

Homeschooling During a Pandemic

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Macy and Jennifer are married and grateful for their education as they practice social isolation together with their two boys ages 6 and 9.

Often in January we start the year with resolutions and dreams about what will come. Perhaps we are planning the graduation of a high school senior, buying equipment to finally lose that fifteen pounds, or signing up for classes to finish a degree. Not many of us outside of the field of public health saw what big changes were coming for our communities and our world with COVID-19, otherwise referred to as coronavirus. With the rapid spread of this disease across oceans and neighborhoods, we find ourselves living “safer at home” without those routines and activities that keep us feeling safe.

Now that schools are closed for at least several more weeks, parents in particular are faced with the challenge of educating their children at home while dealing with unemployment, underemployment, or working remotely. A friend of ours humorously tweeted the other day “look at us, homeschoolers, all of us.” Her witty exclamation spoke to a lot of us who send our children to school, public or private, relying on trained professionals to teach our children the basic skills needed in their academic and social development. We may have advanced degrees, but teaching long division to our own children is a daunting task.

The history of homeschooling in the U.S. began with parents wanting to protect and isolate their children from outside influences that ran contrary to their values and beliefs (Ray, 2004; Valery, 2011, Walters, 2015). Some families were motivated to bring education home by the integration of schools, the removal of God from school rituals, and desire for faith-centered curriculum (Glenn-Applegate, Pentimonti, & Justice, 2011; Stevens, 2003). For other families, the desire to homeschool came from a pedagogical rebellion against the size of school districts, the creation of common core, and schooling strategies that were focused more on crowd control than centered around child development (Gaither, 2009; Kerns, 2016). Due to COVID-19 this niche practice of incorporating learning into family life has now become an everyday reality for almost every American caretaker across the country.

It is important for caretakers to know that homeschooling success is more than test scores, clocking in hours, staring at a screen, and completing checklists. Homeschooling is like any

aspect of parenting- it can be incredibly difficult yet rewarding. More weathered homeschooling parents often report that success comes from the pride of watching their children authentically learn and grow.

Here are our recommendations to help you and your children find the most success in that growth. These suggestions are focused on the *how* of homeschooling rather than the *what* (activities) for homeschooling. There are plenty of resources (your own school district, Pinterest, Facebook videos, or emails from your mother-in-law) that you have probably already seen.

- **Re-frame the experience.** You have an unplanned but unparalleled opportunity to engage your child in deep, meaningful learning experiences that are more aligned with your child's unique development (e.g. learning style, sleep schedule, eating habits). Shaking up learning from the traditional school routine will not only foster creativity with your child but will be much easier to manage than piles of worksheets and reading tasks.
- **Be kind and forgive yourself.** Give yourself space and time to become the home educator that works best for you, your child, and your home life. You might often wonder "Am I doing enough." **You are.**
- **Make everyday moments for learning.** You can cook together, clean out a closet, or go on a walk and hunt for bugs. The learning experiences you are providing for your child may not include color-coded daily schedules with structured, time-in-seat worksheets and activities like formal schooling, but everyday moments and interactions are a valuable way to support your child's growth.
- **Empower your children.** Give your child some choice and freedom over their learning. This will not only help build intrinsic motivation but also teach self-regulation and autonomy.
- **Rely on resources that are already available.** Make your life easier by relying on pre-made materials and resources from your school district and community organizations.
- **Set a schedule that works for you but don't stick to it...or do.** Find what works for you and allow for flexibility. This pandemic is a collective experience of trauma and it's ok to change when things don't feel good, to take breaks, and to allow everyone in your family some freedom.
- **Eat well and move more.** Encourage balanced eating and involve children in deciding what is on their plate and in its preparation. You can also teach your kids how to safely use cooking utensils, measure ingredients (math!), how to keep food safe and store it for later. Older children might like being charged with the making of a whole meal to feed the family. The www.UThealthyamilies.org website has videos that teach knife skills, easy substitutions when you don't have every ingredient in a recipe, and food safety among other things.

As two working parents we have faced the same challenges trying to incorporate meaningful learning into our children's lives while working and maintaining a household during this chaotic time. However, here are a few things we have done in our home to facilitate learning with our children:



We spend a lot of time outside. Whether that is directed learning outside with scavenger hikes or walks, reading outside and eating outside. Most recently our children have figured out how to ride a bike and a scooter. Both of these things were challenging for them before COVID-19 and now they have been able to put time into these activities and we are proud of what they have been able to accomplish!



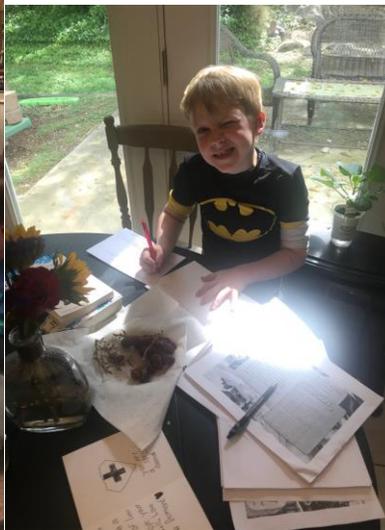
We also do a lot of yoga with them. This has allowed us to take small breaks from our own work and connect with them. It has the added benefit of teaching all of us how to connect and listen to our bodies.



Many parents are worried about “too much screen time.” We pay attention to what each of our boys need when it comes to their own screen time use, but don’t follow any hard rules (one needs more screen time to keep his brain calm and focused, one is more tactile and would rather be outside more). However, we have tried to do our best to have meaningful screen time experiences and teach them to regulate their use of technology. Often, they can make decisions about what is best and most appropriate for themselves. We try to have them video chat and interact with their friends, classmates/teachers/tutors and family members as much as possible. Sometimes that means Facetiming while playing Animal Crossing with buddies!



Finally, we are trying to utilize what we already have in our home. This includes board games, books, downloaded apps, materials provided by the school district and other resources we have in baskets and bookshelves around the house. Learning also means that the boys participate in household work and caring for others. Recently they wrote thank you notes to the healthcare workers we know in our lives. Whatever activity we do we strive to keep in mind that we are learning by talking and not by testing.



Not everything we teach our children during this time will be related to a common core standard or help improve their state test scores and that is fine. In fact, what they learn with us at home, might be even better. Perhaps the greatest thing we can teach our kids during this time is to be kind to ourselves and others, to work together, and do the best we can in a world that is always changing.

Resources for further information: *THIS MIGHT NOT BE NECESSARY

www.UThealthyfamilies.org - find delicious low-cost recipes, skills videos, information how to stretch your food budget, and more.

Extension links

Local Homeschooling - Homeschooling everyday

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