



Libraries and Homeschoolers

OUR SHARED COMMON GROUND

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My eighteen-year-old daughter is online at Galaxy Zoo <galaxyzoo.org>, a citizen science "crowdsourcing" project. She's "in the zone," smoothly, quickly, effortlessly identifying images of galaxies, one after another, as elliptical or spiral or merging. My fifteen-year-old son is writing a paper for his Florida Virtual School (FLVS) <www.flvs.net> language arts class and browsing Purdue University's Online Writing Lab <owl.english.purdue.edu> to check his grammar. We're a homeschool family, and my children are using our school library—the Internet.

My teenaged daughter and son are old hands at new technologies. My daughter is dual-enrolled at the University of South Florida, earning college credit while wrapping up her high school program. She's taking an astronomy class at the moment, not just because it meets the general education requirement, but because she's genuinely interested in astronomy. She's using the insights gained in her college class to better appreciate her citizen science hobby at Galaxy Zoo. I watch her integrate information from a variety of resources as effortlessly as she zips through galaxy images.

Her career interests are hovering around environmental science at the moment, and she's been researching, mostly online, colleges that offer the type of programs she wants. She's considering the Peace Corps, as well, and is enrolled in the Coverdell World Wise Schools program of the Peace Corps <www.peacecorps.gov/wws>, where she's enjoying a correspondence program that connects her with a Peace Corps volunteer on Nevis in the Caribbean. Curious about Nevis, my daughter used the CIA World Factbook <www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook> and other online geography resources, and then

wrote an article about the Coverdell Program for *News in a Click* <www.flvs.net/fvsnews/mar2002/rd_column.htm>, FLVS's award winning online school newspaper.

My son wants to be a mechanical engineer. A delayed reader, an awkward writer, bedeviled by vague health problems, he hit his stride with online learning, intellectually inspired and physically freed to explore and understand the things he loves—mainly computer programming and robotics. A late bloomer, he blossomed under the soft glow of his computer monitor, like a tender plant in a warm greenhouse.

The Homeschool Phenomenon

In Florida, my children are just two of over fifty-five thousand homeschoolers in the state (Florida Department of Education 2008). Nationally, according to a 2003 National Center for Education study, we're part of a learning community estimated to be between 1.5 to 2 million strong, or more than 2 percent of school-aged children in America.

Factor in the increase in virtual school options nationwide, and we're part of an even larger community of home-based learners (NACOL 2007). And, like other homeschoolers, our use of "the library" extends far beyond our local county resources.

Some basics about homeschooling:

It's legal, in some form or another, in all fifty states, although laws vary considerably from state to state.

- Nearly 75 percent of homeschoolers are white. Although minority numbers are up in the last few years, at 20 percent they don't

match the nearly 50 percent minority enrollment in public school programs (NCES 2006).

- More than 80 percent of home-school families are two-parent households, compared with fewer than 70 percent of public school families (NCES 2003).
- Household income is about the same as that of public school families (NCES 2003). (Only private school families show a significantly higher income.)
- Parental levels of education are similar between home and public school families, although home-school families show a statistically higher number of Bachelor's and graduate degrees (NCES 2003).
- In 2003 over 40 percent of home-schooled students used some form of distance learning instruction (NCES 2003).

The primary reason most families give for choosing homeschool instruction over public school instruction is "concern about the environment of other schools," followed by a desire to provide religious or moral instruction, and dissatisfaction with academic instruction in public schools (NCES 2003).

Learning at home can be carried out quite formally, with rooms set aside as fully furnished classrooms with children's desks and whiteboards, and lessons conducted via prepared commercial curricula or via rigorous correspondence programs like Calvert's <www.calvertschool.org/home-school>. Or homeschools can be extremely informal, as in "unschooling" families who follow a casual, free-spirited child-led approach to learning. Most homeschools, however, fall somewhere in between, with families choosing a variety of methodologies and approaches, adapting to the changing needs of each child and providing a varied mix of structure and spontaneity.

Learning Beyond Brick and Mortar Institutions

The term "homeschooling" immediately sets the stage for something different. Beyond the implied features of an informal home setting, some other factors are worth understanding when examining how home educators use library and other informational resources.

Even with large families, individual homeschools are clearly smaller in size and scope than public school classrooms. More important, though, homeschools typically include a wide range of ages and grades, with one family potentially teaching kindergarten through high school. And when homeschool groups gather together, a one-room schoolhouse effect often occurs, with older children working with younger ones.

