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Unschooling Approach

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Dear Friends,

Summer is in full swing, and although we know that homeschool moms never really have a "down" time, we hope that you are enjoying the lazy, hazy days of the season. Your teaching time may decrease during the summer, but most moms we talk to use the summer to think about and plan for the next school year. So, while you are reflecting on the big picture of what your homeschool will look like in September, we thought you would benefit from considering perhaps a new approach to your schooling.

This month we asked Elizabeth Smith, wife of HSLDA President Michael Smith, to share with you ideas and information on alternatives to traditional styles of teaching in the homeschool setting. These are ideas and concepts she developed and tested with her own children. So, let's listen to what she has to offer:

"My assignment is to write about my 'unschooling' approach to the high school years. I prefer to call our method an alternative to traditional style teaching rather than unschooling because we did have measurable education goals. Although we were a little less structured than the usual textbook approach, we were not quite as freewheeling as some 'unschooling' families.

"As a child I found school boring. Little of what I learned was stimulating or motivational. Homeschooling, however, provides the opportunity for creative ideas as well as the intellectual stimulation that the traditional classroom method sometimes misses. Early on I was intrigued by the chance to 'create' a lifelong learner by teaching in such a way that my children would love to learn.

"Much of this article will share the teaching ideas we discovered along the way. If you are going to step out a bit with innovative methods, it's helpful to remember the history of formal education. Before the 1850's, mandatory attendance in public schools and the traditional classroom was a rarity. For the greater part of history, tutoring, mentoring, apprenticing, and lecturing were ways young people were taught. This practical approach slowly was phased into our educational traditions of today. As homeschoolers, we have the opportunity to think outside of this box and incorporate methods more beneficial to the various learning styles and abilities of our children.

SO, WHAT DID OUR ALTERNATIVE METHOD LOOK LIKE?

We began with two essential courses of study and every other course built upon them. Math and English were the common threads. Out of English evolved history, penmanship, grammar, composition, literature, creative writing, and even science. In essence, English became history and history became English. My question was always, 'Is there a more interesting way to teach this?' For instance, in the early teen years I wanted our children to learn how to analyze what they read. I wasn't interested in their learning facts only, but in using the learning of facts to stimulate their minds.

"Reading aloud was a part of our school day every year of our homeschool experience. There is no better way to discuss and dissect ideas with your children than by sharing opinions about what you read. One book I chose to read aloud was 'A Tale of Two Cities.' Each of my children kept a small spiral notebook to record his or her analysis of each chapter. As they listened, they knew they were required to write out the main theme of the chapter in their own words. Part of their assignment was to restrict their description to two or three sentences. Though in the early chapters they faltered, through this process, they became adept at picking out the main points, major themes, and key facts, concisely recording their analysis. Along with learning to analyze literature, the children were reading beautiful literature by one of history's greatest authors and studying the art of fine writing, a skill which proved invaluable in college.

"While learning how to analyze, the children were also reading a historical novel. Since 'A Tale of Two Cities' centers on London and Paris at the time of the French Revolution, we also investigated the facts and causes of the French Revolution along with the geography of England, France, Western Europe and the surrounding seaways. As you see, the list of things taught and learned were extensive.

"It is significant to note that we did not create a lot of paperwork. Except for the notebook analyzing each chapter and spelling words taken from the pages of the book to increase vocabulary, there was little written work. This project lasted for several months and took up a fair amount of time. There were no tests, but with Mom constantly interacting with the children, progress and intellectual growth was easy to see and measure. (The purpose of tests is to evaluate how well the child is doing and may be necessary when teaching a larger group of children or in instances where children are working independently of the parent.)

"In our non-traditional approach to literature, reading, as you can see, was an important activity in our home. I was intent on keeping it a pleasurable activity. At the same time, though, there were lots of discussions over reading assignments, and the open exchange of ideas proved to be a stimulating, mental exercise.

