

The following interview with Mary Hood was conducted in September, 2009, by Carletta Sanders of "Successful Homeschooling". Visit her at www.successful-homeschooling.com.

Interview Questions

1. How old are your children, and how long did you homeschool?

My children are now 18 through 31. We homeschooled from the beginning through high school graduation, so that was about 26 years. One of my kids is now living in Korea working at an international school, one is in a master's program in counseling, and three are still working on their college degrees, one in art history, one in mass communication, and one in philosophy.

2. Why did you decide to homeschool your children?

My original decision was based on characteristics of my oldest son which would have made school a disaster...but they were quickly supplemented with other reasons, concerning values and parental control of education.

3. How would you define relaxed homeschooling?

Relaxed homeschooling, to me, is a mindset, not a philosophy. It is the idea that you are a family, not a school; a dad/head of the household, not a principal, a mom, not a teacher, and you have individual relationships with your kids, not a school. This helps you learn to leave the school trappings behind, set your own goals, and live life in a relaxed and joyful manner, not taking the whole thing quite so seriously.

4. Why did you decide to take a relaxed approach to homeschooling?

My kids taught me that was the best way to make life work.

5. Describe the average day in a relaxed homeschool.

There is no average day in a relaxed homeschool! I will say that when my kids were little, we always started with some Bible study (reading The Story Bible by Pearl Buck over and over while they made their own little booklets/pictures to go along with it), and some other unit study at the breakfast table...then the morning was considered "productive time". That might mean sitting under an apple tree thinking about the universe or playing with legos, but it would not be computer games/ipods/television/neighbor kids, etc. Afternoons were looser...grocery shopping, park, library, personal free time, etc. One day a week, usually Fridays, we tried to go someplace interesting, like a zoo or a museum.

6. What type of families/students are well-suited to relaxed homeschooling?

Anyone who wants to enjoy their homeschooling and maintain control over their kid's education.

7. What type of families/students struggle with a relaxed approach?

People who can't leave the old wineskins of institutional education behind.

8. What are the pitfalls of becoming overly focused on academics in a homeschool environment?

Life should always be balanced. Academics are very important. So are other things!

9. What is the role of grading and testing in a relaxed homeschool?

We test to help them learn how to take tests, not to find out what is in their short-term memory cells that particular day. I don't believe in grades or external motivators of any kind, so we don't use those until we need to do it for college transcripts. I do believe in standardized testing every year starting in third grade, as long as everyone involved realizes it isn't really an indicator of much of anything....However, we live in a test-happy society, and kids need to have the experience of being tested so they can learn how to do it. That includes doing it in a group environment where you can't go to the bathroom until a teacher says you can! It's part of learning how to cope. Again, don't start this until third grade, and the first time you do it, if you can do it yourself at the breakfast table, that's fine. By the sixth grade or so, they really need to be doing it in a school-like atmosphere somewhere, but with other homeschoolers, not in a public school setting.

10. Without heavy reliance on tests and grades, how can parents assess their child's learning?

With their own goals in mind, a relaxed homeschooling mom needs to constantly be asking herself questions. "What's working? What's not? Why? Is it a readiness issue? A personality conflict? A learning styles issue? And in the words of a wise Amish woman, "Do ye now next thing."

11. What is the role of textbooks and formal curriculum in a relaxed homeschool?

I don't believe in textbooks or formal curricula in the elementary grades unless they are used as a guideline for the teacher or unless the request is coming from the student. I have used formal textbooks in science and math after about seventh grade. We personally have used Apologia science and math from chalkdust.com. I still prefer using real library books and experiences in most other subjects in high school.

12. How does a parent go about teaching without textbooks and curriculum?

Well, this might seem radical, but I don't think anyone can really teach anything to anyone else, unless they really want to learn it. (To me, it doesn't count as learning if you learn it to spit it out on a test and then forget it.) I'd concentrate on doing a lot of reading, having a loose, but consistent structure to the day, and following interests as best as you can, while also letting your own goals for the kids guide you. Trust yourself, trust your instincts, pray a lot and trust God to give you the answers as you need them. Then chill out a little.

13. How do relaxed homeschoolers make sure they aren't leaving any gaps in their child's education?

We all have gaps in our education. Nobody can make sure of that! Even if we plugged up every gap we could think of, new knowledge would spring up the next day. More important is focusing on character and developing a self-motivated, self-directed learner. I personally focus on skill development more, especially in the high school years. Help a child grow into an adult who loves to learn and has the tools to do so, and they can learn whatever they need to learn when it becomes important in their lives

14. How can relaxed homeschoolers make sure their children are prepared for college?

Focus on skills, especially the four communication skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening. (Most of these will develop more or less naturally in a home where communication is prized.) Add in computer skills, computational ability, test-taking skills, research skills (internet and library-based), and if you want to walk in the front door, make sure you are aware of the requirements the colleges have for specific subjects before you start high school. I've had a rash lately of people who want me to help them get into college, but they "forgot to take a foreign language" or "didn't take any math past geometry"....makes it harder, although not impossible, to get in. However, do not buy the lie that accreditation is important or necessary to get into college....that is the educational establishment trying to regain a foothold to take over our kid's schooling. If enough people do it willingly, someday we will lose our freedoms. There is a free downloadable article on that on our website, www.archersforthe lord.org.

