



The Relaxed Home Schooler® Newsletter

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Coming Up:

Not a whole lot!

I am not doing much speaking for the next couple of months while I figure out what is happening around here next year and catch up on a little writing and administrative work.

However if anyone wants to invite me to do a workshop or come to a fair, feel free to ask. Maybe you'll catch me at just the right time.

I hoped to know for sure by now if we were going to have a resource center in Cherokee County, GA, or not next fall, but we are still in flux.

For those interested, keep an eye on our website,
www.archersforthelord.org

Welcome! Hope we help you to relax and enjoy life at home with your kids!

From Mary:

Since I'm writing this the first day of spring, I was motivated to talk a bit about learning in the out-of-doors.

Because motivation is such an important part of any learning, I also wrote a piece talking about how to help your kids develop their own interests so their motivation peaks and their interest in learning soars!

I was assisted in this article by my writing class, who each shared how they discovered their passions. These students are mostly high school students, and most of them already have some interests that they are passionate about pursuing...dance, violin, gymnastic, robotics, skateboarding, and classical piano to name just a few!

How did they find these interests? How did they develop them once they found them? What was the role of their parents?

Read on for the answers!

Note:

I was just up at the Whole Child Conference in Nashville, TN last weekend. This was not a homeschooling conference; it was a group that serves primarily foster and adoptive parents, some in residential group home settings, and some in the home environment.

I was particularly surprised by the large number of foster parents who were either homeschooling or seriously considering it. I had been under the impression that foster parents weren't able to make that choice, but apparently it is okay in some states.

I also listened to several workshops that were specifically about learning and brain development. I've always known about things like right brain/left brain dominance, but the talks really convinced me once more of the need to individualize all our instruction.

Some kids just can't learn by hearing; others can't learn by seeing! This is definitely an area parents need to study up on. I bought one of the presenter's books for our library. Now...all I need is a place to put that library! Help me pray in the right spot for this new resource center!

Finding Their Passions, Stimulating Their Own Motivation

One of the most common questions parents ask me when they are trying to switch over to a more relaxed, family-based form of education is, “How do you get your children motivated?”

When coming directly out of a more structured environment, whether in school or in a highly structured traditional homeschool curriculum, it is common for students to appear to lack motivation at first. They need some down time to lose some of the ennui they have built up in that environment, where individual motivation and goal-setting is not particularly encouraged.

Some people have started referring to this as “deschooling”. I don’t really like the idea of that, as it seems to imply giving them a break for awhile and then stepping right back in with teacher or parent-directed activities.

The best thing a homeschooling mom can do when she is starting out with a child who has never gone to school is to avoid squashing his or her intrinsic motivation.

Some people claim little children have no such motivation, but most moms I know realize that the typical two year wants to do everything, know everything, and ask every question under the sun. Yet many ten years olds in our society seem to be stuck in a “I dunno; I don’t care; whatever” mode.

In order to help students find their passions, I believe in exposing young children to many different places, different people, and different experiences. A child who was “born to be a concert violinist” might never discover that if he never went to a symphony as a child. However, that same child might well pick it up on his own after a single exposure.

As students do find their passions, it is important to give them plenty of time to develop them, and to balance carefully the demands of their new interests with the money and time available in the family.

When some children want to do expensive lessons, or go on costly adventures, it is not unrealistic to expect them to help somehow with the costs!

Some parents question the validity of their children’s interests, believing that it is necessary to spend most of their time learning academic subjects. I have found that, when students have their own passions, the passion itself often will trigger the development of academic skills as well, through reading and writing about the activity, using math in real life applications, and developing such skills as preparation, goal-setting, and the will to follow through.

I asked the students in my writing class, who range in age from twelve to seventeen, to share with me how they found and developed their own passions.

A couple of them definitely found their interests on their own. One developed a love of skateboarding after watching youtube videos. Another developed a love of robotics gradually, through a variety of team and individual activities. In some cases, like skateboarding, not much money or effort is required by the parents, but in others, like robotics, it takes a huge commitment from the parents, of both money and time. This particular mom has to travel a great deal to various team events, but the fact that her son is passionate about the subject makes it all worthwhile to her. The skateboarder, on the other hand, primarily works at his skill out in the street, with a minimum of financial outlay, but he still needs to be given the time and encouragement to do so.

One girl, who is a serious dancer, had taken some lessons when she was young, but then, after attending a performance where a friend was dancing, decided to take up ballet again. At first, she was primarily taking ballet to spend time with her friend, but soon it became a lot more important. She stated that “being homeschooled as allowed me to start pursuing this dream”.