Homeschool families typically connect with one another at the community level with homeschool support groups, like our LIFE of Tampa group <LIFEofTampa.blogspot.com>, informal playgroups, scouting programs, learning cooperatives, homeschool support groups, and community volunteer efforts. Homeschool families tap into one another's skills and expertise, often taking turns teaching classes. They may pool financial resources and contract out for teachers or tutors, use community learning programs at local libraries and museums, and organize field trips to a variety of places. Many participate in local public school programs part-time to enjoy sports or music programs, to take a particular class, or to join in the growing number of state virtual school programs available to them.

Another way homeschools differ from traditional public education is that they are not usually "standards" based. Although homeschool families are often aware of state standards, and may even use them to guide some of their studies, standards do not, for the most part, influence learning or materials choices.

Instruction itself is often varied, usually hands-on, and can include anything from field trips to apprenticeships and specially-designed studies. And despite being "home" based, most homeschool programs are conducted in many different places, from the backseat of the car while doing everyday errands, to parks and museums, and, of course, in libraries.

Often, too, children of varying ages do the same caliber of work because homeschools operate on the principle of academic progress

My daughter is examining a watershed exhibit at a local nature center.



commensurate with ability rather than age. So a ten-year-old might very well be capable of performing high school algebra. Or, conversely, a ten-year-old with trouble reading might be working with younger children without suffering any stigma because most homeschool families subscribe to the late Dr. Raymond Moore's philosophy of "better late than early" (Moore 1989). That philosophy dictates that early achievement is not as desirable as academic readiness, and that forcing children into early studies is counterproductive.

All these differences from traditional schooling are significant when a homeschool family comes into a library seeking materials because "grade level" or "age appropriate" may not be applicable to a given homeschooled student's needs.

The Homeschool Library

The road to knowledge is paved with a lot of resources. Homeschool libraries can be huge, overflowing affairs of popular learning books, bargain basement tomes on obscure topics, vast National Geographic collections, or special collections on anything from aviation to zoology. In addition to books, private collections can include videos, music and educational CDs, educational DVDs, prepackaged curricula, children's workbooks, e-books, and audio books.

Audio books are actually a popular resource for homeschool families, often employed in their far-ranging travels to take children to many different programs and activities. Audio books entertain and inform children who are waiting for one another, or who simply need something to occupy them in the car. And homeschoolers often find that children who may be slow or

uninterested readers will respond favorably to audio books, and that these audio books may even spark literary interest that regular books may not.

Homeschool groups with access to a central meeting place may create their own lending libraries, coalescing their collections to share among their group members and creating their own lending practices. North County Home Educators, a support group for homeschooling families in Maryland, publishes a list of library titles online <www.iqcweb.com/nche/nchelib.htm> and permits members who have attended at least three of their events to borrow books for up to two months.

Homeschool curriculum vendors are abundant, marketing everything from Rosetta Stone (which homeschoolers have been sorry to see disappear from online library offerings across the country) to Abeka to Saxon or Singapore Math, Writing Strands, and more.

Homeschoolers routinely clear library bookstore shelves, enthusiastically shop at Scholastic warehouse sales, and prowl bookstores and conventions for interesting books and potential learning resources. Homeschooling families share their resources, and are free with recommendations, reviews and criticisms of books and learning materials, strongly influencing one another's purchasing and use habits.

Homeschoolers and the Public Library

In 2007, 52 percent of America's more than 100,000 public libraries saw an increase in circulation (Combined Book Exhibit 2007). A good portion of those users are home educators, according to NCES (2003), which

found that nearly 80 percent of homeschoolers use a public library.

Although homeschoolers use library computer and Internet services, as do many other library patrons, homeschoolers are well connected at home. More than 40 percent of homeschooled students used some sort of distance learning program, about 20 percent used television or video learning resources, and about 15 percent used a correspondence program (NCES 2003).

Homeschoolers often develop close associations with local librarians, frequenting their local libraries often, but freely using interlibrary loan systems, as well. Homeschooling families will often decide whether or not to purchase a media product by borrowing from the library first, to determine if the product fits their needs.

