

# Revisiting the Common Myths about Homeschooling

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Apple argues that “if one of the marks of the growing acceptance of ideological changes is their positive presentation in the popular media, then home schooling clearly found a place in our consciousness” (2000, 256). The popular media offers positive portrayals of homeschooling in the national press, television, and radio talk shows, and numerous widely read popular magazines. The American public sees and reads about homeschooled students who win or do well in national spelling and geography competitions; homeschooled students who enter prestigious universities; and how universities now recruit and accommodate homeschooled students. They see the results of various studies about homeschoolers’ academic achievements compared to their public school counterparts. Furthermore, the movement has been growing steadily over the past few years. Almost 1.1 million children were homeschooled last year, according to the latest survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. That represents a 29 percent increase from 1999. However, in the midst of a significant growth in this form of education and evidence demonstrating that homeschooling produces excellent students and citizens, many people, including educators, are still plagued by various myths regarding homeschooling. In what follows, I revisit four common myths that still influence individuals regarding their perspective and understanding of the role homeschooling plays in the education of American children.

## *Myth #1: Homeschooling Produces Social Misfits*

This myth stems from the thought that homeschooled students lack the social skills needed to function “normally” in today’s society. Critics charge that

homeschooled children are isolated from the outside world, rendering them socially and educationally handicapped. Among these critics are professional educators. Mayberry et al. (1995) found that 92 percent of public school superintendents surveyed believed homeschooled children do not receive adequate socialization experiences. The common argument is that by sheltering children from the real world, they are seldom presented with the opportunities to learn greatly needed knowledge and social interaction skills. Unless children are exposed to the social life found in public schools on a daily basis, they will lack the skills needed to successfully adapt to real-life situations when they are older.

## *Reality*

Probably the most widely held misconception of homeschooling is the myth of socialization. This myth was born out of a misunderstanding of what homeschooling is really like and rests on the assumption that school is the only effective means for socializing children. The mistaken belief is that homeschooled children wake up and hit the books from 9:00 till 4:00, locked away in their homes with little interaction with the outside world. They are socially awkward, lack essential social skills, and have difficulty relating to others in social situations. However, this is simply an outdated stereotype. Yes, there are some homeschooled students who are social misfits, but there are also public school students who lack adequate social skills.

The term “socialization” is important to define before addressing its relationship to homeschooling. According to Medlin (2000), different people mean different things regarding socialization. For some, the

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term centers on social activity where children are given time to interact and play with friends and participate in extracurricular activities like sports or theater. Others are concerned with the social influence, where children learn to conform to cultural norms. Finally, some people mean social exposure or introducing children to the culture and values of different groups of people. Although these are all a part of socialization, Durkin defines the concept as the "process whereby people acquire the rules of behavior and systems of beliefs and attitudes that equip a person to function effectively as a member of a particular society" (1995, 614). The process of socialization usually occurs in a child's daily activities as he or she interacts with individuals, the community, and culture at large.

It seems that most homeschool parents are aware of the issue of socialization and are strongly committed to providing positive socialization opportunities for their children. Homeschooled children are involved in numerous activities outside the home with peers, children of different ages, and adults (Ray 1999). On the average, homeschooled students are involved in 5.2 activities outside the home, with 98 percent engaged in two or more (Ray 1997). This range of activities includes scouting, dance classes, group sports, 4-H, and volunteer work, demonstrating that homeschoolers are not isolated from the outside world.

More important, the assumption that traditional schooling offers socialization experiences that homeschooling cannot is flawed. Schools are not the only place that children can learn these basic life skills. There are other institutions, groups, and activities outside the home that can provide students with age-integrated opportunities to gain needed socialization skills. Nelsen argues that "home schooled children are more frequently exposed to a wider variety of people and situations than could be expected in a traditional classroom environment where their exposure is limited to twenty-five to thirty-five people of similar age and socioeconomic background" (1998, 35). This seems to be an advantage for homeschoolers. From research findings, Galloway (as cited in Medlin 2000) concludes that because homeschooled students are not peer-grouped in school, they learn to get along with a variety of people, making them socially mature and able to adjust to new situations. The key question that should be raised is what kind of socialization does the public school offer? For homeschool parents, the home and not public schools offers the kind of socialization that they desire for their children.

