Managing Your Homeschool

Dedicated to homeschoolers everywhere:
May the Lord bless you as you build tomorrow’s generation!
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Remember when summers were for vacations, baseball games, and catching up on household projects? That was back in the B.H. (Before Homeschooling) Days, wasn’t it?

Most homeschoolers spend a significant amount of time each summer preparing for the upcoming school year. Wise planning makes the new year go much more smoothly. Every hour you spend in preparation saves you hours of time fumbling around later. It is worth the investment.

Homeschooling reminds me of gardening. Before the new season begins, moms eagerly look through catalogs and browse the local “nursery” (also known as the Vendor Hall at your state conference!).

Then they check the “discount stores” (friends, used curriculum fairs, and the Internet) for curriculum for the upcoming school year.

As fall approaches, there is heightened excitement as new routines, schedules, and lesson plans fly from Mom’s mind to the family’s ears.

My own children learned to brace themselves for all of my new plans each year. They also learned that my enthusiasm and energy faded rather quickly. Management and follow-through are always tougher than goal-setting, just like in gardening.

During our nineteen years of homeschooling, I found that each year was a little different. Factors such as where we were living at the time, how many children we had, and whether the youngest was a baby, a toddler, or school-age all influenced how I planned for the year.
Over the years, we homeschooled in a basement schoolroom, around the kitchen table while on location with Dad’s work, and from our living room couch during a difficult pregnancy.

We started homeschooling when our firstborn was five. We also had a three-year-old and a newborn. Like most rookies, I set up a classroom with little desks and tried to make our son’s kindergarten experience as much like regular school as possible. The three-year-old scribbled a few pages, but mostly played in an adjacent room.

The infant mostly slept or nursed. After adding two more sons to our family, I discovered that it is definitely easier to homeschool with an infant in the house, than with a toddler—an infant stays where you put him!

Whether you are new to homeschooling or a seasoned veteran, there are several things you can do during the summer to prepare for the upcoming year. Firming up discipline, establishing routines, and academic preparation are some of the areas we will discuss here.

**Discipline**

If you have not already established the habit of prompt and thorough obedience in your home, it is essential that you do so now. You must have a child’s attention before you can teach him.

*You must have a child’s attention before you can teach him.*

When our boys were young, we often reminded them to “Do what I say, right away, with a smile.” This summarizes the three requirements of obedience, whether from child to parent or from parent to God. Our actions don’t show true obedience unless we do what we are told to do, right away, and with a proper attitude.
It is important that your child know what is expected—what he must do in order to please you. Defining your expectations helps. If one of our sons delayed obeying us or started to argue about what we told him to do, we simply restated the “definition” of obedience: Do what I say, right away, with a smile. Then he understood that if he did not obey, he would receive correction.

Disciplining children requires that the parent be disciplined, too. Follow-through is essential. Perhaps you’ve heard the old joke:

What is the first rule for teaching a parakeet how to talk?

You must have a larger vocabulary than the parakeet.

So, what is the first rule for disciplining children? You must have more discipline than the child.

Although there are times when it seems easier to repeat your request, count to three, or just let it go, in the long run enforcing instant obedience will save you much time, energy, and heartache.

The most important things we teach our children are not found in textbooks. We are charged with teaching them to love and obey their Heavenly Father. They learn to love and obey Him by learning to love and obey us. And their view of Him will be reflected in how they view us as parents.

Hopefully, we can communicate unconditional love and the perfect balance between justice and mercy that He manifests toward us. That is a lofty goal made possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us to transform us into His likeness.¹

¹ For an extensive treatment of the topic of discipline, see Marcia’s book, Managing Your Children available at www.marciawashburn.com.
Establishing Routines

Your home will run more smoothly during the next school year if you and your children are accustomed to some day-to-day routines. Although our family didn’t always rise at the same time every morning—it varied according to the previous evening’s activities and bedtime—the children could expect the same order of events before school each day.

Each morning they were expected to use the bathroom, comb their hair, and dress before breakfast. When we had livestock, the animals were to be fed before the children ate. After breakfast, rooms were tidied (not a big job if things were left in order the night before) and morning chores were completed.

Morning chores were assigned according to the age of the child. Since our five boys’ ages spanned almost ten years, their abilities were quite different.

Each son was given as many chores as he was years of age. For example, the five-year-old had five daily chores—most of them to be completed before school while the older ones fed the animals.

The eleven-year-old had eleven chores, some daily, some weekly, and some monthly. This was also the year of preparation for learning to take over his own laundry at age twelve.

At each birthday each son received another responsibility along with new privileges. When the younger brothers complained that the older ones got to do things they weren’t permitted to do yet, they were reminded that the older ones also had more responsibilities. “To whom is much given is much required.”

When teaching a child to do a new chore, spend time with him demonstrating and then watching as he completes the chore himself. It
may take several days (or weeks in the case of laundry) for him to faithfully remember all of the steps to necessary to do the job right.

Write on a file card what steps are necessary to complete the chore and post it in the room where he does that chore. If doing the dishes also means wiping the counters, putting away the leftovers, and sweeping the floor, write those tasks on the card.

Then have periodic, unannounced inspections. It is important to realize that as a parent you can only expect what you inspect. Most adults wouldn’t show up at work everyday if they thought no one would notice their absence. Be prepared to praise your child for the steps he has done well. Re-teach the other steps until you can count on him to do the job to the best of his ability. Do not expect adult level performance, but do expect effort and do commend his small victories.

Your family already has many routines that are working well for you. Periodically, evaluate them to see which ones need to be modified as your family’s needs change.

Routines keep you from having to start over every day with the basics of chores, discipline, and scheduling. Those decisions are already made and the tasks can be done rapidly because everyone knows what to expect. These structure-building routines allow us to be open to the fun surprises that God has planned to flesh out each new day.²

Preparing for the Academics of Homeschooling

Parents are generally allowed to use any calendar for their homeschool. Some follow the traditional September through May school year, while others

² For more on routines, see Marcia’s book, Managing Your Home available at www.marciawashburn.com.
teach for eight weeks and then take off two weeks year-round. Each state has slightly different requirements for homeschoolers. Contact your state organization to be sure that you know what your state law says concerning the required number of days of instruction, record-keeping, etc.³

There are several things to remember as you are planning for the year’s academics. We have the joy and the privilege as homeschoolers of truly individualizing our children’s education. No child works at the same grade level in every subject. It is all right to use a second grade speller, a fifth grade reader, and an eighth grade math book for your sixth grader if that’s what he needs.

After homeschooling for a few years, I discovered that it was getting more and more difficult to keep up with all of the assignments. With five children each doing eight subjects each day, I was drowning. But I didn’t want to just give them workbooks or online work to do. The heart of homeschooling is that it is Christ-centered, parent-directed, and free of government control. After thinking it over, I decided to teach the boys as a group whenever possible.

When the boys were young, we often integrated the subjects to teach a character trait such as attentiveness through several different subject areas. They worked on sequential subjects such as math, beginning reading, and spelling individually. We did history, science, music, art, and others together, with each child doing assignments appropriate for his skill level. This saved me from preparing lessons in eight subjects for five children each day. It also saved my sanity.

³ Home School Legal Defense at www.hslda.org is a good resource for checking on local requirements. A great online resource for both beginners and seasoned homeschoolers is the website for Christian Home Educators of Colorado found at www.chec.org.
Some subjects must be taught individually or to a group that is all at that level. These are the sequential subjects that must be taught in a specific order so that they make sense. Sequential subjects include beginning reading, spelling, and math.

Non-sequential subjects can be taught at different grade levels without a problem. Who says that a child must study dinosaurs in second grade and the solar system in fourth grade? This is merely a convenience for curriculum publishers. Why not have the whole family study rocks or South America at the same time? Why not have the whole family enjoy *Robinson Crusoe* together?

It is not necessary to use textbooks with every child in every subject. In fact, you may not use any textbooks at all! Textbooks are merely a summary of information on a subject and are seldom as interesting as reading biographies about the people the texts describe. I often used the texts as an outline, but used the library for the actual materials. This meant lots of summer reading to keep ahead of my class. By deciding what general topics we needed to cover the next year, I could shop wisely at the state homeschool conference, as well.

To plan out the year, I would check the table of contents in the textbook. I divided the number of chapters by eight, even though we used a nine-month school year. This way, I could plan how much information to cover in a month and allow two catch up weeks each semester. It really helped when Christmas or a new baby came around.

We didn’t always cover everything, but it gave us a goal to work toward. I didn’t teach all of the information in the textbook, but picked out the central themes and went into more depth on those. The textbook acted as a guideline for selecting library resources about each topic. Remember—it is
better to cover a limited amount of material thoroughly than to skim over the top of lots of information.