Additionally, homeschool groups and homeschoolers in clubs like 4-H and Camp Fire USA, will often meet at larger libraries, benefiting from being able to use library meeting rooms during public school hours, when the rooms are available and unused by others.

And savvy public libraries often cater to homeschool users by developing daytime programs to serve them. The Allen County Public Library in Indiana offers everything from a Homeschool Book Club to a Homeschool Handchime Choir <www.acpl.lib.in.us/children/homeschool_programs.html>. The Skokie Public Library in Illinois offers an extensive collection of services and programs for homeschoolers, including a variety of book clubs, discussion groups, and craft activities <www.skokieliibrary.info/s_kids/kd_homeschool/programs.asp>.

Collaborating with Homeschoolers

Homeschoolers often make friends with their local librarians and aren't shy about asking for assistance or guidance. When our local Lego League robotics team <www.usfirst.org> had to conduct an energy audit of a public building as part of its 2007–2008 challenge project, our first choice was our local library. The head librarian, whom we've known for years, went to great lengths to help, connecting us with the county energy manager, who, in turn, provided the students with access to many aspects of library operations and energy usage, as well as an opportunity to tour a county energy plant. The close working relationship we've enjoyed for many years with our local libraries definitely gave us, as home educators, an edge in this project, and our young people benefited from an incredible learning opportunity.

Though school librarians have been less visible to the homeschooling community, homeschoolers sometimes have close associations with public school teachers. In Florida, where one of our annual evaluation options includes a portfolio evaluation by a certified public educator, many homeschoolers contract with the same teacher each year; this teacher often becomes a resource in his or her own right. Our public school teacher evaluator gave us suggestions for programs, books, scholarships, and other resources each year for several years.

And, of course, local educational venues like museums, science centers, zoos, and nature parks are another very common resource for home educating families. Most educational facilities offer homeschool programs and classes. The Museum of Science and Industry <www.mosi.org> in Tampa has long offered homeschool-specific courses in everything from applied chemistry for high schoolers to preschool activities for toddlers.

Additionally, homeschoolers find ways to connect with experts in a variety of fields. My oldest daughter developed an interest in taxidermy, of all things. After exhausting the local library's collection of three or four books on the subject, we went on the hunt for a local taxidermist who might be willing to help her learn more. We found one who invited her to apprentice with her, which she continues to do today. And on the advice of a career counselor, we searched online until we tracked down the head taxidermist at the Smithsonian, who actually called my daughter at home, talked to her for a while about recommended courses of study, and invited her to stay in touch. That experience led us to develop a Mentor Match program <tampabaymentormatch.wetpaint.com> that seeks to unite experts in a variety of fields with interested students.

success stories, homeschoolers typically outperform their public school peers in standardized tests (Wood 2003) and are being accepted into colleges and universities in record numbers (Pardington 2008).

Homeschoolers will always be a large, anomalous group, and they'll always be closely connected with our public libraries. In *Helping Homeschoolers in the Library* Adreinne Furness observes, "The good news is that public libraries and homeschoolers share many values. In children's departments, we support and encourage parents' roles as their children's first teachers. ... We work with children to help them explore their interests and passions and to build a solid foundation for lifelong learning. Like homeschooling pioneer John Holt, librarians believe that learning

"...public libraries and homeschoolers share many values. We support and encourage parents' roles as their children's first teachers. We work with children to help them explore their interests and passions and to build a solid foundation for lifelong learning."

Colleges and universities offer still more creative and academic outlets for ambitious homeschoolers. Taking advantage of dual-enrollment opportunities, available in most states, students as young as fifteen or sixteen can take college courses, tuition free, and can often finish high school with their Associate in Arts degrees completed. At the very least, they can get a few undergraduate courses out of the way, explore topics of interest at a higher level, and get an early feel for higher education.

The Bottom Line

Headlines around the country attest to the fact that homeschooling works. Besides geography and spelling bee

isn't something that only happens in a certain place during certain hours on a school day" (2008, vi).