It is also important to understand that a child's self-concept and the socialization process are closely related. The majority of studies done on homeschoolers indicate that their self-concepts are comparable to and usually stronger than that of children in conventional schools. Ray (1989) discusses several studies that indicate that homeschool students' social development is comparable

to or more advanced than that of public school students. For example, Taylor (1986) focused on the self-concept as a significant aspect of a child's psychological development. Taylor employed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS) to measure the central core of personality with homeschooled children in grades 4–12. The results of the nationwide study revealed that homeschooled students scored significantly higher than public school students for the global scale and all six subscales of the PHCSCS, indicating that these particular homeschooled students have a higher and more positive self-concept than the public school students. The conclusion is that insofar as self-concept reflects socialization, homeschoolers are neither socially deprived nor inferior regarding socialization (Taylor 1986).

Kelley (1991) utilized the PHCSCS and concluded that the self-concepts of homeschooled students in suburban Los Angeles were significantly higher than conventionally schooled students. Medlin (1994) examined various predictors of achievement and found that homeschoolers' academic self-concept was above the national average. Smedley (as cited in Ray 1999) evaluated the communication skills, socialization, and daily living skills of public school and homeschooled students and found that the homeschooled students were significantly better socialized and more mature than their public school counterparts.

Opponents of homeschooling often raise concerns for gender issues. Regarding gender, Sheffer (1995) argues that facilitating peer-dependency is part of how schools shortchange girls. In a study of self-esteem among adolescent girls, she found that unlike their public school counterparts, homeschooled girls did not typically lose confidence in themselves when their ideas and opinions were not embraced by their peers.

No one knows for certain what is the best kind of socialization for children or what makes for a healthy child and by no means are all homeschooled children well adjusted. This is not to say that homeschooling is the only way for parents to educate their children. But there is ample research indicating that homeschooling offers more than just educational benefits, and this may be the reason for the growing number of parents opting for home education.

#### *Myth #2: Homeschooling Fails to Prepare Good Citizens*

In August 2001, *Time* magazine raised the issue of citizenship and homeschooling by asking the question, "Is Home Schooling Good for America?" The concern was that homeschooling may turn out better students, but does it create better citizens? The argument was that homeschooling isolated students from the world, including political and social involvement. Furthermore, homeschooling centers on the best interest of the individual rather than public schools' concern for the best interest for society as a whole.

*Reality*

Today, the first generation of homeschooled students have grown up and have entered America's workforce, colleges, and universities. But, are they good citizens compared to the general U.S. population? A recent report, "Home Schooling Grows Up," released by Dr. Brian Ray, argues that "home schooling produces successful adults who are actively involved in their communities and continue to value education for themselves and their children" (2003, 6). The study surveyed more than seventy-three hundred adults who were homeschooled, with more than five thousand of these being homeschooled for at least seven years. Their responses and results demonstrate that homeschooled students are excellent citizens compared to the general U.S. population.

For example, one element of being a good citizen is a person's level of engagement in civic and political affairs. According to these findings, only 4.2 percent of homeschool graduates consider politics and government too complicated to understand, compared to 35 percent of U.S. adults. Ray demonstrates that homeschool graduates are more actively involved in their communities than the general U.S. population. The following statistics illustrate this point:

- Seventy-one percent of homeschool graduates participate in an ongoing community service activity, compared to 37 percent of U.S. adults of similar ages.
- Eighty-eight percent of the homeschool graduates surveyed are members of an organization (such as a community group, church, or professional organization) compared to 50 percent of U.S. adults.
- Homeschool graduates are more likely to contribute money to a political party and are more likely to work for a political party or cause.
- Seventy-six percent of homeschool graduates surveyed between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four voted in a national or state election within the last five years, compared to only 29 percent of the relevant U.S. population.
- Homeschool graduates are more likely to have participated in a protest or boycott, attended a public meeting, wrote, or telephoned a public official or signed a petition more often than the general population. (Ray 2003)

The bottom line: Homeschool graduates are actively involved in the political process and are more engaged as citizens compared to the general U.S. population.