As the boys grew older, we chose to rotate through subjects like science and history. For example, one year we would study American history, the next geography, and the next world history. Then we would repeat the sequence.

During the American history year, the younger boys learned about the best known presidents such as Washington and Lincoln and about our home state of Colorado. The older children learned about all of the presidents as we got to their times in history and they learned all of the states, capitals, etc. By the time we returned to American history again three years later, the younger ones had a basic speaking acquaintance with much of the material and the older ones were ready for a more in-depth study of both American history and government.

Since much of the teaching was done as a group, I read aloud many of the books. I found that my boys would listen to me read much longer if I allowed them to do something with their hands such as assembling puzzle maps of the United States or building a fort with Legos®. As Ruth Beechick is fond of saying, “We need to work with the wiggle.” Periodic questions insured that they continued to follow what I said.

In science we would study health and the human body every few years. One year we rolled out butcher paper on the floor and traced around each child’s body. The older students labeled their body parts with the various bones we had been studying. I did the labeling for the younger children, allowing them to dictate to me.

Most of them just labeled the arm, leg, mouth, eyes, etc. But our seven-year-old, John, insisted on putting the liver on his paper—no heart, stomach, or other internal organs—just the liver. I was surprised that he even knew he
had a liver. This is the same child that recently moved to Peru as a missionary doctor. You just never know.

It is not necessary to do every subject every day, or even every week. You will want to spend time daily on Bible, math, reading and spelling. But you may very well choose to do history one semester and science the other. Or perhaps do history on Monday and Tuesday and science on Thursday and Friday, leaving Wednesday for music lessons or to participate in activity days with your homeschooling support group or co-op.

Plan on spending some time and thought this summer preparing for the upcoming school year. Refining your discipline techniques, tweaking household routines, and planning your academics will smooth the way for a successful year.
Fall is my favorite time of year. It is a time of new beginnings, new projects, and new hopes and dreams that this year will be different.

For forty-three years, my fall seasons began with the start of a new school year—either as a student myself or as a teacher.

As each September rolled around, I just knew that this would be the year we would get it all together.

This year I would find the secret to homeschooling a houseful of children and yet living in a home that was magazine-perfect.

Yeah, right! I eventually admitted that my name is not Super-Mom. Maybe that’s one of God’s purposes in having us homeschool—so we will realize that we cannot do it in our own strength—we must rely on Him.

Parenting puts you on your knees; homeschooling keeps you there. A simple 1-2-3 formula for homeschooling success does not exist. Just as our children change and grow, so do we. God uses homeschooling as an individualized curriculum to help us parents to grow and change, too.

Over the nineteen years that we homeschooled our five sons, we developed some strategies that worked well for us. We discovered that home schooling is much like operating a small business. Establishing a suitable workplace,
prioritizing a schedule, and assigning jobs efficiently are essential to the success of both.

The Workplace

Work out the logistics. Decide where you will store your school materials. Will you have a separate room for school time, or will you need to put everything away each day?

Through the years we’ve had school in a variety of locations: in a spare bedroom, around the dining room table, in a camper trailer, and from the living room couch during a difficult pregnancy. Each location worked, but as our family grew to include five sons and we acquired more learning materials, we felt the need to establish a permanent schoolroom.

We selected a room in our unfinished basement for our classroom. Since six separate desks would have monopolized the room, my husband installed a pre-cut laminated countertop along two walls. This desktop was supported by four legal-size, two-drawer filing cabinets. The laminated surface was ideal for art and science projects, and great for laying out my sewing projects during after-school hours.

Each child was assigned one filing drawer for his school materials, and I used the remaining drawers for my teaching files. Textbooks were placed at the front of each drawer, along with a lunch box (great for portability) for markers, scissors, and small supplies. A jar held the child’s pencils within easy reach. Hanging file folders in the drawers held school papers (divided by subject areas), coloring books, artwork, and flat memorabilia. An added benefit: the boys learned how to use a simple filing system.

Each boy had a bulletin board hung on the wall by his “desk” to display his work and to post reminders, memory verses, etc. When we did group activities, the boys could easily turn their chairs toward me. Until all of the
boys were tall enough to sit well in full-size chairs, we used some small school desks along one wall.

The pre-school age children could play quietly (sometimes!) on the floor while the older boys worked. A floor-to-ceiling bookshelf stood on the opposite wall and a time line raced along the ceiling. Hand-me-down carpet covered the floor and a U.S. flag disguised the entrance to the crawl space under the house.

As my class got smaller (my how fast they do grow!), we eventually abandoned the schoolroom and began using the living room for our “together times.” The boys took turns sitting on either side of me as we snuggled under an afghan in the big recliner while I read aloud. The former classroom was useful for other projects and eventually became a “dorm” for our college-aged sons when they spent the weekend at home.

You may not have a room to devote to school alone, but ask God to give you creative and resourceful ideas for maximizing the space you do have in your home for teaching. A filing cabinet is a great investment for your teaching supplies.

If you use a kitchen table, consider using a plastic bin for each child’s school and library books, supplies, etc. It is easy to tote the bin from room to room and it can be put away on a shelf or in a closet when he has finished with his formal schooling for the day so you don’t have school materials out all of the time. Everyone needs a break from school to just be a family.

**Setting Priorities**

We found that it was essential to set priorities for our day. Since we wanted to center our day and our education on the Lord, we started with Bible and
prayer first each day. Then if the rest of the day fell apart (we all know this happens occasionally), we had completed the most important work of the day.

When the children were young, we used a children’s Bible. Later we worked our way through various books of the Old and New Testaments. We made a point of memorizing Scripture portions such as the Lord’s Prayer, Psalms 23 and 100, Romans 12, and Proverbs 3. Even the youngest students could learn long passages one phrase or verse at a time.

We made a prayer notebook to direct our family prayer time. Using an inexpensive photo album with self-sticking pages, we set aside several pages for each day of the week. On Mondays we prayed for people in our immediate family. The album included pictures of each of us. What a blessing to hear the boys praying for each other!

On Tuesdays we prayed for our country. We referred to pictures of our president (available free from the White House), soldiers, our flag, etc., as we prayed.

Wednesdays were for our church family whom we would be seeing at the evening service.

Thursdays were for missions and included pictures of missionaries whom we supported. If we had discussed some current events happening in another country, they found their way into the boys’ prayers, also.

On Fridays we prayed for our extended family, some of whom we may be seeing over the weekend—grandparents, cousins, etc. Seeing their pictures every week helped our little ones remember and recognize relatives who lived at a distance.

The prayer notebook acted as a guide so that our family remembered to pray beyond our own
borders. We didn’t allow the notebook to lock us into only praying for certain needs on a certain day. It simply reminded us not to forget those whom we didn’t see daily and to keep a balance in our prayer life.

**Handling Assignments**

Homeschooling is a great way to individualize instruction for each child, but it didn’t take me long to figure out that teaching seven different subjects to each of five children on an individual basis was not going to work at the Washburn house.

I had to come up with a better way of covering the material. I didn’t want to lock them into workbooks all day, so we did much of our Bible, science, history, music, literature, and art together as a class, sometimes as unit studies. The sequential subjects (reading, math, and spelling) were taught individually.

Each week I wrote assignments in each boy’s assignment notebook, a 5 x 7-inch stenographer’s tablet with spiral wire at the top, available at office supply stores. I used an assignment book even for my pre-readers so I could keep track of their progress.

The page was headed with that day’s date; assignments and reminders for the week were listed below. Sometimes I would slip in a surprise such as “Do ten pushups,” “Give Mom a kiss,” or “Make popcorn for everyone on Wednesday at 2:00.” Reminders to work on memory verses, practice piano lessons, etc., were also included.

The younger children needed day-by-day assignments for each subject. I could write weekly assignments for the older boys, allowing them to learn to plan how they would use their time. Some of them preferred to finish all
of their grammar for the week and then move on to another subject; others preferred to do a little of each subject each day.

The boys checked off assignments as they were completed. When I had an individual conference with each boy, it was easy to spot his progress. He could note any questions about his work in the notebook, also. If I was called away from the schoolroom to answer the door or change a diaper, the boys knew what to work on until I returned. At the end of the school year, I filed the used assignment books with samples of the boys’ work.

Homeschooling, especially with a “quiverful” of students, can be complicated. Using the sound business principles of establishing an optimal work environment, prioritizing your schedule, and assigning individual jobs efficiently can help your school to run more smoothly. If you approach your tasks with prayer and imagination, you will find the organization tools that will most benefit your family.
What is your greatest aggravation about homeschooling? Most moms say it is figuring out how to deal with the mess.

“What do I do with all of those papers?”

