

Choosing Your Approach to Home education

Where and How to Explore your Choices

There are so many books that could be read about education, describing a variety of different systems, methods, and philosophies. Reading and talking about education is certainly an excellent way to find inspiration and ideas, to help you decide not only what you do want, but also to clarify what you don't want.

Education Otherwise publications and leaflets (e.g. *School is not Compulsory*, *Early Years* and *Their Own Voices*, various leaflets from the EO Information Leaflet Series, including *Further Reading* for suggestions of books) are an excellent start; also anything by John Holt, by significant educationalists such as Montessori, Steiner etc., and a variety of books published by Educational Heretics Press (address at the end).

Friends and family, members of EO and complete strangers will also have plenty to offer in advice, opinions and attitudes about education! Of course, your own experience, common sense and instinct are also essential and as valid as any educational theory.

One of the advantages of home education is that you can choose the best aspects of any system, method or philosophy, combine it with the best aspects of others to create a unique education perfectly suited to your individual child and family – ideally!! And then, as with parenting, you will benefit from remembering that there's no such thing as a 'perfect' education and not every day, maybe only a few days, will really live up to your absolute ideal; but 'good enough' is good enough. Being flexible, adaptable and good-humoured about the whole process will really help!

Think of all the personal qualities you would most like your child to possess as an adult - and demonstrate them yourself. Think about the attitude to learning you would like your child to have - and have that yourself. There is no better place to start than with yourself!

Now that you have the opportunity to create an education which is most effective for your unique family and child, you can clear your mind of any conditioning or preconceptions about education formed by your own education or the current system, and do some serious freethinking. Assess the aspects that were unhelpful, limiting, terrifying etc. and throw them out! Assess the aspects that were wonderful, inspiring, exciting etc. and hang on to them!

Then you will remember that your child is not the same as you - so be prepared to find out that some things you hated, your child loves and vice versa. Work with your child, and you will find the way that suits you all. Be aware that this may vary between siblings.

Learning styles

There are different ways in which people learn most easily - some like to see things written down, and will learn well from reading. Other visual learners will prefer to use diagrams or pictures rather than words. Some people are auditory learners, and need to hear words spoken aloud in order to remember them well, or may recall things if they have rhythm or are set to music. Yet others (kinaesthetic learners) need to be physically involved, by movement or touch, before they are able to take in new ideas, and will benefit from practical experimentation and the use of objects to touch and handle.

Other differences in learning style are between those who learn step-by-step (sequential learners), and those who like to see the whole picture first and then fill in the details (gestalt or global learners). It is important to recognise the differences in these learning styles.

Choices about Structure & Learning Approach

Schooling is of course highly structured with both timetable and curriculum: it is restricted to certain hours, gives the student little choice in what, when and how to study, divides knowledge into separate subjects, emphasises that learning is what the teacher can transmit to the student ... and so on. Some of what happens in the system of schooling, however, has less to do with how individual children learn most effectively than with administering an education to a very large group with few human resources.

In a home education setting you do not have these restrictions and can instead concentrate on what, when and how your child learns best.

We know from research that education can be made much more relevant, interesting and effective where there is recognition that there are different types of intelligence and many learning styles. Many home educators have also found that more can be learnt in a short late night conversation than in an hour's more formal study in the morning.

As well as helping your children to learn in a way that best suits their individual needs, their

involvement in the process of decision-making provides other valuable lessons, such as what it feels like to be involved in a democratic situation. Roland Meighan (Educational Heretics Press) affirms this, and proposes that education can be usefully categorised as authoritarian, democratic or autonomous.

What is significant is that no one system is better in principle than another and what is needed is flexibility and choice. Some things are best learned in an authoritarian structure (where adults determine the content and style of learning), others require a democratic approach (where adults and children are involved in a more collaborative decision-making process). Many others are best learned autonomously (where children are primarily taking responsibility and making decisions about their learning). Some families prefer to emphasise that their approach is more centred in one of the above, whereas others feel they employ a varying combination of all three.

National Curriculum and Informal Learning

Home educators need not follow the National Curriculum and they are not subject to the associated Standard Attainment Targets (SATs). Some families choose to use the NC as a guide; many others follow a child's individual interests with a foundation of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Families try to include a broad range of experiences, plus open doors to yet more areas of potential study so the child is aware of many possibilities.

Whatever approach is taken, you do not have to work to a structured timetable unless you wish. However, some families prefer an element of structure: for example, formal work in the mornings and more flexibility in the afternoons. But true learning can occur in far more natural, spontaneous ways – any time, anywhere, and in many ways. Education and everyday life, and your role as parent and educator, may become beautifully integrated and inseparable. You are in a position to create a unique and personalised educational approach, which will become your way of life.