These findings dispel the myth that homeschoolers withdraw from society and their civic responsibilities. Homeschoolers clearly learn about the real world, possibly more than do their public school counterparts. While the purpose of public education is to educate future citizens who take an active role in improving the social, economic, and political conditions in society,

Ray's research indicates that public schools, not homeschooling, should be scrutinized for their efforts regarding "citizenship training."

What about other aspects of adulthood, such as employment? Knowles (1991) surveyed adults who were homeschooled because of ideology or geographical isolation. None were unemployed or on welfare. Nearly two-thirds were self-employed. In addition, 94 percent of those surveyed stated that their home education prepared them to be independent persons, while 79 percent said it helped them interact with individuals from different levels of society. Knowles argues that because such a large percentage of those surveyed were self-employed, this provides evidence that homeschooling develops an individual's self-reliance and independence.

It seems that homeschooling creates responsible and productive citizens, which is positive for both the individual and society. Children are benefiting from the homeschool environment and much can be learned from examining what homeschooling families are doing.

*Myth #3: Students Who Are Homeschooled Have Difficulty Entering College*

The argument is that without a high school diploma, grades and SAT or ACT test scores, homeschooled students have a difficult time getting into good colleges and universities. In addition, when homeschooled students enter college, they have a very difficult time relating to other students and have difficulty facing the academic challenges. Since their schooling experiences are limited to their homeschool setting, they are at a disadvantage with their postsecondary studies.

*Reality*

Every year homeschoolers are admitted to hundreds of colleges and universities in at least five countries. Many of these schools of higher education are selective colleges that most parents dream about their children attending. The list includes such prestigious schools as Brown, Georgetown, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, the United States Military Academy at West Point, UC at Berkeley, University of Michigan, Notre Dame, and Yale.<sup>1</sup> These colleges and universities provide homeschooled students information regarding admission requirements and financial assistance. Not only do colleges and universities boast that their place of learning is supportive of students who have largely been homeschooled, but universities actively recruit homeschoolers. Many college representatives attend homeschool conferences to talk with students and parents, and admission departments advertise in homeschool publications, communicate with state-wide homeschool organizations, conduct workshops for homeschoolers and their parents to help them plan for college admission and tuition costs, and even offer special scholarships for homeschooled students.

What about SAT and ACT scores? Homeschooled children generally score at or above the national averages on standardized tests. The ACT publisher reported scores of 1,926 homeschooled students from the graduating class of 1997. These students scored higher than the national average in English, reading, and the overall composite of the ACT. However, there was little difference regarding reasoning skills (Ray 1999). Evidence indicates that homeschooled children learn the "right" things without attending public schools.

Universities and colleges all over the nation realize that homeschooled students are well prepared for the academic rigor of college life. In analyzing college ability, Galloway and Sutton (as cited in Klicka 2003) found that homeschooled students demonstrate comparable academic preparedness and achievement in college as students from conventional schools. Their conclusion: Homeschooled students perform satisfactorily in college level academic settings.

Galloway and Sutton (2000) found that homeschoolers who went to college demonstrated no significant social skill deprivation from their homeschool experience. In addition, leadership skills among homeschooled students was substantially higher than their counterparts from the private and public high schools. Finally, homeschoolers exhibit a strong work ethic and high moral values, which play a role in their success in college (Klicka 2003). The reality is that homeschooled children can learn effectively and succeed in college without experiencing traditional forms of schooling.

*Myth #4: Most People Homeschool Only for Religious Reasons*

The stereotypical view of homeschooling families is one of a conservative Christian family who homeschools in order to pass on Christian values to their children and protect them from the world.

*Reality*

Ironically, the contemporary homeschooling movement began sometime around mid-century as a liberal, rather than a conservative, alternative to public education (Lines 2003). Possibly as many as ten thousand families in the late fifties and early sixties viewed school as too rigidly conservative and pursued a more liberal educational philosophy at home (Lines 2003). Because of judicial decisions considering formal school prayer (*Engel v. Vitale* 1962) and school-endorsed bible readings (*Abington School District v. Schempp* 1963) as violations of the First Amendment, conservative Christians became concerned that schools were becoming too secular and slowly families began to enroll their children in private schools while others began homeschooling. Lines points out that "in the 1980's as the school culture drifted to the left, conservative and reli-

gious families were surprised to find themselves in a countercultural position" (2003, 13-14).