“Where did I put that great recipe for homemade Play-Doh™?”

“Where are the instructions for that great game for reviewing the bones in the human body?”

How can we corral all of those papers and project components so we can find them when we need them?

Let’s consider both the paper and non-paper items that may be free-ranging through your home.

Fileables

American homeschoolers are blessed with an overwhelming wealth of teaching materials. Sometimes we might wish for the simplicity of homeschooling in a jungle community like my friends in Ecuador. But to whom many materials are given, much storage is required.

The most efficient way to store flat items, and to be able to find them later, is to either use a filing cabinet or to transfer them to a computer file. Here are some ideas to get you started.
Purchase one or more filing cabinets. They may be new or used, metal or furniture-finished. If you have a choice, buy one that has legal-size drawers—they give you a few inches of extra room around the edges for longer papers and books. Suspension files will glide more easily and are worth the extra cost. If your cabinet isn’t designed for hanging files, purchase a conversion kit at an office supply store. Plastic bins with grooves to hold the file folders will work, if your budget is tight.

We made desks for our boys by using two-drawer cabinets to support a laminated countertop. Each son had a drawer for his own books, supplies, and papers, and I had two for my current teaching materials.

I found it helpful to set up my files according to subjects. Initially the folders read “Science” or “History.” As I added more items, I sub-divided them into categories such as “American History—Colonial” or “American History—Presidents.”

You will be able to store some ideas and files on your computer. Your computer filing system for homeschooling should mirror the system you’ve selected for your filing cabinets. If you file by school subjects in your filing cabinets, do the same in your computer files.

Scan useful magazine articles into your computer and you won’t have to search through all of your back issues for that great unit study or teaching idea.

*Home School Enrichment Magazine* offers subscribers a bonus—you may read each entire issue online. Although you cannot save the articles directly to your computer, you can save the URL address for the article to your file so you can easily find the information later.

In addition to the subject area folders, you may want files for field trip ideas and details; games; a list of items you’ve loaned to others; and a list of where you stored seldom-used items such as the plastic
clock Johnny used in third grade to learn to tell time and now Sarah needs it five years later.

The most important rule for any kind of filing is to keep up with it. Otherwise your files are useless to you and you’re back to stacks of to-be-filed papers. Trust me on this one: you don’t want to go there. Periodically, perhaps each year before purchasing new curriculum, sort through your files, discarding what you no longer need. Who knows? You may discover all kinds of wonderful teaching treasures you’d forgotten you owned.

Non-Fileables

Every homeschool has items that don’t fit conveniently into a filing cabinet: basic school supplies, microscopes, games, puzzles, models of the human body, and on and on. The larger and younger your family, the more important it is to find homes for each of these items. Many of them are expensive and some could be dangerous to little ones.

Storing basic school supplies:

♦ If your family works around the kitchen table for school, place all of the basics—scissors, glue, crayons, markers, etc.—in a shoebox in the middle of the table. Store it elsewhere after your class work is finished for the day.

♦ You might even make this collection off-limits for non-school projects so you know that you will always have needed supplies on hand when you start each morning. Color-coding works well for some families whose equipment tends to “walk” off—red means “stop!”—only use this item for schoolwork.

♦ Alternately, if each child has his own file drawer or bin for his books and papers, he could store a set of school supplies there.
Each child could have his own plastic pencil box for his supplies. Keep it in his drawer or bin or on the shelf with his books.

Storing odd-shaped school items:

- Games and puzzles can be stored on bookshelves, in drawers, or on a closet shelf. We made low shelves in one bedroom closet using bricks and boards beneath the boys’ hanging clothes.

- There may be room for a small chest of drawers in a closet. Consider under-the-bed storage, too.

- Odd-shaped items such as models and microscopes may find a home in a spare kitchen cupboard, in the garage, or in the basement or attic.

- Just as you label a box of outgrown clothes with the name of the next child who will use them, do the same with curriculum and supplemental items.

Make Your Job Easier

- Clear out clutter—unused appliances, toys, clothes, etc.—to make way for what you do use. Ask yourself: “Do I really need to keep this?”

- Keep additional clutter out by giving school items instead of non-essentials as birthday gifts. What boy wouldn’t want his own set of hand tools or perhaps a quality magnifying glass to examine insects in the garden? What girl wouldn’t want supplies for hand-sewing, quilting, or scrapbooking?

- American companies over-package most products. Do you really need the box it came in? Can you place the game pieces into zipper-style bags so you can file the game if you’re short on shelf space? Or perhaps you have more shelf space than filing space and keeping the box makes sense. Analyze your home and make your decision accordingly.
If you are severely space-challenged, think carefully about what curriculum and supplemental materials will work for your family. You might consider making and using lap books that can easily be filed.¹

Some projects are worth doing and some are not. Many projects are a waste of time. If your children are mastering the concepts without doing lots of hands-on activities, don’t feel that you must do all of the projects just because they’re mentioned in the teacher’s manual. Discern which ones will benefit your children and don’t bother with the rest.

Are you drowning in teaching clutter? Do you need a major overhaul to get control of your school stuff? Start in one area and master it first. Make step-by-step changes. Pretty soon you will be spending less time looking for things and more time using them.

¹ If you are not familiar with the lap book concept, visit http://www.unitstudy.com or http://www.ajourneythroughlearning.net for examples.
A few of you are old enough to remember when personal computers were introduced and the manufacturers grandly announced that we were soon going to be a Paperless Society. Whoever made that prediction had obviously never run a homeschooling household.

As homeschoolers, we accumulate more kinds of paper than Grandma knew existed.

And if your house is like mine, the piles threaten to overwhelm us—

School assignments,

art projects,

household papers,

mail and bills,

clippings to file for use sometime in the future—

ey all pile up at an astonishing rate.

Here are some strategies to tame the Paper Monster that huffs and puffs his way into your house.

School Papers

First, decide what to do with all of those wonderful math and handwriting papers your children produce every day. These are subjects that require lots of practice and generate piles of papers.

Most states do not require you to keep every paper and project your child does for school (what a relief!). A file folder or tote box for each child will...
corral those papers you do decide to keep. Sort through the box quarterly to see what is really important and trash the rest. Explain to your children that those are just practice papers and that you’ll only be keeping copies of their very best work.

We use the same principle in other areas. For example, we don’t record the child’s daily piano practice but we may videotape a recital.

**Art Projects**

What about art projects? Whenever possible, design your art lessons around something that can eventually be given to a loving friend, neighbor, or relative.

A rotating refrigerator exhibit works for many families. When it’s time to remove a picture or painting, the child decides whether to discard it, give it away (grandparents love to see what your children have been doing), or keep it in his own Memory Box.

Some children will keep very few items while others will find it difficult to part with any of their masterpieces. The Memory Box is a file box kept in the child’s room; he keeps papers, souvenirs, etc., in it. When it is full, he must either stop adding to it or sort out the items no longer important to him.

**Organizing Research Files**

Homeschool moms are always on the lookout for great teaching ideas. Over the years I collected hundreds of magazine articles, pictures, and other teaching materials to supplement my children’s regular curriculum. My files were chaotic until I started filing according to school subjects.

At first, I labeled file folders for each subject area: science, history, music, and so forth. Eventually, I needed to develop sub-categories in each area, for
example *Science—Meteorology*, *Science—Zoology*, and *Science—Human Body*. These I filed alphabetically.

I placed the history files in chronological order, for example: *History—Greeks and Romans* or *History—U.S. Colonial*.

Other file headings include *Holidays—Fall*; *Language Arts—Spelling*; *Music—Composers*; *Homeschooling—Catalogs*; and *Homeschooling—Legal Issues*.

When first starting your filing system, you may not need such detailed file names, but it is helpful to have a plan for expanding when you need to. Start with just a subject heading, such as *Math*; then detail it as needed. An older child may get valuable experience as he helps you set up a filing system.

Get the best quality filing cabinets you can afford. Drawers are heavy when full; suspension rollers save you lots of aggravation and are easier for students to handle.

Legal-size drawers are nice. You have a few extra inches along the sides for extra-long items, notebooks, or flashcards.

If hanging files are not built into the drawers, purchase a metal frame set from an office supply store. Hanging files hold more than traditional manila file folders, they don't slide down in the drawer, and they glide easily along on the side rails, making filing a pleasure—almost!

A bonus: if you are schooling in the family room, a nice filing cabinet could hold all of your textbooks and teaching materials when you finish for the day.

Make a rule for yourself to only save papers you will actually take time to process or file—no “To Be Filed” piles allowed! (I still struggle with this one). It doesn't take any longer to file an item immediately than to file it later. Actually, you'll save time by not having to guess how many inches down in
the “To Be Filed” box you might find a missing resource. Self-discipline pays for teachers as well as students. Trust me on this.