Another girl discovered a love for gymnastics when she was about eight. She commented that she always used to do flips around the house, and her parents decided to put her in gymnastics. What they thought was going to be a once-a-week involvement has turned into twenty hours a week.

Two other students discovered passions for music: one is a violinist and the other a pianist. The violinist begged her parents for lessons after listening to her cousins playing during a visit. In third grade, her parents relented, but she found that the lessons were boring and she wasn’t good at practicing. Then she heard a particularly lovely piece, and decided she wanted to be able to play like that, so she started back in again. Now she listens to classical music and practices every day and has learned to love it!

In some cases, moms wind up being a little more directive, and while this can occasionally backfire (like when my parents made me take accordion!) sometimes it leads to positive results. One boy started playing a bit on his mom’s keyboard, and after a year or so, his mom found him a teacher. Although he really wanted to learn electric guitar, his mom insisted because she believed that learning to read music and play the piano is the basis for all other music. At first he hated it, but eventually he started to like it, and then, after moving and finding a classically-trained piano teacher, his own goal has become to be a classical pianist!

In my own case, I have found that passion and internal motivation are the keys, but they must be supported by habits that are developed consciously or the “goals” are apt to dissolve and turn into unrealized dreams. It takes work to learn to do difficult things, but the rewards can be great! Remember, it isn’t too late for you moms to take up something yourself that you’ve always wanted to do! You need to be part of the learning experience, too!

Learning in the Out-of-Doors: Planned and Serendipitous

As I write this, it is the first day of calendar spring. At this time of year, my rural roots always reassert themselves and I start wanting to go turn over some sod and get out in the garden.

During the years I was homeschooling my kids, we spent a lot of time outdoors. Some people might view this as mere playing; others might regard it as work, doing projects to actually feed the family. I viewed it as both of these, but also as a valid educational experience. You can bet I “called it school” when making out my records.

The obvious subject you can study while outside is science, especially that part of science that relates to nature. We prepared the soil, sent off samples to have the PH factor tested at our local county extension office, and then waited while the sun dried it out to just the perfect texture before tilling it.

I remember that one year I failed to wait; hoping to get potatoes in the ground early enough, I wound up tilling too soon, and the ground turned into mud cakes. That entire year was wasted in the garden. You can also develop some of those fruits of the spirit while out in the garden! It certainly helped me to develop the virtue of patience!

Once tilled, it was always fun to go to the store and buy our seeds for the year. Starting with very little knowledge of gardening, I once went into a feed store and asked for “seed sweet potatoes”. The old men there looked at me askance, and then said, “there ain’t no such thing as seed sweet potatoes.” So I said, “Well, do you have whatever you use to grow sweet potatoes? It turns out they are called “slips”, and they didn’t sell them there. As I turned to leave, one of the old men said, “Stop by my place and I’ll give you a bunch....” That turned out to be another serendipitous experience, because, like many old men, he took to the kids and regaled them with stories of bygone days!

While choosing the plants to put out, there is plenty of opportunity for learning experiences. You can look at a map of planting zones, and discuss the needs of various plants for sun and water, soil density and acidity. We learned that tomatoes would fare well in an acidic soil. After trial and error, we learned that our soil was too clay here in Georgia to grow carrots or potatoes in the ground, but that a container full of mainly sand would grow the carrots nicely.

We also learned that carrots may look nice and pretty up on top, but if you don’t thin them out at the proper time, they will grow knobby and skinny on the bottoms.

Once the plants were up, we also began to learn a lot about the roles of the insects, good and bad. The kids were paid to collect the bad bugs in a jar. The praying mantises and spiders turned out to be our helpers, as they culled many of the bad bugs from the garden.

One year we had to plant the corn twice, because of an industrious squirrel who followed us down the rows, digging up the seeds as we planted them! Another time we had several nice mid-size watermelons about to get ripe and found that the raccoons were also interested in them. One day we went outside and found exactly half of the first watermelon chewed off and carried away. We decided to leave the other half for him, and invented a system of boxes and boards to protect the others during the nights. For weeks we went outside every single night to protect the growing melons. Then one night we forgot. The next morning, every single one of the watermelons had been carried away! Somebody had a great feast that night!

Some years I got downright depressed for a bit because it always felt like we were feeding the animals instead of ourselves. However, we had read the books “Rabbit Hill” and “The Long Winter”, by Robert Lawson, and the kids were just ecstatic to think how much we were helping the little critters!

Another series of books we loved that went along with gardening and working outdoors was Thornton Burgess’ “Mother West Wind” series. Still another was Beatrix Potter’s books, especially “The Tale of Peter Rabbit”.

