To bring some of the struggles and successes of home schooling to life, following is one family's experience.

# **Schooling at Home**

by Joyce Fleck Long

lthough children have been schooled at home in the United States for centuries, the concept of home schooling as a cultural phenomenon has resurfaced in just the last 30 years. I first became aware of it in 1985, when a friend started teaching her three boys at home. At the time, my husband worked in the public schools, and he viewed her decision with a great deal of skepticism. However, by August of 1986, we had withdrawn our two children from their local Georgia public schools and had begun to prepare for our own home schooling movement.

By observing my friend's adjustments and sacrifices, I realized that my life was about to change dramatically. My heart was ready,

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#### My Own Reflection on Home Schooling

Just as no two families are alike, so are no two home schools equal. This is one of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the movement. Though each family determines its own curriculum, pedagogy, assessments, and performance level-the number of choices available can provide too much freedom for the instructors, especially during the first year. Some parents enter the whirlwind and are overwhelmed. In response, they may never formulate a consistent and coherent structure within which to make judgments. There are so many resources that it is sometimes difficult to decide which are the best ones for their situation.

Another problem is that, in the beginning, we may not really know

our children's developmental level. which makes it difficult to prepare an academic plan that will engage their interests. We are not dealing with a large classroom of students, so the pace is different and requires a different level of preparation. Because students may progress very quickly, it is challenging to stay ahead of their needs. On the other hand, with large blocks of time and flexibility, children actually have time to finish projects and study subjects in depth (Holinga 1999). Home schooling parents eventually discover that, by providing individual attention and appropriate academic freedom, students who were burned out or restrained by labels can flourish in amazing ways.

We were hopeful starting out with our children. Jenna was in the seventh grade and remained home for five years, through the eleventh grade. Chris studied at home for seven years, beginning in second grade and finishing in the eighth. When we started, I had an undergraduate degree in business. I had never taken an education course, although I had done some tutoring and substitute teaching, as well as volunteering in our children's classrooms.

When we first approached our older child, Jenna, and asked her to consider being home schooled, she spent a few days deliberating the question. In her response, she stated that we needed to try this alternative because she really didn't "know" anything; instead, she had been memorizing her way through school. She was a straight-A student, in the gifted program, but knew that something was missing-for "only my spelling teacher reviews anything from earlier in the year." I was heartsick about the revelation, grateful for her discernment, and determined to relieve her of that pressure.

## Examining My Educational Philosophy

As educational research verifies, most teachers begin the process of instruction from their own personal experiences, and so I began to prepare, envisioning what I thought learning should include. Like parenting, teaching depends on quick, instinctive habits and behaviors that develop from deeply held ways of seeing and valuing (Meier 1995). I realized that I did indeed have some vague academic ideas that developed into the following goals:

• establish foundations that we could build upon in wellstructured domains, such as math;

 combine repetition and discovery into an enjoyable learning process;

• make chronological and cultural connections within academic disciplines, such as geography and literature;

• move our classroom boundaries to include community resources;

• integrate practical experiences with theories, such as planting a garden and raising animals; and

• encourage creative and individual solutions to problems.

I scoured the library, collected curriculum catalogs, asked questions of experienced teachers, and began to organize my overall lesson plans. I wanted to keep the structure simple, but it was tempting to purchase anything that might enhance their learning experiences. When I reviewed the social studies and science curricula I had ordered, I discovered that there was not much difference in the subjects covered from one grade level to the next. I had expected that each grade would study a certain topic in depth with varied content each year.

Therefore, I began to design my own curriculum, using the library as a resource center to develop the topics or questions that I assigned. Then I contacted museums, zoos, theatres, nature centers, and other historical landmarks to incorporate their exhibits into my lesson plans. In fact, field trips became one of our academic staples because, with the holistic approach, I expected to find educational experiences wherever we went. In this way, both children were given ample room to explore a topic from their differing perspectives and areas of interest in a way that enhanced the learning experience.

Educators know that instruction can occur individually (e.g. between a textbook and the student), in tutorial and mentoring settings (one-on-one), in small groups, and in larger, more formal settings. Leonard (1968) verified that education is a process that changes the learner by an interaction. The effectiveness of that interaction relates to the frequency, variety, and intensity of the exchange. The result of the exchange will ultimately bring delight, building a satisfying accomplishment.