However, religious and conservative families are not the only ones homeschooling their children. Romanowski argues that one of the unique aspects of the homeschool community is that it appeals to "a demographic diversity that includes virtually all races, religions, socioeconomic groups and political viewpoints. There are conservatives who consider public education too liberal, liberals who consider it too conservative, and those who are driven by religious convictions" (2003, 82). Both the political left and right of homeschooling are active today.

Although there are different reasons families choose to homeschool their children, Van Galen appropriately places homeschoolers into two distinct categories: ideologues and pedagogues. The ideologues argue that they homeschool their children for two reasons: "they object to what they believe is being taught in public and private schools, and they seek to strengthen their relationships with their children" (Van Galen 1988, 55). These parents have specific beliefs, values, and skills that they want their children to learn and embrace. Because they are convinced that these things are not being adequately taught in public school, they opt for homeschooling to assure that their children are provided numerous and genuine opportunities to learn this knowledge.

The ideologues' argument is essentially religiously based and criticizes the values and beliefs that are taught within public schools. It is often the case that "these parents view the public schools as grounded in secular humanist philosophy that does not include strong Christian values" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994, 66). Their dispute moves beyond issues like school prayer and argues that public schools fail to take religion seriously throughout the curriculum. This becomes problematic for these families because "their religious beliefs and the education of their children were inextricably intertwined" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994, 77). These parents have a strong concern for their children's moral, ethical, and spiritual development, and they feel that public schools do not provide appropriate moral or ethical instruction, much less religious values. Therefore, they opt to homeschool their children in an attempt to avoid public school's attempt to strangle religion's influence.

On the other hand, pedagogues teach their children at home primarily for pedagogical reasons. Their main argument is not concerned with the content of public education but rather their belief that whatever public schools teach, they teach ineptly. These parents "share a respect for their children's intellect and creativity and a belief that children learn best when pedagogy taps into the child's innate desire to learn" (Van Galen 1988, 55). Pedagogues homeschool primarily because

of what they believe will be educational benefits to their children. These parents have either experienced firsthand or have witnessed children suffering both emotionally and academically because of the schools' shortcomings, and there is a recognition "that the schools are often unwilling or unable to serve children with unique learning styles or scholarly needs" (Van Galen 1988, 57). They challenge the power of public schools to sort, select, and label their children based on what they see as a limited measure of their child's ability. This leads them to believe "that breaking from the traditional formal model of teaching will lead to improved understanding and learning in their children" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994, 66).

Ray (1999) cites various studies and points out several additional reasons parents homeschool their children. First, parents want their children to accomplish more academically than they would in schools. Related to this, parents want an individualized curriculum and learning environment that meets their child's unique needs and strengths. Third, they want to foster family relationships amongst siblings and parents. Fourth, parents want to provide their children with guided and reasoned social interactions with peers and adults rather than letting the school determine this. Finally, there are reasons regarding the safety of their children. Whatever the reason, the main issue is that the education of children in the United States should primarily be the responsibility of the parents. Parents have the right to choose how their children should be educated by determining what form of schooling best meets the complex needs of their children.

### Conclusion

The essence of a public school system in a democratic society is that the educational system listens critically to the concerns of parents and provides avenues for parental choice. More important, the expectation that public education should adequately serve the needs of children from broad and diverse backgrounds should be reconsidered. Public schools do not, cannot, and probably should not be expected to meet the needs of every child in the community. Instead, parents, schools, and the community need to work together to educate all children, no matter what form of education parents choose. Our main concern should be that education, whatever form it takes, maximizes the potential of all children. Inevitably, this will lead some parents to select alternative and less institutionalized options for their children's education. As educators and community members, we need to respect parents' choices because this is the essence of a democratic educational system.

Instead of constantly comparing and contrasting public schools and homeschools, we should look at how each can learn from one another and then use this information to improve the learning experiences of all children, no matter what form of education takes place.

*Key words: homeschool, myths, education*

### NOTE

1. To view a list of more than one thousand schools that admit homeschoolers, see [http://learninfreedom.org/colleges\\_4\\_hmsc.html](http://learninfreedom.org/colleges_4_hmsc.html).

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