

Hard Time Homeschooling

Contributed by Hal Young, North Carolinians for Home Education
Last Updated Thursday, 13 October 2005

Homeschooling is always a challenge. It's a monumental undertaking for a parent to accept full responsibility for their child's education and training. The commitment of homeschool parents never ceases to amaze me, even after ten years of homeschooling in our own family.

There are times, though, when home education is not the biggest challenge at home. The news recently has been full of weather emergencies and plant closings. Many of us will go through periods of serious illness, job loss, career change, financial hardship, or worse.

My own family has experienced this, too, and occasionally more than one trial at a time. But this is where we've learned that homeschooling is best for the hard times, too.

The answer is the same

Most of us have to run a gauntlet of well-meaning relatives and friends who question the homeschooling decision at the outset. Often those folks come to terms with your educational choice, once they see that you're (a) successful with it, or (b) beyond any chance of being talked out of it. (Or (c), Both). But when the crises come, you may hear from them anew. "You're under so much stress now; don't you think it would be better to put the kids back in school?"

Well, actually, NO, I doubt it would be better at all. For one thing, the concept of "back in school" is meaningless to my children. Enrollment in a bricks-and-mortar institution would not be a return to anything, but a totally new venture into an unfamiliar culture. Whatever it did to our family life, abandoning home education for a classroom setting would simply pile more stress onto the younger members of the family -- in addition to their stress over Mom's illness, or Dad's job hunt, or whatever the crisis at the moment. To them, it would be no different than a sudden relocation or an unplanned job change would be for us.

Even if we had taken them out of a classroom to start homeschooling, the likelihood is that our reason for beginning home education at all has not changed. I have never heard a family say that the local school system has suddenly improved, or that cliques and youth culture are important for their child's spiritual development, or that their family would really appreciate the structure of a state-mandated schedule. And we didn't begin homeschooling because it was convenient, either -- we did it out of love for our children, and concern for their hearts and souls as well as their minds, and a sense of duty for them all. Has that changed?

What we've learned through the hard times, both in our family and in the families we've known, is that homeschooling provides a place to anchor. We've gone through periods when my wife taught school at her bedside, recovering from surgery or childbirth, or when our classroom was built by General Motors and the field trip of the day was along the road to our new home in another state. It's almost humorous, but it's true, that homeschoolers so often look at the crisis at hand, shrug inwardly, and announce, "All right, today we study meteorology." Or biology, or economics, or theology, as the situation suggests.

Success in the hard times

We've learned there are two keys to successfully homeschooling through the hard times. Number one is commitment -- know why you're homeschooling, review that reason often, and dig in for the hard pull. If home education is a priority to you, for example, a financial pinch might be time to consider dropping cable, reducing cell-phone use, buying staple groceries and cooking in bulk, or other "drastic" measures. Is homeschooling more critical than HBO? Getting a newspaper delivered rather than reading the news online?

While you're remembering, recall that you are in charge of your school; it may be time to back down the challenging curriculum for a while and focus on the core material. As the administrator/parent, you have the authority to choose when, where, and how much your students are taught. If the teacher is a casualty of the process, then nobody wins.

The second key we found is willingness to ask and receive help. This may actually be the harder of the two, to us men in particular. Brothers, it is not sponging to let your extended family, or your church, or your support group know, "Folks, times are tight for us, and this is where it hurts." God commands us to "bear one another's burdens" -- are you so strong you'll never need a hand sometime? And how can our acquaintances fulfill that calling, if those in difficulty (including ourselves, sometimes) refuse assistance?

Think about being a construction worker on a high steel structure -- you don't want to live in the safety net, but you use it when the time comes. Recognize that when you allow your friends to assist you, you are giving them an opportunity to serve, to exercise their own graces of love and generosity, and to teach their children about compassion and sacrifice. Pain and suffering and heartache are not restricted to depressed areas of the country -- they occur in our own families, and in our neighbors'. We need to recognize it, and our children need to learn it.

On the other hand

Finally, if you are not the one suffering, this is your time to look for those who are. Your friends and neighbors might not wish to advertise their need, but when you are sensitive enough to see it and respond, it can mean a lot. Be discrete; respect your friends' privacy. Men in particular have a hard time accepting help and comfort, like when working through a job loss or serious illness, so be low key -- anonymous, even. Our support group started a benevolence fund which serves as a "money laundry" for donated assistance; "Good news! Someone" has offered to pay your phone bill this month. Who? Oh, they said it's a gift from God. Your kids will enjoy dropping off a box of groceries or a prepared meal in secret. Volunteer to run errands; ferry kids to field trips or meetings; give them a prepaid long distance card. Hire a fellow homeschool parent for work you might have done yourself -- housecleaning, yard work, car repair, even tutoring; you can always claim to be "too busy" (aren't you?), and it takes it out of the realm of charity for the recipient.

Remember that a fellow homeschooler going through the gauntlet again may need your fellowship and understanding as much as they may need help with errands or babysitting -- you who are strong, encourage the weak, uphold the fainthearted. As Paul reminded us, share the comfort you've received, and know that the testing produces endurance.

Homeschooling works for the hard times too, and sometimes the lessons don't come from the curriculum.

Hal Young is president of North Carolinians for Home Education; he and his wife Melanie live in Smithfield, N.C., and have homeschooled their seven children from the beginning ... and through some hard times along the way. You can contact the Youngs at youngandsons@earthlink.net

This article appeared in the November/December 2003 issue of The Greenhouse Report and is reprinted with permission of North Carolinians for Home Education (<http://nche.com>)