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Taking a Different Path: A Mother's Reflections on Homeschooling

Dori Staehle

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When our children Nicole and Evan were nine and six respectively, they had many school problems and concerns. Academically, socially and emotionally, public school simply was not working. Both children taught themselves to read by age three and had a burning desire to learn. At home, they were very self-directed and always managed to keep themselves busy with projects, drawings, writing and continuous reading. In school, they found that they could not learn at the same pace or in the ways that worked best for them, causing frustration and disappointment. Moreover, they didn't know why they needed to be in school at all if they weren't learning anything new.

When this situation was presented to the school staff, my husband Mark, a Human Resources Manager, and myself were faced with an unexpected response: no one believed us. Our children simply couldn't be that advanced nor could they know the meaning of the word *bored*. However, the fact remained that Nicole's reading level in second grade was five or six years ahead of her peers and her writing abilities were considered prodigious. Evan's reading and math skills were also quite advanced, as was his art ability. Neither child was identified as gifted or received any significant modifications in their academic programming. Two schools, two and a half years and many staffing meetings later, it was extremely evident that no one knew about giftedness and no one knew what was happening to Nicole. Our once delightful child was now prone to fits of anger and seclusion. Our concerns were dismissed. At this point Mark and I then decided to obtain outside opinions and testing. Nicole, we were informed, was suffering from depression. An exceptionally perceptive and creative child, she feared she was losing her abilities and her creativity. She told us that if she remained in school, she would never be able to be herself. School, she claimed, was equivalent to prison. It was apparent that Nicole had suffered enough and she needed time to heal. Her abilities, her level

of asynchronous development, her heightened sensitivities, and her different ways of learning required a very special environment. Evan, we discovered, was in the same predicament. Once he required an IQ test with a higher ceiling, we knew we were in trouble.

Suddenly, Mark and I realized that we had reached the proverbial fork in the road. We couldn't find any schools, public or private, that would be able to accommodate our children. Private schools for the gifted were financially unattainable. However, Nicole and Evan had another plan: They wanted to learn at home. Nicole also indicated that she had other talents and abilities that she wanted to develop. We decided to trust our instincts and we chose to take a different path.

The Journey Begins

Though many tried to dissuade us, from relatives to perfect strangers, we attended several homeschooling support meetings, attended workshops at our state's homeschooling convention and felt comfortable with our decision to homeschool. Most importantly, as there were 1,000 homeschoolers in our district and 10,000 in our state, we knew we were not alone on our journey. The illusion of a parent sitting at the kitchen table teaching her children for hours on end with no contact with another living soul was quickly shattered. We learned that people homeschool in many different ways and for many different reasons. Nicole and Evan made fast friends with children who were just as creative and advanced as they were. I later learned that the majority of these children were also exceptionally gifted. Our children felt like they fit in for the first time.

We began homeschooling in the summer of 1995. Nicole and Evan submitted an impressive list entailing what and how they would like to learn. This served as a basis for a mission statement and a curriculum plan. We drew up a contract and I was hired. As a former foreign language teacher and finance professor, I became an unlikely homeschooling parent.

Original Methodology

In the beginning, I assumed the role of Head Teacher and Director. I took Nicole and Evan's ideas and developed projects and activities, respecting their requests for more challenge and creativity. We began with minimal coercion and min-

imal spending. In order for this to work, they needed to have some ownership of their learning.

Our first year was quite a learning experience for all of us. Nicole and Evan at first needed some semblance to their former school schedule to ease the transition, yet their temperaments and body clocks were very different. It took some time and many revisions to find a formula that everyone could live with. What was most comforting was that their unique learning styles were finally being addressed. Nicole, Evan and I are all visual/spatial learners. Individuals with this learning style are generally creative, think in pictures and are not at all sequential. They are masters of visualization and need to picture things in their heads to learn. Math and spelling can be a problem, worksheets are a nightmare and timed tests are impossible. They can appear disorganized, as they simply do not reach their conclusions in a step-by-step fashion but often skip steps. Most importantly, they need to see the whole picture and how everything fits. The piecemeal, lock-step methods used in school are useless and frustrating. Visual/spatial learners also have heightened sensitivities to noise, lights, smells, clothing and feelings. The higher the level of giftedness, the more pronounced these sensitivities tend to be. It is no wonder Evan and Nicole were not only mislabeled and recommended for Ritalin, but simply could not tolerate school any longer.

We therefore redefined school. First, we designed unit studies in which all learning revolved around a certain topic. By using drama, manipulatives and props, art, experiments and our imaginations, we began to make progress and have fun. I found my various backgrounds, including my time spent in the business world really helped foster concepts that are applicable to the real world. For example, instead of doing rows and rows of calculations, I asked each child to devise a product. They then learned about costs, including labor, raw materials, overhead and advertising. They then priced their products, wrote an effective ad campaign and designed additional products to add to their product line. They also performed *consumer math* using store circulars and they learned fractions through baking. Math suddenly made sense to Nicole. Her math calculation score on

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the Iowas rose by forty percentile points and her self-esteem soared as well. She has since moved on to algebra and geometry.