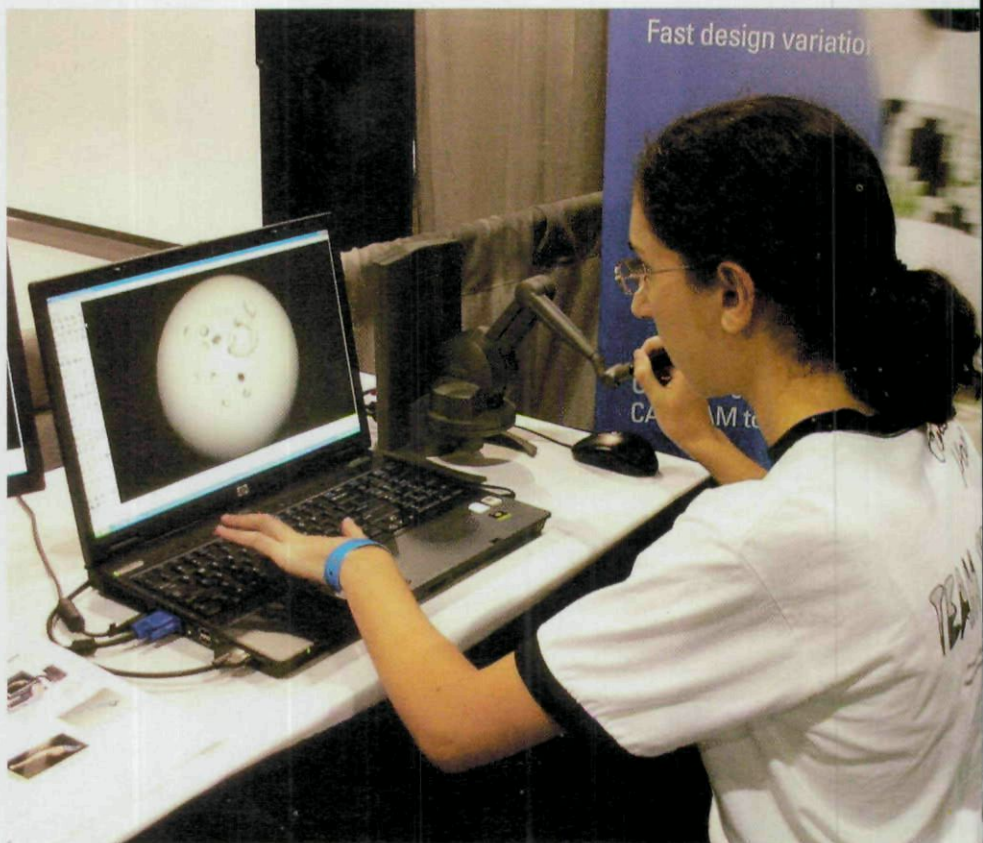
Libraries represent the open learning environment homeschool families value beyond all else. Libraries are often second homes and literary heaven to homeschoolers, providing a welcoming embrace of endless knowledge stacked wall to wall and floor to ceiling.

By becoming more sensitive to young patrons in the library during "school hours," librarians can go a long way toward building a sense of trust and security among members of the local homeschool community, as well as encouraging

a lifelong love of libraries that will sustain homeschoolers throughout their lives. School librarians might consider inviting homeschoolers to participate in enrichment activities, such as author visits in the library, or encourage them to display their science fair projects along with those created by in-school students. By opening a dialogue with homeschoolers and their families, school librarians contribute to creating an inclusive community in which all students can learn about themselves and one another.

And for all that libraries offer homeschoolers, homeschoolers offer something back, from devoted patronage to a greater-than-average willingness to contribute their time, money, and media as inspiration for libraries to create programs that, notes Furness, "also serve (our) communities as a whole." Homeschoolers and libraries, says Furness, are inextricably bound by our shared core belief "in the importance of the life of the mind" (2008, vi).

Theresa Willingham is a professional writer, author of the *Food Allergy Field Guide* (Savory Palate, 2nd edition, 2006) and a regular contributor to the *St. Petersburg Times in Florida*. She is Vice President of Learning is for Everyone <www.learningis4everyone.org>, a non-profit educational resource organization, as well as leader of a state homeschool support group, *LIFE of Florida* <LIFEofFlorida.blogspot.com>, and the national homeschool support group, *UU Homeschoolers* <www.uuhomeschool.org>. A homeschooling veteran of more than fourteen years, Theresa has taught her three children from preschool through high school and credits them with enriching her own learning. "Thanks to them, I've learned about robots and taxidermy, gone on peace vigils, read *The Golden Compass*, and generally learned far more than I ever would have had I sent my kids to school."



My daughter is experimenting with an Autocad "mouse" that enables her to "feel" the surface that's being created on the computer screen.

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