See *Educating Children at Home* by Alan Thomas for evidence that shows how effective informal education is as a general principle; also the great importance of the role played by 'purposive' conversation.

You may find it helpful to keep a diary of what your family does throughout your days of home education. It may surprise you on reflection to discover just how much is learned in normal living circumstances such as talking around the

kitchen table, discussing television or radio programmes, going on walks; combined with educational visits, projects etc. This diary can also be a useful source from which to extract information at a later date should the LEA wish to enquire about your home education. This would be particularly useful to supplement the more limited written work often found with a less formal approach to education.

See Roland Meighan's book *The Next Learning System* for a good summary of the positive research findings concerning home education. Also in the book, Meighan suggests the development of 'Personal Learning Plans' in place of age related studying, with ideas taken from a 'Catalogue Curriculum' in place of a National Curriculum.

Choices about Curriculum Content

A wide range of social opportunities is considered to be important by many families, as is having access to a varied and expansive curriculum, in addition to having an excellent opportunity to specialise in individual interests, such as music or science etc. The education might pay particular attention to literacy and numeracy skills, general knowledge, the inter-relatedness of subjects, current global and environmental issues, information technology, adequate physical exercise etc. This may be where the National Curriculum is of use; not to follow rigidly, but for investigating the range of subjects and skills that are generally followed in schools but which can be added to at home. Copies are available from your LEA.

Similarly it may be useful to obtain details about qualifications and syllabuses that can be followed, as inspiration for the variety of different subjects that you can learn (see EO Info leaflet *Courses and Qualifications*). It might be useful to find out what would be needed to prepare for an area of study and/or work that is of interest. Work places are useful to visit, perhaps even for placements, and there are numerous museums, castles, places of interest etc. Educational suppliers' catalogues are useful for ideas, and you might obtain a copy of television and radio schools' broadcasts.

There are many documentaries and discussions which can provoke debate (addresses on the leaflet *Useful Organisations* from the EO Information Leaflet Series). Home education is also a wonderful opportunity to find out more about what your local community has to offer regarding courses, workshops, recreational activities, clubs and societies, places of interest etc. Take time to explore the library, Yellow Pages, the local paper and bookshops.

It is essential to have a non-indoctrinatory approach, so that consideration is given to developing a wide-ranging curiosity about issues; examining ideas from many perspectives in a critical and questioning manner so that no evidence is taken as irrefutable.

This is relevant to, for example, religious or moral issues: open-minded reflection on the variety of attitudes and opinions held in the world can ultimately allow your child to choose a personal view based on the range of ideas explored. If you have strongly held opinions on certain issues and firm beliefs or values, you should be able to provide an example of living according to such ideals without insisting that your child adopt these values unquestioningly. Each child has the right to become a unique individual in his or her own right, with personal beliefs and values.

Motivation

If you can think back to when your child was age 2, 3 or 4 for example, you will recognise how much was learned without being formally taught. In fact the 'education' of children in the home from birth to 5 must be the most effective system that exists. This system is possible at any age; most adults would agree that learning takes place most effectively and efficiently when there is genuine interest, curiosity, and a compelling intrinsically motivated reason for learning. In this way we learn excellently about cookery, gardening, yoga, car maintenance or whatever.

Many adults have lost enthusiasm for the kind of subjects taught in schools, although travelling, watching wildlife or science programmes and documentaries can often revive our curiosity.

It is not hard to realise why this love of learning, which is natural and irrepressible in a 3 year old, falls by the wayside in school, where we have to learn certain things at certain times in certain ways, and then be tested on what we have learned. It can take some time to recover from this process and to recapture the desire to learn.

If your child has suffered in school, it may take some time before learning is bearable, let alone exciting again, so be prepared to allow time for 'convalescence' and allow learning to re-emerge from genuine interest and motivation, not external pressure. (See leaflets "*School Anxieties*" and "*Dyslexia*" from the EO Information Leaflet Series if relevant.)

Skills and Resources

You need not be concerned about your ability to offer an effective home education. You do not need to have formal teaching qualifications in order to teach at home. Even though many of the

members of EO are teachers, some say this is not always an advantage. People trained to teach children in the more structured way appropriate to the logistical requirements of a school setting sometimes need to re-appraise their approach if they decide to home educate their own children. This is especially the case where a child has become anxious about learning because of past experiences – a creative and fresh approach may be the only option. The main attributes you can apply to the situation are resourcefulness, commitment, a special knowledge of your child's strengths and weaknesses and time!

