

A LINE ON LIFE

12/22/96

Home Schooling — Positives and Negatives *

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Dissatisfied with our public schools, some parents want to teach their children at home. According to the Home School Legal Defense Association, in the 1960s, only a handful of families did this. In the 1980s, it was made an official alternative by states. In 1990, about 300,000 children in the United States were taught at home. Currently, this has jumped to about 900,000 children.

The association indicates that parents who home-school have typically attended or graduated from college. Their average income ranges from \$25,000-\$50,000. Many are Christians and Mormons, but there are also significant numbers of atheists, libertarians and liberals.

In approving home schooling, most states mandated 180 four-to-five-hour days of instruction per year. The topics must include reading, writing, math, history and science. Several states include standardized tests to see if the children are learning enough.

Some research indicates that home-educated children do as well academically as those in public schools. On the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, they score well above the national average – the 77th percentile. However, home schooling may not be the only reason for this high score. It may be caused by the interest of the parents in the educational process, merely being offspring of college-educated parents, or some combination of these factors.

Parents see several benefits to home schooling.

- **Controlled socialization** – Parents believe that home schooling improves children's relations with adults. It also helps them avoid a peer culture with excessive premarital sex, drugs and alcohol.
- **One-on-one teaching** – Home-schooling parents view public schools as teaching to the slowest children in the classes. This means their children cannot learn as quickly. They believe their training can help their children learn faster. For example, one child was well ahead of her kindergarten class. By first grade, she was bored and hated school. According to her mother, *"Because her needs weren't being met, she went from self-assured to withdrawn. I felt that I could do better."* The girl and her brother, 11 and 13, have been schooled at home. Both score at the top percentile on standardized tests. The son is working at a level that is two grades above his peers.
- **Family support** – Home-schooled children get to know their parents and siblings better, because they spend more *"quality time"* together. Close family relations give children a greater capacity to confront the world and find a satisfying vocation.

However, psychologists have some reservations about home schooling. They acknowledge that home schooling shields children from base attitudes, substance abuse and violence. However, children will eventually come into contact with these problems.

In 1986, psychologist Mona Delahooke did a study on home-schooled children. The home-schooled children scored as well on standardized tests. Even so, she and other psychologists are concerned about some potential problems.

- **Lack of exposure to diversity** – Home schoolers are less likely to meet children of other cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Instead of exposure to varied philosophies in school, home-schooled children only hear their parents' philosophies. If ignorant of contrary views, children are more likely to be influenced by them, when they are finally encountered. Gradually encountering a variety of philosophies can "*inoculate*" the children, especially if parents help their children understand how these philosophies compare to their own. Then children are more capable of forming their own views.
 - **Lack of participation in the greater society** – Keeping children at home may hinder their ability to get along with others in our pluralistic society. Public schooling teaches socialization skills like self-control and accountability. They are more likely to learn to respect others (even if the others are different), wait their turn, and share their resources.
 - **Potential difficulty entering mainstream life** – At some level, the children need to re-enter the educational system. Arguments about the placement of the children are likely to arise between parents and administrators. Even with standardized tests and college entrance exams, acceptance of home-schooled children into college varies on a case-by-case basis. Applications are difficult to judge without set standards.
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To promote positive changes in our educational system, parents need to become more involved with the schools.

There is a third option available to parents who are dissatisfied with their children's public education – *become actively involved in your child's education*. Children – whose parents are engaged in their educational process – are more confident and succeed better at school. If parents are too busy to get involved with their children's schooling, their children are more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol. Recently, Laurence Steinberg (Temple University) studied 20,000 high school students. He discovered – if parents isolated themselves from the educational process – their children had lower grades.

Especially with single parents and dual-career families, it is difficult to find time to become involved with your child's schooling. However, there is strong evidence that schools cannot do an effective job without parental support. Parents can help by encouraging their children to do their homework. If parents have the skills, they can actively participate with their children in completing assignments. Parents can attend parent-teacher conferences regarding their children's progress in school. If time and energy allow, parents can become active in parent-teacher associations at their children's schools.

This middle ground has two advantages. First, it does not require the time and effort of home schooling. Second, by working together with your schools, not only are you helping your children – you may be helping other children as well.

* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Home schools: How do they affect children?" [*The APA Monitor*](#), December, 1996, page 1, 43.