"Another way we blended literature, composition, history, and geography in a fascinating and enjoyable learning opportunity was to latch onto the interests of the children. When our son was 13 years old, he became fascinated with the Civil War. He picked up a book about the war and pored over it until he memorized the names of all the major generals. Seeing his interest, I created a course rich with history and literature during this era. He was assigned to read four biographies, two of Abraham Lincoln and two of Robert E. Lee. Then he wrote a paper on the theme of why God chose these two men to lead their armies in the Civil War and what character qualities equipped them for this calling.

"In order for writing to improve, grammar instruction was necessary. Rather than using some of the traditional materials, I taught a working knowledge of grammar using Winston Grammar. The children learned to identify parts of speech and punctuation by placing clue cards under various words in a sentence. There is also an advanced version available that teaches students everything they need to know for college-level writing and all at a fraction of the cost of other curriculums.

"In teaching math, I viewed games and hands-on projects as learning tools. Up until fourth grade, games and math manipulatives were used rather than a textbook. A favorite was Math-It, a wonderful tool you seldom see at homeschool conferences anymore. The reason I like Math-It is that it teaches all the basic math facts. The child competes against himself to improve his own abilities. Math-It teaches short cuts that I use even as an adult, and it helps children learn to 'think numbers.' By the time my children began using textbooks, they thoroughly knew addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Advanced Math-It also covers decimal, fractions, and more difficult concepts. Any high school student will benefit from playing these games. The student is not always learning new concepts, but is always sharpening his or her mind.

SOMETIMES WE LIMIT OURSELVES BY THE WAY WE DEFINE EDUCATION.

"A saying I like is 'School is never out.' As I mentioned above, one of our favorite activities is playing games that teach. I have a list of over 15 things we can learn from playing Monopoly, such as real estate concepts, budgeting, and mercy. Another tool I enjoyed using was puzzles, especially in teaching geography. We kept puzzles of the United States and of the world in the family room where we read aloud. (I found that children often listen better if their hands are occupied.) These puzzles taught them all the states and state capitols, mountain ranges, major waterways and natural resources and crops for each region. The puzzle of the world taught them latitude and longitude, continents, and features like the ones they learned with the U.S. puzzle.

"As you can see, my alternative approach to traditional classroom teaching included not only textbooks, but also games, puzzles, hands-on projects, and a variety of teaching methods. Our children began taking courses at the local community college at the age of 16 and gradually transitioned into full-time students who graduated from university. I believe that much of their success in doing college work came from the way we approached learning.

"As we honor the individuality of each homeschool family we can sample from the best ideas for educating our children. Our own children's ability to perform well in college proves that families can be flexible as they pursue the goal of creating a lifelong learner.

"The goal, though, stays the same: Stimulate the child's mind so that he or she will want to learn. When your student wants to learn, you have won the education battle at home.

"Thank you for this opportunity to share with you my thoughts and ideas this month."

-- Elizabeth Smith

We hope you found Elizabeth's ideas as interesting as we did. If you are feeling less than able in stimulating your children to learn, remember that moms have distinct teaching styles just as their children have learning styles. Trying to replicate another's style unlike yours may prove discouraging and the struggle will create more tension inside you. Some of us are "book-oriented" while others are "unschooled" oriented. We can learn and benefit from each other, taking ideas from all approaches and incorporating them into our own style. So, remember that the Lord is fully able to use any method to fulfill His purposes so that your child receives the education you are capable of providing. The Lord has fully equipped you to not only to be the best mother for your child but also his best teacher. Trust Him and know that He is faithful.

In August we will be talking about the college application process. We'll provide you with tips on the types of information you'll need to gather for the application, give you a timetable for charting your course, and answer some frequently asked questions about the process to make your job as your child's guidance counselor a bit easier.

Blessings to you,
Becky and Diane



**This resource is an article from the
Homeschooling Thru Highschool newsletter
(7/6/2006), and is provided by the Home School
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Source URL (retrieved on 05/24/2013 - 3:44am): <http://www.mache.org/resources/article/11-27-2011/unschooling-approach>