Periodically, leaf through your files. Not only will you find items to dispose of, but also you’ll find resources you forgot that you had. These newly-found treasures will spark creative ideas for future lessons.

Use a small recipe box of index cards for odds and ends such as quotations, games, field trip ideas, etc. One card may list items loaned to others. Another may list locations of seldom-used materials; this card saves much searching. Use it for household items, as well as school stuff.

Or set up a similar system on your computer. And keep reminding yourself that you don’t always need to save the clipping or article; if you only need a website address or a few sentences from the page, type it into a computer file and discard the hard copy.

**Household Papers**

What about household (non-school) papers? Phone messages, appointment information, and mail all add to the clutter that threatens to overtake our homes.

- **Phone messages.** Avoid using little scraps of paper and sticky notes for important messages. If you have a land line phone, place a stenographer’s notebook or clipboard next to the phone (with pen attached!); teach your family to check the message notebook each time they come home. You may even want to invest in a notebook specifically designed for taking messages at an office; it has carbonless paper, which automatically gives you a permanent copy of the message but allows the recipient to tear off the message without taking the whole notebook with him.
- **Personal planner.** Just as important as a message notebook is using a personal planner. Not only will it reduce paper clutter, but it will ease mind clutter, as well.

  Don’t you hate it when you have that niggling feeling that you’re forgetting something important? A planner makes those thoughts go “bye-bye.” This may be a traditional notebook planner or an electronic planner such as a tablet. My children call my planner “Mom’s Brain.” Don’t leave home without it.

- **Mail.** Some quick ideas for dealing with mail (junk and otherwise): process mail once daily. Sit next to a trashcan. Open all letters and bills, discarding all unneeded inserts and outer envelopes as you go. Place the mail in a folder or large envelope until you are ready to answer the letters and pay the bills (are we ever ready for that?).

  Place magazines and catalogs in a reading basket. As you look through them, tear out pages to keep. I keep a file folder of just the catalog pages that interest me (with expiration dates) so I can compare them when I’m ready to order. Trash the parts of the catalogs and magazines you have no use for. If you are keeping the entire magazine, consider purchasing vertical magazine holders from an office supply store. You might place a sticky note on the cover with pages that you want to reference later.

**Final Thoughts**

If your paperwork is truly out of control, choose one small area to tackle at a time. Perhaps you will start by establishing a mail handling routine or using Memory Boxes for your children. Maybe you will implement a central message center or personal planner first.
Whatever you choose will diminish the Paper Monster’s power to control your life. Chase that interloper out of your home and you’ll have the freedom to go about your daily tasks without dodging piles of papers. Charge!
And so it’s January—that month we face with combined anticipation and dread. We’ve negotiated the busy Christmas season and, perhaps, have some new ideas and new equipment (Christmas gifts!) to try in our homeschools.

But the thought of slogging along for another five months may bring dismay to even the stoutest of hearts on some dreary winter days.¹ It’s time for a mid-year makeover.

**Out with the Old**

How does your house look? Have you found new homes for all those Christmas gifts? If they don’t have an assigned spot in your home, your new belongings will become a curse not a blessing, always in your way. Have you passed along items and clothes no longer needed now that you have all that new stuff?

A cluttered home leads to a cluttered mind. It is hard to think fresh thoughts with old projects staring you down at every turn. Are there projects that once interested you but now just make you feel guilty? It is not a sin to pass along a half-finished cross-stitch to someone who has time to complete it.

Are you saving magazines and newspapers to read “someday?” Discard anything that is already outdated and schedule fifteen minutes a day to catch up on the rest.

¹ If you feel discouraged as you face the next semester, see Marcia’s book, *Encouragement for Homeschool Moms* at www.marciwashburn.com.
As you read magazines you know you’ll want to keep, attach a sticky note to the front to list articles you think you’ll refer to later. You might even type a list of those articles onto your computer so you can actually find them when you need them. Select a place to store keeper magazines so they’re not sitting in piles around the house.

**Start Fresh**

We not only need to get rid of old stuff, we need to boot the old attitudes that clogged our relational arteries last year.

Have you struggled with a certain child? A certain subject? A personal character fault? Now is the time to start fresh.

Get rid of those things you’ve dragged into the New Year that should have been left in the Old Year. Clean out that refrigerator-full of questionable leftovers and haven’t-used-this-since-I-made-that-recipe-nobody-liked-three-years-ago stuff. You don’t need to store emotional garbage. Bitterness and resentment will poison you just like moldy meat. Move on.

Why do we hang onto attitudes and habits that drag us down anyway? They’re like that extra ten pounds we gained from too much eggnog and chocolate fudge over the holidays.

Talk with that child you’ve been struggling with. Tell him you want to start fresh. Help both of you to visualize it by using a white board to write down areas of disagreement from the past. Then, one-by-one, erase them, saying “I forgive you for this hurt/attitude/action.”

As new challenges arise, don’t be tempted to dig up the old, forgiven ones. Just deal with the present conflict right away. Keep short accounts with each
other; don’t pile up emotional debt—choose a debt-free life, except for the
debt of love which is never completely paid.

First Things First

Spend time together with the Lord each day before starting the academic
subjects. If an emergency arises, you will still have spent your time doing the
most important “subject” of the day. Don’t let academics become an idol in
your home. Put God first.

And don’t neglect your personal time with the
Lord; you cannot lead someone where you
haven’t been. The time you spend in studying
the Bible and in prayer with your children is
precious and vital, but it does not replace your one-on-one time with Him.

Your children must understand, by your example, that a regular quiet time is
a part of the Christian walk for all believers, not just another school subject
that they will outgrow when they graduate.

Tackle Something New in School

Is it time for a child to make plans to start his own business when summer
arrives? Have you been itching to develop a unit study around your family’s
special interests such as film-making?

Do you need to hit the books hard for a few weeks with the promise of an
extra-special trip or project on the horizon?

Ninety-percent of successful teaching is enthusiasm. Sell your children on
whatever you’ve decided to do next and you’ve won the war.
Avoid Comparisons

Do you feel like you’re really not doing a very good job homeschooling your children? Like they would be better off in a public school? Of course if you need to take your homeschooling more seriously than a casual, “Okay, kid, go do your school now,” then get after it. There is no room for laziness on the part of teacher or student.

But perhaps you just feel like everyone else is doing a better job homeschooling than you are. It’s easy to put others on a pedestal, but you aren’t called to be anyone else but yourself. God didn’t make a mistake when He made you the parent of your children—He knew what He was doing. He doesn’t necessarily call us to build scholarship winners or musical prodigies or winners of spelling bees. He calls us to faithfully raise our children to know His ways and walk in them. And they will learn to do that by watching you live your life faithfully.

Be Faithful

Every day won’t be filled with excitement; sometimes, even most times, you will put one foot in front of the other and just keep on walking. And this perseverance will prepare your children better for the adult world than an assumption that every day will be a Disneyland day.

Elisa Morgan, founder of MOPS International, reminds us, “A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a great thing.”

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2 See “The Ideal Homeschool Mother” in the articles section of Marcia’s website at www.marciawashburn.com.
Billy Graham once commented to his employees that many of them would be in line ahead of him to receive eternal rewards. He explained that God values faithfulness over fruitfulness.

Whether you teach thousands of people every year through a speaking ministry or you teach just one or two sometimes-unwilling children, God remembers your faithfulness.

You are responsible for remaining faithful to what He has called you to do; He is responsible for your fruitfulness. Bloom where He has planted you. Don’t, even mentally, pick up your roots and move to a “greener” pasture.

Ask the Lord for Joy

In times of discouragement I’ve found comfort in Isaiah 40-43. I especially like The Message version of Isaiah 43:1b-3:

“Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you. I’ve called your name. You’re mine. When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you. When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down. When you’re between a rock and a hard place, it won’t be a dead end—because I am God, your personal God, the Holy of Israel, your Savior. I paid a huge price for you . . . that’s how much you mean to me!”

Would it make a difference in your enthusiasm for teaching on a tired morning if you reminded yourself that what you do today will impact not only your children, but your grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and beyond? Encourage yourself with words from the Word such as Psalms 127 and 128.

While preparing to teach my workshop, The Joys of Raising Boys, I ran across a delightful book of prayers for little boys. Listen in as a discouraged little boy learns to pray:

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Dear God,
Psst... are You listening? Are You always listening to hear me talk to You? My dad says You are. I can talk to You anytime... from any place and You will hear what I pray. I am glad that I don't have to stand in line to talk to You. I am glad You don't have voicemail. Thank You for listening all the time! Amen.⁴

The joy of the Lord is indeed your strength. As you clear out the clutter in your household, your head, and your heart for your New Year Makeover, turn to the One Who promises you that His mercies are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness!