### Personal Curriculum and Pedagogical Choices

The first year was a transitional year for all of us. Chris conquered reading, Jenna acquired alternative methods of learning, and I became a teacher. I attempted to coordinate the lessons so subjects were interrelated. For example, during our first year we studied Asia. I prepared a series of rather complex questions for Jenna that covered political science, history, geography, science, religion, and home economics. She was given the option to choose one country and then gather the appropriate information to answer the assignment. I expected her to select either China or India because she had sampled foods and knew people from those cultures. Instead, she chose Pakistan and, for her to answer all of the questions, I had to take her to the local state university's library.

Some of my choices were the result of specific hurdles we encountered. For instance, after Jenna failed to pass any level of the pre-test in math, I realized that we would have to do remedial work. Evidently, she had not been able to memorize her way past the basic arithmetic skills. As her frustration level grew, I put the seventh grade text away and searched for some alternatives. We played number games, laid out garden tracts, followed recipes, and used math manipulatives.

Eventually, I found a business math text emphasizing practical problems, which allowed her to recognize the relationships inherent in numbers. Soon we were able to resume learning higher math. By the time she reached high school at home, we had formed a learning cooperative group with three other families. Six of the parents taught a variety of classes. The students created and produced plays/videos; dissected chickens; solved custom-designed word problems in algebra; published a statewide home school yearbook; and traced the movement of civilization around the globe.

The group traveled across the state, participating with other groups in a variety of educational experiences in art, science, drama, social studies, and music. They also acquired practical skills in cooking, sewing, money management, and landscaping, coordinated with additional academic knowledge whenever possible. They did service projects, performing in nursing homes and working in a private inner-city school. In addition, they kept journals and wrote their way across the curriculum. They joined athletic teams and had intramural sports events with other groups.

During our home schooling years, the children learned to take their own place within the family unit. They had active voices in how we handled certain topics and projects. Chris even designed a remodeling project for our home. As the children became proficient at functioning in their community, they acquired knowledge and understanding that transferred to their future academic programs. Jenna graduated as a math major from a state university, and Chris is now completing his final year in culinary school. There are countless other stories of home schooled students who have completed college and graduate degrees. Many of them conquered the subjects at younger ages because of the flexibility that their educational environments provided (Lyman 1998; Colfax and Colfax 1998).

#### A Growing Trend?

In many ways, the option of home schooling enables parents to get back to the primary business of schooling in an atmosphere that is free from political dictates, unlike the encumbered public school system. The movement has developed a solid foundation of theory and legal precedents that provides the basis for continued growth in our nation. It is now possible to assure policy makers that this home delivery system works, without having to criticize other forms of education. The history of home schooling began with contention and confrontation, but it now is in a phase of consolidation (Knowles, Marlow, and Muchmore 1992).

Parents who practice home schooling are interested in simply teaching their children. They are not concerned with building an alternative movement to conquer the public school system. Ten years ago, many chose this option for religious reasons, but today it is a growing trend for families of various backgrounds. As school violence escalates, many may choose to home school to protect their children's safety.

Certainly, many people are more aware of home schooling today than when it began 30 years ago, and there is no indication that the movement will slow down. Thousands of resources are available for home schoolers, regardless of one's specific educational philosophy. In fact, the movement's popularity presents a new challenge to advocates. Some are concerned that, as more and more people leave the traditional system, home schooling will begin to resemble that institution. Will the wider culture infiltrate home schooling? As educational options expand, will the growth of home school organizations diminish parental control?

It is important to remember what home schools represent. Although each unit begins for individual reasons, collectively they exert a positive force upon the next generation. One child at a time is being educated in a manner specifically tailored to his or her needs. As each child is positively influenced, society can only benefit from the improvements. I realize now that my experience was both unique and typical of many other home schooling households, for home schooling is an expression of an educational philosophy that can only be understood in relation to society's current policies and instructional network. The growing momentum of home schooling seems to indicate a greater need for alternative forms of education.

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