Many times, a serendipitous unit study would appear when we found something special in the garden. One day, we had a pot belly pig rooting around! Another time, a deer and her two fawns had jumped the fence. Once, in North Carolina, when Sam was still a baby, there was an eight foot long king snake all stretched out along the bank! Luckily, this is the type that eats the poisonous snakes, so we were okay!

Sam developed his lifelong love of spiders through watching them weave their webs out in the garden, catching all the insects and helping us out! It eventually led to an obsession with tarantulas, and at one point we had one living in a box on our front porch! Another time we had an infestation of black widow spiders in our side yard, and I was NOT permitted to do anything about it, because that turned into Sam’s “project”.

The science experiences we had in nature naturally fueled our efforts to learn about God’s wonderful world, and we started to add in trips to other places, from nature spots like beaches or mountains or streams to a variety of science museums, zoos, and botanical gardens.

We often brought in other subjects like literature, and math (measuring the rows and the spaces in between, figuring out the area of the garden or the perimeter for the fencing, etc.)

Much of this learning just happened because we made the original effort to get out of doors and get busy. However, some of it was more planned, as you can see in the excerpt from an old article I wrote in The Old Schoolhouse Magazine about the “project method”.

From the Archives:

“The Project Method” by Mary Hood

Condensed from the October, 2012, issue of The Old Schoolhouse Magazine
Column formerly called, “The Ordinary Homeschooler”.

The project method has certain similarities to the unit study method, such as the emphasis on active learning and its adaptability to several different subject areas. I have personally used the project method the most in the area of science

One of the chief benefits of the project method is the way that it teaches, in a natural fashion, the process of developing ideas, setting goals, making and executing plans, and evaluating progress. These are all necessary things to learn in order to prepare for adulthood and are not usually a big part of traditional education, in which the teachers set the goals and plans and students merely do what they are told.

One of the best projects our family ever did was to create a nature trail in the woods behind our house. This involved a good bit of planning by the children, as they determined the best route, and then had to make decisions about what would be the best “points of interest”. In one spot, they put up a sign saying, “Who Lives Here?” at the entrance to a hole in a rotting log. Another signpost was located at “Hood Pond”, which was actually the spot where our water pipe had broken beneath the driveway, but they didn’t know that!

After locating and putting up signs at approximately ten places along the trail, the children then created a “trail guidebook”, which required some creative writing and artwork. They were hoping to impress other neighborhood children enough to motivate them to pay money for the guidebook and the tour. Of course, that never developed, so a few lessons on supply and demand economics were also learned along the way.

Other potential projects could include such things as hatching chicken eggs in an incubator, raising worms, building a compost pile, creating a pond in the backyard, creating a wildflower garden to attract butterflies, or simply creating and maintaining a vegetable garden. (Note: an herb garden is another good project, and can be done in a small area on a patio or deck.) Birdhouses and feeders or a wide variety of construction projects can also provide suitable means to apply the project method. This type of education appeals a great deal to boys, who are often frustrated by the “sit down and study” type of education that is common in more traditional education.

The typical steps in the project method are as follows:

1. Brainstorm about possible projects that you and the children would be interested in doing, and choose one;
2. Set goals together, and discuss some of the reasons that this particular project is worthwhile. Make sure you all have sufficient motivation to follow through. (That applies especially to you moms!)
3. Plan the project as much as you can, but allow some flexibility. Sometimes projects wind up taking on lives of their own!

4. Determine what materials you will need to execute the project and either purchase or create them. Be sure to involve children in every step along the way.

5. Begin the project! Try to work together as a team. As with most projects, there should be a leader, but tasks should be delegated based on the skills, talents, and interests of each person involved. Consider having one of the children be the leader in a project once in awhile. It doesn’t always have to be an adult.

6. Follow through. Be sure to complete the project. One of the worst things you can do is to continually start projects and never finish them, which is the exact opposite of what you are trying to accomplish.

One of the problems I see...is that moms love the idea of doing these projects but somehow either doubt their ability to follow through or simply feel that they don’t have enough time...These projects can be even more educational than having the children sit around a table all day doing book work. Once they get involved in a project, they may read books about it, write in a journal, keep records, do artwork, or even use math skills as a natural part of the project.

Children often get antsy about this time in the school year, ready to put away at least some of their books and go outside. It may be beneficial to set aside some of the more traditional work for a time and try something a little different.

Projects can add spice to your curriculum or even constitute the bulk of your educational efforts. They can involve and inspire those who are resistant to book work and provide a framework for the use of books and writing experiences. They can be used as additional exercises to supplement unit studies or provide a break from more structured activities. Above all, they can teach effective goal-setting, planning, executing, and evaluating skills in a natural, family-centered environment, which will not only help your children prepare for adult life but will also give you the gratification of knowing that you can come up with interesting projects and follow through until they are completed!