Keeping the Home in Homeschooling: Dealing with Extra-Curriculars

Do you ever wonder, “If a woman’s place is in the home, why am I always in the car?”

Do you find yourself hurrying your children through chores and schoolwork to get to lessons, co-op classes, and sports practices on time?

Is there just too much pressure in your life? Help is on the way!

We have a love-hate relationship with those outside-of-home activities called extra-curriculars. And they really do serve a good purpose when thoughtfully selected.

They can fill in gaps in your curriculum—many parents use piano lessons as a music class or gymnastics for physical education. Extra-curriculars provide opportunities for social interaction. Children (and parents!) can develop leadership skills and learn to serve others while participating in supplementary activities.

But every parent soon learns the challenges of outside-the-home activities. If overdone, activities may divide the family, stealing time and energy. Children may form new loyalties toward peers, teachers, and coaches, challenging the authority and wisdom of their own parents. If an older child is on a sports team, all of the younger ones get dragged to every practice and game, regardless of nap times or unfinished schoolwork; their needs as little ones take a backseat to the coach’s schedule.

It is easy to fall into the trap of signing up your children for every class or club that comes along. They all sound so interesting. And sometimes we’re afraid, deep down, that our children are somehow getting cheated by not
being in a “regular” school. So we compensate by saying “yes” to too many activities.

Your children will do just fine, even if they’re not involved in every activity that catches their fancy. No one can do everything. Children need to learn time management along the way, just as we do. Creativity grows when a child has enough unstructured time to get bored now and then.

In my piano studio, I’m often struck by the impact over-scheduling has on children. These children rush in for their lessons, often without all of their music, giving excuses about why they didn’t have time to practice, and then they nearly nod off on the piano bench they’re so tired. These poor tykes are the victims of over-scheduling or, perhaps, their parents’ need for bragging rights.

What a contrast with the children whose parents don’t feel the need to schedule every moment of their children’s lives! Often students with less natural talent play better than those with loads of talent but little time to develop it.

Here are some suggestions for making extra-curricular activities work for your family.

♦ The younger the child, the more time he needs at home.

♦ Consider activities that all or most of the family can be a part of such as church, or service activities. You will develop wonderful shared memories over
the years, as well as spending less time in the car. Whether your children sing at nursing homes or raise money for missions, they will learn the joy of serving others.

- Check out 4-H with your county extension agent. This organization offers hundreds of projects from electricity and photography to clothing design, public speaking, and training service dogs. The materials are very economical and offer many hands-on activities; some families even use them for science curriculum. Perhaps other homeschoolers in your area would like to form a 4-H club that meets during the school day. A huge benefit: the clubs are age-integrated so everyone in the family can attend meetings together.

- If you decide to participate in team sports, try to find teams that allow several ages together so you aren’t racing from one practice or game to another multiple times per week. You might choose a city league instead of a competitive league; the time commitment difference is huge. Our boys played city-sponsored soccer for six weeks each spring, but didn’t do the summer-long four-times-a-week baseball with out-of-town travel to games. With five sons, it would have been insane; summer would have been anything but refreshing.

- Some large families allow each child to be in just one activity. One may take violin lessons, another is in sports, and another prepares for a nursing career through volunteering at a nursing home. Since the child has selected the activity himself, he is more likely to be enthusiastic about practicing and participating.

Life on-the-go demands strong organizational skills. Note that I said skills, not gifts. A skill is something you can learn, whether or not it comes naturally like a gift. Here are some things that have worked at our house.

- Before saying “yes” to a new activity, refer to your calendar or planner. How will it fit with what you’re already doing? Are you and your spouse in full agreement about it?
• How will this activity impact the family as a whole? Will little ones’ naps and routines be impacted?

• Think through where the uniforms, equipment, books, etc., that your activities require will be stored when not in use. Piano music can stay in a tote bag in a basket near the piano, ready to be grabbed on lesson day. Shin guards for soccer players might be stored in the trunk of the car or hanging in the garage in a net bag with the soccer ball. Perhaps you will invest in lockers for the garage or mudroom for uniforms; we used lockers for the boys’ chore clothes when they raised livestock for 4-H.

• Plan to take care of errands while you already have everyone in the car. Many moms make a quick trip to the library for new books before coming to piano lessons in my home. Everyone is eager to devour their latest finds while their siblings take their lessons.

• Bring along mending, crocheting, lesson planning, or other work to do while you wait. Or, if not all of your children are involved in the activity, use the precious one-on-one time to read to your little ones or take a walk in the neighborhood while you wait. Even though you’ve been with your children all day, they’ve still had to share your attention with their siblings. It is the rare child, even a homeschooled one, who gets the undivided attention of an adult for even fifteen minutes per day.

There are some wonderful options out there—support groups and service opportunities, clubs and classes, lessons and language learning. They add spice to your life and may even develop a career interest in a young person.

But, like the herbs and spices you use in the kitchen, they must be carefully selected and used sparingly. You may love oregano in your spaghetti sauce, but you wouldn’t measure it by the cupful! Sprinkle in just enough extras to enhance your routine curriculum and savor the balanced life you’ve created.
Eight Habits for Highly Successful Homeschooling

What is a successful homeschool? What does it look like? Is it defined by children who score highly on standardized tests? Is it one in which everyone can’t wait to start school each day?

As we begin a new year, let’s enlarge our vision a bit. Let’s examine the habits that lead to highly successful homeschools.

Habit #1: Keep the heart in homeschooling

Christian homeschooling is distinctive in that, in its ideal form, it is Christ-centered, parent-directed, and free from government control. When all three of these factors are in place, the homeschool rests on a solid foundation.

• Christ-centered

The most important thing we teach our children is to love God and to serve Him in body, soul, and spirit. If we believe that God is everywhere and knows the number of hairs on our heads, shouldn’t we expect that He will show up in our children’s education?

If we have bright kids with weak character, what have we gained? Better the child cannot do calculus or diagram sentences than that he doesn’t know and obey the Lord Who created him.

We are commanded in Deuteronomy 6:7-9 and Psalm 78 to teach our children God’s ways. Knowing and serving God is not an elective—this is the core curriculum. Everything else is an elective.
A secular curriculum that ignores God is a weak substitute for Christian materials that acknowledge the One Who created us from nothing.

- **Parent-directed**

Education is not about stuffing information into a child’s head. Education is discipling him. A one-size-fits-all approach may work well for building cars in a factory, but not for educating children.

God did not use cookie cutters to make our children. When the parent selects teaching materials based on the child’s unique abilities and needs, the child thrives.

We follow the model Jesus used with his disciples, teaching them as they walked together, ate together, talked together, and rested together. In my view, a child, especially a young child, is better served by the companionship of the parent working alongside to learn the material than by sitting in front of a computer. There is a place for computers in the homeschool, but not all day, every day.

- **Free from government control**

No one except God loves or understands a child better than his parents. A government-controlled homeschool cannot provide the optimum education for the child because it cannot individualize for the child’s needs in the ways that a parent can.

Homeschooling succeeds not because it is at home but because of parental involvement—parents teaching the children, not just plugging them into a canned curriculum on a free computer.
Homeschooling has been astonishingly successful due to these three elements we’re calling the Heart of Homeschooling: parent-directed, Christ-centered education, free of government control. When these three aspects of the heart of homeschooling are removed, we return to the old assembly line ways of educating children and the phenomenal successes of homeschooling vanish.

**Habit #2: Keep your priorities straight**

As important as homeschooling is, don’t allow your children’s education to become an idol. Cultivating your personal relationship with the Father is essential and must be your top priority.

Next is your marriage. As important as your children are, your relationship with your spouse must come next. Don’t center your home around your children; a child-centered home is not a healthy home.

Your parenting/homeschooling/discipling responsibilities come next. If you still have time for additional ministry outside the home, that’s great, but know when to say “no.” You will have to say “no” to many worthwhile activities, including some learning opportunities for your children. Learn how to keep the home in homeschooling.

**Habit #3: Keep on learning**

Some of you loved every minute of school and even played school in the summertime. Others, for whatever reason, didn’t thrive.

Whether you thrived or dived in school, you will now get the education you missed. You will experience the excitement of seeing the subjects come together in new ways.

You learn what you teach—by repetition and by trying to think of ways to teach it to a struggling child.
Parents who homeschool soon learn that homeschooling is not simply an academic choice, but a unique lifestyle that allows every family member to be all that they were designed to be. Both parents and children are daily learning to serve and follow the Lord. As parents we learn that we are not only teachers, but students, not only disciplers, but disciples.