The Experiment

In the fall, I entered a graduate program for gifted education. In order to accommodate my schedule and to help with my assignments, we agreed to have structured learning on three days and unstructured, independent learning on the other two. Much to my surprise, Nicole and Evan were actually learning and retaining more on the unstructured days. Moreover, their projects and activities were more complex and interesting than my required lesson plans. They began designing their own learning and their capabilities soon surpassed my expectations. As my graduate program was more geared to the moderately gifted child in a public school classroom or gifted program, there was little that was applicable to students like Nicole and Evan. I abandoned this program and its philosophies and decided to learn from my children.

This experiment caused me to look differently at education. I noticed that what was hindering Nicole and Evan the most was direct instruction. What was most beneficial to them was to allow them to choose their own studies and to proceed in manners that worked best for them. To make this process more interesting, we took frequent field trips and conducted outdoor studies. I also contacted members of the community who were more than willing to donate their time and talents. Consequently, our children have worked with scientists, inventors, wildlife biologists, veterinarians, musicians, artists and writers. Though they were not in a regular classroom per se, the community had now become their classroom. They also participated in a host of activities with other homeschoolers.

Learning has now become much more flexible and often spontaneous, as you never know which direction their studies will take them. Evan's study on robotics, for example, led to an interest in computer animation and special effects. He also needed to know some chemistry and physics for his experiments and prototypes. Nicole's interest in one of our cats who was a stray, led to a study on cat genetics to determine his parentage. She needed to study the components of human genetics first and then allow for the staggering number of genetic combinations needed to determine a mixed-breed cat. She not only solved the mystery but learned about statistics and probability.

Pleasant Surprises

As the years progressed, we realized how our family had changed and become even closer. Sibling fights were replaced

by appreciation of the other's abilities. Nicole and Evan became good friends. Their love of learning was contagious and subjects I used to hate, I now found fascinating. We were also enjoying a much more relaxed lifestyle, as we determined our own schedule and could learn more naturally.

However, the most interesting and even eerie discovery was finding that Nicole did indeed have other amazing talents as she had previously claimed. Nicole has exceptionally musical abilities. She demonstrated that she can play any song by ear, often after hearing it only once. How she knew this about herself remains a mystery. As we did not have a piano at the time, she would sit at any piano she could find. She was soon offered free piano lessons with the area's best teacher. Shortly thereafter, Nicole began composing and, at age eleven, she wrote her first screenplay and composed its score. She has received much support from the musical community and is now working with a professional musician. Nicole also sings and writes her own lyrics and recently recorded a demo tape. By twelve, she became more self-actualized than most adults. Her attitude and hope for the future have dramatically improved.

Evan also demonstrated similar musical ability and now plays piano and drums. His major passions, however, are art and science. While Nicole is usually found at her new keyboard and synthesizer, Evan is usually found drawing. Once considered hyperactive, Evan can focus his energies for long periods of time in his passion areas. He hopes to pursue a career as an animator, an architect or an aerospace engineer. His ability to draw to scale, enlarge and draw from many unusual perspectives tells a great deal about how he thinks. He has a fine appreciation for science and nature and is truly the most gentle soul I have ever encountered.

As for me, I still teach foreign languages from home. However, due to the volume of inquiries from parents of highly gifted children, I now consult and tutor, specializing in exceptionally gifted visual/spatial learners. The majority of these children are either mislabeled or misunderstood and require different learning techniques if they are to remain in school. However, 99% of these families have chosen homeschooling after coming to the realization that school had been a harmful environment for their child.

Conclusion

Many people assume that all children need to be in school. For students like Nicole and Evan, however, school can be extremely compromising to their abilities, their creativity and their sense of self. Not only are they prevented from learning in

ways that work best for them, they really have little in common with their peers, causing them to stand out and feel different. Fortunately, there are large numbers of these children in the homeschooling community.

By listening to Nicole and Evan, we were able to find a workable solution to their educational dilemma. Though homeschooling is not something I ever imagined myself doing, the benefits to independent, self-directed, highly capable learners are difficult to refute. Nicole, now thirteen, and Evan, now ten, refuse to return to school and desire to continue homeschooling indefinitely. For our family, this unconventional and highly controversial form of learning has made all the difference in the world.

Addendum 2000

In the year since this article was written, Niki has decided to skip college in favor of a music career. She writes lyrics and music and has several songs copyrighted. She performs at coffeehouses, made several demo tapes, performs with an adult contemporary band, and gives piano lessons. The reviews from her demo tapes have been overwhelming and it looks like Niki will be performing as a professional within a year.

Niki has had the good fortune to meet very generous and supportive local musicians who have taught her about the intricacies of recording, promoting herself, and about the business of the music industry. One musician taught her how to play the electric guitar; he is now her promoter. I've been recruited to be Niki's business manager and choreographer. Evan is now her drummer and her father is a weekend roadie. Niki's studies now revolve primarily around music and Evan's revolve around art. The Staehle children continue to design their own studies and use the community as their classroom.

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