15. How should parents go about designing a homeschool program for their children?

Don't feel like you have to do it all up front....pick out some goals to start , get a "flow" going to your days, read a lot, go to the library, live an interesting life. If you feel clueless, take out a textbook and get some ideas from the table of contents. Again, in high school, it becomes more important to declare subjects, but you can still be creative in the way you cover them. For example, a biology lab could be done the usual way, or maybe instead you could do a marine mammal apprenticeship at Sea World, or a greenhouse/botany lab. Foreign language could be learned the usual school-like way, or on cds in the car, or through travel or missions work. Just keep good records when you get to high school, and make sure your kids are involved at that point in designing their programs and maintaining their own records.

16. What advice do you have for parents when choosing homeschool materials?

Most people buy way too much these days. Don't feel like you have to have all your ducks in a row before September even starts. Use a lot of library/free materials, and stop saying you can't do it, because you can! "Favorite quote: All you can do is all you can do but all you can do is enough." Don't feel like you have to pick everything from one source, either....nothing wrong with being eclectic.(Again, in high school, we do usually have a science and math textbook picked out at the start of the year.)

17. How can relaxed homeschoolers meet their state requirements for hours of instruction, subject areas and record keeping?

Too big a topic for a short answer. I've written a booklet called, "Relaxed Record Keeping", available from our website, www.archersfortheLord.org. Short answer: Know your laws, retain parental control, keep records even if you are in an "easy" state....bare minimum: lists of books from the library, (take the computerized list or make one yourself, tack it to the bulletin board until it is time to check them off when you return them, and then date it and stick it in a manila file folder marked with the year)....also keep a journal, talking about the conversation you had in the car on the way to town, the great field trip, the project using worms in the garden, etc. The journal is for you to remind yourself if you have to pull it together into a report later. A personal journal is NEVER meant for anyone else to read unless you decide to publish your memoirs. And remember, again, not to take everything so seriously. A trip to the Grand Canyon is not a vacation, it is a school outing. Count it!

18. How does relaxed homeschooling help children develop a love of learning?

It comes naturally in this setting.

19. How does relaxed homeschooling help children become responsible, self-motivated learners?

Again, it comes naturally. However, if it isn't coming naturally, stop focusing on what you can't control (the kids, husbands, everyone else around you) and focus on what you can control (yourself!) If they aren't motivated, get motivated yourself and become a good role model. Enthusiasm is contagious! Also, I personally distinguish somewhat between learning responsibility academically and in life. If you get tired of a subject in the middle of it in our family, you're not likely to be forced to finish it right then. But if you get tired of the laundry in the middle of folding it, tough! That's your job, finish it! I believe in kids learning responsibility through chores, volunteer work, and a paid job as soon as they are able. Even before they are old enough to have a paid job, they can start their own business! (Pet-sitting, babysitting, crafts, or whatever.)

20. What is the role of structure and discipline in a relaxed home school?

Again, too big a question. I wrote a short booklet on this, also available on our website.. Have a basic plan for the day, let your own goals drive you, stress respect for each other and those around you. Remember, also, to live a broad life. There is a big world out there, with lots of different people and different ideas. Don't live such a small life that you can only interface with people who believe exactly what you believe. I do believe in sheltering small children, but I believe just as strongly that older kids need to be nudged out of the nest a little at a time, when they can still come back to discuss things at the end of the day.

21. How should homeschool parents measure success?

One day at a time! You're alive, you're trying, hence you're succeeding at something! Moms especially need to learn how to pat themselves on the back for small successes (like getting your bed made) because no one else is going to do it for you. Stop focusing on what you didn't accomplish that day...there will always be something, and the enemy loves to use discouragement as a tool.

22. What advice do you have for new homeschoolers?

Enjoy your life with your kids. Sometimes it's hard but you'll miss them when they finally leave home. Also, keep your own growth part of the equation, or you'll wind up with the biggest empty nest syndrome in the history of the world. For those of you who are close to that, contact us...we'll put you to work! ARCHERS for the Lord, Inc., (The Association of Relaxed Christian Home Educators, our non-profit organization) hopes to harness all the energy and knowledge homeschooling moms have been working on developing all these years, and use it to change the world (or at least, one small corner of it.) Stay in touch with us via the website, www.archersforthelord.org, or via our print magazine, "The Relaxed Homeschooler's Lifestyle". The magazine is building gradually...just one introductory issue available right now. We also plan to have area conferences starting in a couple of years. The first two will probably be planned for the Southeast, somewhere in the mountains, and the Southwest, probably California. However, if you want us to consider your area, get a group of committed volunteers together and we'll talk!