Set aside time and resources to in-service yourself. Subscribe to good homeschooling magazines. Sign up for free encouragement at Internet sites specifically for homeschoolers. Budget for the books you need as a teacher for your own professional development. And do whatever is necessary to get yourself and your spouse to your state’s annual homeschool conference; you will return refreshed and recharged.

Habit #4: Become a student of your child

Study your child. What is his temperament? What is his learning style? What is his love language? Is my child ready to learn this particular skill?

One of our sons taught himself to read at age four; another was still not reading at age ten. We set aside the phonics materials, continuing with his other subjects; when we returned to reading instruction six months later, he could read! It was simply a readiness issue.

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1 For starters: Upgrade: Ten Secrets to the Best Education for Your Child by Kevin Swanson; The Heart of Homeschooling by Chris Klicka; You CAN Teach Your Child Successfully by Ruth Beechick; Sacred Parenting: How Raising Children Shapes Our Souls by Gary L. Thomas; Home Grown Kids by Raymond Moore.

2 See www.hslda.org to find your state’s website leading to info about your state’s conference.

3 See Transformed Temperaments or Why You Act the Way You Do, both by Tim LaHaye. Highly recommended!

4 100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum by Cathy Duffy. Discusses your teaching style as well as your child’s learning style and recommends materials that work well for each.

5 The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman
Another son rapidly progressed to third grade math while in kindergarten but got stuck on division. He stayed at the same math level for two years until his readiness level finally caught up and he moved on again.

**Habit #5: Seek support**

Avoid the Lone Ranger Mom Syndrome. Genesis 2:18 reminds us that it is not good for man to be alone. It is not good for homeschoolers to operate in isolation either. Connect on as many levels as possible to ensure your homeschool success. At the personal level, you may connect with a mentor who can suggest solutions for everything from teaching challenges to developing household management skills that support the homeschool lifestyle.

At the local level, connect with a support group—both for your sake and for your children’s. Start one that works for you, if necessary. Connect at the state level with your state organization for conferences and other special events. At the national level connect with Home School Legal Defense Association.

**Habit #6: Realize that every homeschool will look different**

Don’t compare yourself or your homeschool with others. You are God’s choice as your child’s parent, whether he is your child by birth, by adoption, or by marriage.

Be realistic in your expectations, both of your children and of yourself. You can do this! God does not call us to do what He does not enable us to do.

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6 See *Activity Days for Homeschool Groups & Families* by Marcia K. Washburn for ideas for your meetings. Available at [www.marciawashburn.com](http://www.marciawashburn.com).

7 See [www.hslda.org](http://www.hslda.org) for info on legal protection, legislative updates, & other important information.
You’ve already taught your children the tough stuff—walking, talking, and potty training. The rest is just not that difficult.8

**Habit #7: Enjoy the journey**

Have fun together. Don’t get grim about learning.
Don’t school at home—learn at home. Explore your subjects together.

Develop a habit of happiness. Bobb Biehl says, “Happiness is having what you want and wanting what you have. By focusing your thinking on what you have that you want, you will be a lot happier than focusing your thinking on what you want but don’t have.”

Paul wrote from a Philippian jail, “. . . for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.”9

God has provided everything you need for your present happiness.

**Habit #8: Trust God for the results**

There will be days when you question your decision to homeschool. There will also be days when you know in your heart that homeschooling is the only way you would ever have it. It is easy to become discouraged when we focus on ourselves. But when we focus on God and His provision, our hope is restored.

Michael Farris reminds us,

“If you could always get an A+ as a teacher, there would be no need for God’s help. We are weak vessels, to be sure, but God has chosen to use us to accomplish his great purpose, that of conforming our

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8 See my article, The Ideal Homeschooling Mother, at www.marciawashburn.com for more encouragement on this topic.
9 Philippians 4:11b
children to the image of Christ. Though we cannot hope to be perfect parents or make perfect decisions about our homeschooling, we can trust ourselves to God, who knows all the intimate details of our lives and theirs. Though we cannot hope to follow him perfectly, we can trust him to redeem what is lost and to cover over even a multitude of sins with his perfect love.”

Do your best, but don’t assume total responsibility for every choice your child makes. God is the Perfect Parent and look what His kids do sometimes!

Focus on God’s grace for your home. Parenting puts you on your knees—homeschooling keeps you there!

Congratulations on your decision to begin or to continue your homeschool journey. It is an adventure, you know. There will always be surprises. You are doing what 98 of 100 parents won’t do—investing your life full-time into the children God has entrusted to you. Develop these eight habits and watch as God grows a successful homeschool in your home.
The story is told about a man who watched a neighbor laboring heartily at sawing down a tree in his back yard. After observing him for some time, he suggested that the exhausted man stop to sharpen his saw, whereupon the man replied, “I don’t have time to sharpen my saw—I have to get this job done.”

We smile at such foolishness, but how often do we continue pushing ahead, doing things the same way we’ve always done them without stopping to ask advice, read the owner’s manual, or sharpen our skills?

Teaching our children is very much on-the-job training, isn’t it? Just as classroom teachers need periodic in-service training, we need to pursue every opportunity to grow as parent-teachers. Here are some ways that work.

**Study the Manufacturer’s Handbook**

God created our children. He didn’t simply start the process at conception and wait to see what would happen—He actually wove together each bone and sinew.¹

And He didn’t leave parents without instruction in how to raise these little ones on loan from Him. He left behind the Owner’s Manual—we call it the Bible.

Make a habit of searching for principles of parenting and teaching recorded in scripture. What positive and negative examples do you see? How did Jesus

¹ Psalm 139
teach His disciples enough in three short years to last a lifetime and beyond? What does the practical book of Proverbs tell us about dealing with character issues such as jealousy, greed, controlling the tongue, and hard work?

We must not slight the meat of scripture in favor of pre-digested books and articles. The Word should be our main course of study each day, with other teaching as side dishes.

Learn from Others

Most of us start homeschooling because we know someone who has made the same choice. This person often acts as a mentor to us, saving us much time and effort, as well as offering emotional and spiritual support along the way. Don’t hesitate to ask for help—soon you will be the one doing the mentoring!

Likewise, a local support group is invaluable, whether you’ve been homeschooling for one month or ten years. Within the group you have access to literally decades of experience. Many support groups have guided discussions on topics of interest. Others invite speakers to address the group.

We can learn from others through printed resources. I remember hungrily devouring the articles in homeschool magazines as they arrived. It was like receiving an at-home conference in each issue. In addition to print magazines, consider signing up for free homeschooling newsletters at Crosswalk.com.

Ask your homeschooling friends for books that have helped them. A 1989 classic that can still be found online is A Survivor’s Guide to Homeschooling by Schackleford and White. Although somewhat dated, the authors’ humorous and inspirational view of the topic is filled with practical ideas.

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2 I heartily recommend Home School Enrichment Magazine and The Old Schoolhouse Magazine. There are many other quality Christian home education magazines available, too.
Sacred Parenting by Gary Thomas is one of my newer favorites for thoughtful reflection.

We never outgrow our need for the training and encouragement we can receive at a state homeschooling conference. The sense of celebration and fellowship that comes from walking and worshiping with thousands of other homeschoolers at the conference will carry you through many discouraging days at home.³

Fill in the Gaps

You may feel you don’t have the educational background to teach your children, especially in the higher level subjects. Let me share a few thoughts here. First, research shows that the parent’s own educational level has little, if any, impact on the success of their homeschool teaching. Success in homeschooling is more directly correlated with commitment than competence. Children whose parents have only a high school education routinely score as well as those with college training.

A dear friend of mine who has no college background laid down her own interests through the four years her oldest son was in high school to do self-assigned homework in math—a subject she had struggled with in school. Working and re-working every trigonometry and calculus problem until she could do it involved a very real crucifixion of self for her. Her son later

³ Looking for a great vacation location while taking in a conference? Check out the Rocky Mountain Super Conference on the Family in Denver sponsored each June by Christian Home Educators of Colorado at www.chec.org. Attendees can select from dozens of workshops on marriage, history, fatherhood, Christian living, family missions, and of course, home education. They also sponsor the Apprenticeship Mentorship Entrepreneurship Program for homeschool graduates; info is at www.ameprogram.com.
successfully completed his degree in wildlife biology and her daughter has completed a rigorous master’s in speech pathology program, thanks to their mother who taught herself the science and math she had never learned in high school.

Homeschooling parents often begin to realize the gaps in their own education when they teach their own children. Expect to learn along with your children. The repetition you’ll get as you teach the material will lock it into your own brain very effectively. As you search for ways to explain new concepts, you’ll be working those slippery facts and concepts into your own memory, as well.