Neither do you as a parent need to know everything in order to help your child to learn. The most valuable education will focus on how to learn, how to think, how to find out information, independently rather than served on a plate. In fact parents often learn alongside the child in a way that enhances the education of the whole family. Nor do you have to spend great amounts of money on home education, since so much information, resources and educational opportunities are available free or at small cost; it is a case of being resourceful and imaginative, finding what is available, asking around, creating your own materials etc.

Interestingly, research shows that the success of home education in the academic and social development of children applies across the range of parents' financial and educational backgrounds and diversity of approaches taken. (See leaflet *Home Education Research* from the EO Information Leaflet Series.)

Providing a 'Suitable education'

Always remember your responsibility is to provide an efficient full-time education suitable to your child's age, ability and aptitude, and according to any special educational needs – this can be fulfilled in an infinite number of ways, all of which are valid as long as the above criteria are fulfilled. There are no detailed legal definitions of these terms, so individual interpretations can vary immensely (more detail about definitions of such terms as established by case law can be found in the leaflet *Legal Aspects of Home education* from the EO Information Leaflet Series).

Never let an LEA insist that their definition is better than yours, impose their interpretation on you, or declare that education has to be the same as what happens in school. Case law has established, for example, that an autonomous education fulfils the criteria well. In a crucial court case, *Harrison v Stevenson* in 1981, the judge decided that the Harrison family's home-

based education was a success:

"[The children] are mature, confident and at ease in all sorts of company. They are lively-minded, have a good general knowledge and are intellectually athletic ... In their case their education - in its own field - has proved and is proving, a marked success."

'In its own field' meant that the Harrison family had elected for autonomous education based on practical and self-sufficiency skills, rather than an academic approach. (extract from Roland Meighan, *Educational Review*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1995).

Obviously an autonomous approach can develop academic skills as effectively as the kind of skills detailed above, and if your child is also experiencing aspects of more authoritarian and democratic educational practice as well, this will serve as flexible and varied preparation for the range of experiences they may encounter in their adult lives.

Keeping your Choices Open

If this all seems a daunting prospect, have confidence that a tremendous amount of varied learning will take place naturally and spontaneously, through conversations and daily life. There is a strong chance that your child will be able to learn more in both quantity and quality, and in less time, than a child in school who does not benefit from the individual attention and variety of experiences you are able to enjoy at home.

If you have a bad day when nothing is going right and you are on the point of giving up – forget it all, have a day out, do something fun and inspiring or just spend a lazy day at home; whatever it takes to remind you that education should be enjoyable and worthwhile. This is also when the EO support network is invaluable. As the network has developed over many years, there are numerous experienced members who can help. Talk to your Local Contact, ring a friend (or anyone!) from the contact list, and make full use of the support that is available.

There may even be times when 'the grass seems greener on the other side of the fence' and your child, or you, think again about school. This is an ideal opportunity to assess what is working well and what might be improved in your home education, to consider what benefits school may offer that you are not currently providing, perhaps to begin an informal project on the history of schooling, alternative educational systems and so on.

This will enable you and your child to make a well-informed, well-researched decision about whether perhaps school has become a more viable option; or whether to continue home education, but maybe with some quite major adjustments. Perhaps your child would enjoy more structure, or needs more freedom?

Home education - Blazing a Trail

The fact that parents are once again reclaiming the responsibility for their children's education is actually in some ways a compliment to 100 years of the education system. For this, combined with living in an information rich society, has served to educate people to the point where many are now ready to develop the whole area of education in further directions.

A truly educated population would welcome these new ideas, be able to consider the issues without prejudice, decide on the best course of action, and have the wherewithal and confidence to effect change if desirable. These abilities, the very essence of what is needed in a modern society, are said by some to be lacking in the current education debate.

John Taylor Gatto, New York 'teacher of the year' in 1991, observed in his acceptance speech, that even amongst the best of his parents and colleagues:

"... only a small number can imagine a different way of doing things".

Home educators are blazing a trail which demonstrates exactly that – a different way of doing things which could truly have an influential effect on the diversity and quality of educational provision in our society.

This leaflet is from the Education Otherwise Information Leaflet Series.

This series is only a guide, not an authoritative statement of law or procedures (Dec 2004).

Educational Heretics Press address: 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ
www.edheretics.gn.apc.org

**Education Otherwise Association Limited PO
PO Box 325, Kings Lynn, PE34 3XW**

Help Line: **0870 7300074**

Website: www.education-otherwise.org

Registered Charity Number: 1055120