Your Own Classical Curriculum and director of Mother of Divine Grace Home Study Program. She welcomes your suggestions or comments. You can send them to her at the Mother of**



*Divine Grace School office, Attention: Laura Berquist, P.O. Box 1440, Ojai, CA 93024; (805) 646-5818.*