You’re not the only one who may require remediation. Winston Churchill did not learn well in school. He evaluated himself to determine the gaps in his own education. Then he studied to close those gaps, asking his mother to ship books on various topics to him while he served in the British military. This largely self-educated man published over fifty books and gave thousands of speeches.

If you cannot teach certain subjects, be aware that homeschool high school students have many additional options available now that were unknown just a few years ago. Internet or video instruction and co-op classes have eased the way for learning foreign languages, math, chemistry, etc. Be sure to carefully think through what classes your student really needs. Not everyone needs calculus and physics.

A note about teacher’s manuals: if you purchase textbooks for some or all of your subjects, you may also be using the accompanying teacher’s manuals. These can be very helpful when used
judiciously. Well-written manuals will show you how to introduce new concepts and offer sample exercises and discussion starters.

It is important to remember, however, that most of these manuals were written for use in a classroom, not in the one-on-one mentoring that parent-led home education entails. Some suggestions in the manual will be impossible to replicate; others will be useful for one child and a waste of time for another.

Ask God to help you discern which activities will benefit each of your children. Remember: experienced teachers never try to do everything suggested in the manual—they treat it as a buffet, picking and choosing what is necessary to meet the child’s individual needs. You don’t need to teach every single sentence in the book.

Re-Creation for the Homeschool Parent

Perhaps the most neglected part of a homeschool mom’s in-service training is the concept of recreation. As we pour ourselves out day after day, we eventually begin to dry up, losing our *joie de vivre*—our joy of life. We can become 24/7 teachers, neglecting our roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and friends.

We could all learn another lesson from Churchill. Despite a grueling schedule as Britain’s Prime Minister during WWII, he knew the necessity of rest.

He recognized that leaders—and you are a leader in your family—can be deceived into thinking their work is so important that only they can do it right. Soon they are working harder and longer and becoming less productive.

Trying to simply rest is sometimes not as effective as directing our thoughts to something new. Churchill was fond of saying, “A change is as good as a
rest.” Our brains tend to continue to think about our most recent thoughts or concerns when we lie down to rest.

We must change our thoughts to something new to get the full re-creating effect of rest. Churchill rested from his many duties by pursuing dozens of hobbies included acting, butterfly collecting, swimming, brick-laying (!), fencing, music, travel, and farming.

When my five little wigglers were young, very little of my work stayed done for very long. A child’s finished paper soon needed to be graded; clean laundry soon needed to be washed; and the next meal needed to be planned almost before the dishes from the last one were cleared away.

In the midst of the temporary-ness of my daily work, I discovered the joy of cross stitching. I could work at it in bits and pieces of time and eventually have a completed project for my wall—one that, unlike my daily chores, would stay finished. My hobby met a need during those years of ever-repeating tasks for creating something pretty and permanent.

Be curious about the world around you. Be all that God designed you to be.

In John 10:10, He says that He came to give us an abundant life. Don’t allow yourself to get locked into a self-made prison of meager living. You are a person, not just a homeschool mom.

Try new things—eat an artichoke or pomegranate; take a different route to a destination; try snorkeling or zip-lining.

Browse through the biographies in your library and learn about someone new to you. Your children need to see you researching subjects of interest.
that are totally unrelated to what you’re teaching them in class. Subscribe to magazines that interest you, or borrow them from a friend.⁴

God didn’t call us to homeschool because we could do it on our own. He knows we will need help from others and from Him. As we listen to Him in prayer, He will often whisper a totally new teaching idea or send us to a Scripture that sheds light on a concern we face.

Homeschooling is a lifestyle, not merely an academic choice—a marathon, not a sprint. Eat, rest, and re-create wisely so you can finish your race well.⁵

⁴ My personal favorites are World, Reader’s Digest, and Country Woman. All of these are family-friendly, so you needn’t fear what your children might see or read if they flip through them.
⁵ Hebrews 12:1-2
One month a few years ago was a momentous month for us. We celebrated two grads and a grand: our first-born finished his MBA, our fifth-born graduated from high school, and we got our first peek at our first grandchild, compliments of our second-born and his wife.

Times like these bring out the reflective side of a person. There’s nothing quite as moving as seeing your formerly boisterous, hard-driving son as a new father who can’t keep his eyes off his precious little girl.

Each of these life events is an opportunity both to reflect on the past and to glimpse the future. How did we get to this point? What did we do right? What would we do differently? What can we do to improve our parenting/grandparenting skills for the future?

**Bible and prayer time worked—sort of**

I eventually figured out that if we didn’t have our family devotional time at the beginning of the day, it probably wouldn’t happen at all. So we began each school day with Bible reading and discussion, followed by prayer time.

Now for the “sort-of-worked” confession. Because I was sporadic in my own personal quiet time with the Lord, I missed the opportunity to share the fresh meat of the Word with my sons. Our Bible time became more of a classroom subject than a time to gather around and feast on His message for each day. I allowed this second-class Bible time to substitute for the real thing.

I also didn’t train the boys to pursue daily devotions beyond what we did together. Suggesting and training are not the same thing. Training infers
following through, asking questions such as, “What did the Lord teach you in your quiet time today?” I deeply regret allowing my personal slothfulness in this area to handicap our sons in this way.

I would like to have communicated the excitement and adventure that life in Christ is meant to be. Instead, I’m afraid much of our discussion centered on rules for right living, not radical ways to change the world for Jesus.

In recent years, as I have allowed the Lord more freedom to direct my ways, our sons are shocked to see their prim and proper mother breaking into new areas of ministry that include national and international travel. They have been just as shocked to see her willingly working in the garden at home as the Lord gets increasing control over her laziness.

Reading together worked

I’m glad we spent lots of time reading together in school. After Bible time and working on group subjects, individually conferencing with each child as needed, we enjoyed reading aloud from a book or on-going series.

Allowing the boys to do something with their hands, such as drawing, puzzles or building with Legos™, extended their patience for listening. I often stopped reading to ask a comprehension question and discovered that they were following the storyline well.

Our boys responded better to real books—biographies, science, literature, missionary stories—than to the pre-digested summaries known as textbooks. I found that the younger boys could often follow the story line of books that were several grades above their own reading level.
Selective group learning worked

For the sequential subjects (beginning reading, math, and spelling), each child had his own individualized time with me. For everything else (history, geography, science, art, music, P.E.), we worked together.

For example, all of us did U.S. history the same year, with differing assignments based on age, ability, and learning style. We all studied the human body at the same time.

This method saved my sanity: imagine doing lesson preps for eight subjects for five students every day! It also gave them the opportunity for class discussion and cooperative learning. As the boys got older we continued to work together, but did less hands-on activities, a loss for the younger ones, especially.

Looking back, I would definitely have the boys do more expository and creative writing, beginning with copying and dictation. Abraham Lincoln was among many who used this proven method of self-instruction.¹

Keeping the home in homeschooling worked

I’m glad to say we didn’t over-extend ourselves with out-of-home activities. False guilt that “they may be missing out on something since we’re keeping them at home” is a trap to be avoided.

For the most part, we chose activities that all of us could do together such as soccer, 4-H, and singing for local nursing homes.

The boys learned to make their own fun. They named and claimed ownership of the numerous couch-size ant hills along the road while walking the lambs.

every morning. The older boys set up timed race tracks for their Hotwheels™ cars.

The two younger boys enlisted the help of my piano students to dig a hole in the backyard the size of a small car, working on the project for many months. Dad roofed it, and the boys enjoyed camping out for several seasons.

Barnball—playing basketball in the loft of our 40-foot tall barn—is still a favorite when the boys are all home. Now they urge their new sisters-in-law to join them.

Allowing God to decide the size of our family worked

My husband and I both grew up in small families, but eventually came to trust God for the number of children we would have. We have no regrets, and can’t imagine not having our younger sons.

The boys had built-in playmates, and we as parents were kept humble because each of them is so different. As Gary Thomas points out in Sacred Parenting, children are one of God’s favorite ways to grow their parents’ character.

It has taken many years for Him to direct my heart toward inward obedience, not merely outward obedience. Hence, much of the discipline I directed toward our sons was aimed at outward conformity of actions, not the obedience of a heart soft toward God.

You cannot teach what you do not practice.²

Sending our sons to a public high school did Not work

At the time, it seemed reasonable to take advantage of the perceived benefit of using our local small town high school. Its well-equipped labs, foreign

² A classic novel that illustrates God’s daily working in the heart of a woman is Stepping Heavenward by Elizabeth Prentiss (Barbour: 1998).
language teacher, and strong music and sports program were enticing. I convinced myself that I could then spend more time with the younger children at home.

But the on-the-go life of keeping up with the firstborn’s activities soon changed that. And the expense of various “gotta-have-its” cost us as much for the one in public school as our curriculum for all of the homeschooled sons combined.

We soon learned that we had given up our liberty; the entire family had to plan around the school schedule for our oldest son. The younger boys mourned the absence of their “lost” brother and eagerly awaited his return on the school bus each afternoon.

But most sadly, the boys began transferring loyalty to friends and teachers and away from family. Sports and other activities, while not bad on their own, began to take more and more time and energy.

An old saying goes, “If the devil can’t make you bad, he’ll make you busy.” We chose second-best for our sons by turning them over to others during the critical teen years. We denied ourselves the opportunity to finish strong. No wise person would change coaches right before the championship game, but, regrettably, we did when we turned over our sons to the local school.

Our sons are now fine young men. They have not turned away from the Lord. But I believe they did not receive as complete a foundation in the Word, in character, in handling money, and in preparation for fatherhood as they could have received at home under our direction.

We see the outcome in families who have stayed the course, homeschooling through high school, and we admire their results. Their children have gone on mission trips, won multiple awards, earned college scholarships, started
What Worked? What Didn’t?

businesses, remained debt-free, developed leadership skills while assisting elected officials, and trained to be patriarchs in their future families.

It can be done. Yes, we realize that homeschooled teens have their struggles and sometimes disappoint their parents. But if we had it to do over, we would keep ours home all the way through.

Now that our sons are adults, they no longer fall under our line of authority, but are still within our circle of council. We delight in their phone calls to talk over upcoming decisions.

Despite the occasional quarrels of their youth, they still deeply value their brotherly relationships and seek times to get together. Now that they are scattered all over the country, I email a weekly (more-or-less!) family newsletter to keep the brothers, grandparents, cousins, and others up-to-date. This allows them to pray more specifically for each other, as well as letting them know family goings-on.

God worked for us

This is the most important observation of all. His faithfulness through the years was beyond measure. He was there through diaper changes and discipline challenges, through homeschooling harassment and housekeeping hassles.

He cared for us through tight budgets, chicken pox (times five!), and public school. He carried us through the death of a child and my own near-death experience.

He equipped us to do what He called us to do. He provided, through our state homeschool organization, our local support group, and faithful authors, the support and wisdom to parent and educate our children. When we listened to this sound advice, our family benefited.
I am convinced that God carefully selects the parents that each child will have—whether by birth or by adoption. He knows what particular mix of temperaments, love languages, gifts, and disabilities will best grow the people in that family.

Believing this, it follows that I must also believe that God chose my husband and me—with all our faults—to be the ideal homeschooling parents for our children.

Would we change anything about how we reared our sons? Looking back from the perspective of hindsight, yes, there are some things we would do differently.

Did God know that we would rear them as we did before He sent them to us? Yes—and He trusted us with them anyway. Amazing, isn’t it?

Steve and Annie Chapman and their children sang a song in the 1980’s called *I Haven’t Turned Out Yet*. The children sing about reassuring their parents that, despite being naughty sometimes, the parents shouldn’t panic because they hadn’t turned out yet—God wasn’t finished working on them. In the final verse, the children overhear their parents praying “Lord, we ask you to forgive us . . . we were kids not long ago and we’re not grown up yet. . . . Keep workin’ with us, please, Lord, we haven’t turned out yet.”

I know He’s still working on this grandma! It is said that you know what kind of job you did as a parent when you see how your children raise your grandchildren. So far, so good. I’ll keep you posted.
What Happens to Old Homeschooling Moms?

Congratulations! Your last child has graduated from your homeschool. You are a Homeschooling Vet!

“At last,” you think, “I’m free to do what I want. I’ll tackle all those unfinished projects. I’ll renew all those neglected friendships. I’ll go back into the workforce. I’ll read all of those books I’ve been yearning to start.”

But wait . . . think back for a moment. Remember when you started this grand adventure?

How did you feel after you made the decision to homeschool? Excited? Scared? Did you wonder where to get materials and curriculum? How to contact a support group? What the legal issues were?

Where did you find these answers? From a homeschooling friend? From books and magazines? Online? From your state homeschool organization?

When we started homeschooling back in 1983, few people had heard of home education. We were met with stares, distrust, and plenty of questions.

Thankfully, that is no longer the case. No one would say that home education has gone mainstream, but there certainly is a wider knowledge and acceptance of it than there was in 1983. The law is much more favorable now than it was when we started. And there certainly are more resources available now.

How did these changes take place? People like you lobbied for new legislation to protect the rights of parents to educate their own children. How did these resources become available? Desperate moms developed curriculum as they went along and shared it with others.
These were people like you—people who learned to home educate the old-fashioned way: by doing it.

These were people who fit leadership responsibilities into their already busy lives, people who led support groups, passed along legislative news, and ran the state conference in the cracks of time between division and diapers, grammar and gardening.

In his excellent book, *Halftime*, Bob Buford says that many of us spend the first half of our lives seeking success. When we reach middle age and our children are beginning to leave home—what he calls “halftime”—our priorities change. We need to consider what direction the Lord may be directing us so that our second half of life can be lived with a goal of working toward significance.

As home educators, we already are working on a significant goal during the first half—educating our children in the fear and wisdom of the Lord and in the practical skills of academics as well as in homemaking and parenting.

But Buford’s point is well taken—we do need to consider what God has for us as “empty nesters.” What significant work can we do now that we are retired homeschoolers?

Look for the thread of evidence that identifies who you are, what your gifts are, and how He may intend for you to use those gifts. How might your gifts be used to further the Kingdom of God on earth through homeschooling? Let’s examine two options: support groups and state organizations.
Support groups

Support groups are often led by already overloaded moms. Consider how you could come alongside these leaders as a mentor or personal assistant.

Clerical skills are always in demand—most groups need a person who can publish a directory, a phone tree, or a newsletter. Coaches for academic teams, sports teams, and Bible quizzing teams are often needed. Perhaps you will head up the yearbook staff.

If you have a gift for hospitality, you could open your home for parent meetings, serve as a greeter, or prepare snacks for the meetings.

Perhaps you will organize a choir or art classes for your local group. Offering to lead an occasional activity day or assist on a field trip could make a huge difference for someone.

Being available as a contact person for newcomers to call with questions would free up moms who are still educating their children. It is difficult to counsel a brand new homeschooling prospect while still teaching your own children.

Are you gifted in gathering materials for a lesson on water safety? Offer to teach a lesson to your support group families.

Is generosity your gift? Perhaps you can underwrite the curriculum expenses for a local family that has fallen on hard times.

Maybe you will organize a used curriculum sale/exchange or a garage sale to underwrite the group’s expenses.

A gift of mercy may make you the perfect fit for counseling new and struggling homeschooling moms who hesitate to call others who are still busy.
with little ones. You are valuable—what you know is a veritable goldmine to a new homeschooler. And leaders always need those with a Barnabas spirit who can encourage them.¹

State organizations

Don’t limit yourself to just serving in your local area. Think about your state homeschool organization. Most are run by volunteers.

Some volunteers serve from their homes, others offer time at the office. Some serve year-round, others help during specific events.

There are many tasks, large and small, that need to be done to keep things going. Opportunities exist for both leadership and supportive positions, for one-time service and multi-year jobs.

There are on-going needs for those who can help with clerical tasks—you would be amazed at how big a job it is to stuff thousands of envelopes for a mailing. Meals need to be prepared for all-day staff meetings. People who are willing to get involved in legislative issues are always welcome.

For every event your state organization sponsors—conventions, introductory seminars, Homeschool Day at the Capitol, and more—there are needs in the areas of transportation, babysitting, speakers, loading and unloading materials, registration, mailings, and more. Hostesses are nearly always in short supply for the conferences. Whatever your gift, however much time you can commit, there is a need for your services.

You are needed

The Bible doesn’t authorize retirement in the American sense of the word. Sometimes there is a change of responsibilities, especially as our energy levels

diminish. But we are called to continue to give of our best—especially now that we actually have something of value to share—experience.

There will be some of us who have new challenges and responsibilities at home—perhaps caring for elderly parents or increased service in the local church or in missions. But many homeschoolers never think about how they can give back now that their children have graduated.

Pray thoughtfully about whether service to the homeschooling community should continue to be a part of your ministry—your “giving back” in honor of those who have pioneered the way for you. You are needed and you will be welcomed with open arms.

We are called to wear out, not rust out!

We are called to wear out, not rust out!
LOOKING FOR GUIDANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT AS A HOMEMAKER?

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Marcia K. Washburn homeschooled her five sons for nineteen years. In demand nationally and internationally as a speaker, she is the author of over a dozen books and writes regularly for several magazines. Visit www.marciawashburn.com for more information on the Management for Moms Series and other resources.
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