

## **Homeschool Preschool**

**by Marjorie Cole, Falls Church**

Originally published in the July-August 2008 *VaHomeschoolers Newsletter*.

Links updated July 2018

When we decided to skip formal preschool, I wondered, “are we homeschooling preschool, homepreschooling or skipping preschool?” The answer wasn’t all that important to me, but I was never sure what to say when I was asked if my daughter was in preschool. My answer too often ended up being a sort of uncomfortable “no.” I never wanted to add more to it for fear of sounding like a lunatic. Where I live, many kids are sent off to preschool beginning at age two or three, though most parents would admit that at the younger ages, “preschool” is just a more attractive name for daycare. Since I’m fortunate enough to live close to my family of origin, I was often able to get a few hours to myself each week by dropping my daughters off with my mother, so I felt no need for early preschool. As my older daughter approached age four, I became a bit more concerned about what she was missing.

### **Ways Preschoolers Can Learn at Home**

I wanted to know what my daughter should be learning, so I checked a lot of resources to find out what preschoolers learn in preschool. I especially liked the [World Book scope and sequence](#). Broadly speaking, the World Book scope and sequence for preschool lists skills pertaining to: size, shapes and colors, numbers and counting, reading readiness, position and direction, time, motor skills, and social-emotional development. There’s really not all that much to it and nothing that requires any specialized tools or teaching. We were able to cover most of this by reading picture books or by playing with toys. I love strewing (leaving learning materials out so they can be found by the child without formally introducing them), so when I read on some list that preschoolers should know their address and phone number, I simply left a lot of at-home cards (business cards with our name and address on them) lying around for her to find—and it worked.

Other items I’d seen on preschool skills lists included: major holidays, days of the week, months of the year and seasons. We learned these through reading lots of books that either directly address the subject or that include the subject in a story. For instance, Eric Carle’s [The Very Hungry Caterpillar](#) is about a caterpillar’s diet and his eventual change into a butterfly. The book progresses through the week as the caterpillar eats different things (On Monday..., On Tuesday...). Eric Carle’s [A House for Hermit Crab](#) does something similar with months of the year.

We worked on writing skills (fine motor skills) by playing with play dough and cutting and pasting. Peeling and sticking stickers is another great way to work on fine motor skills, as is dressing up dollies. Writing instruments and paper as well as wipe-off boards were always available. My oldest, Suzanne, was an early reader but a late writer. Her younger sister is the opposite. My informal theory is that young children focus on one or the other at a given time, so I didn’t try to do both at the same time. I figured that their minds and muscles were developing in their own ways, and I would honor that and not push them.

For math, we continued our relaxed approach. We put a 100 Chart on the wall of the breakfast nook in our kitchen. Our daughters looked at it a lot, using it to count and to understand the relationship between the numbers. There are lots of great counting books. My favorites are Anno's Counting Book and Swan Harbor by Laura Rankin. In addition to counting, the books take readers through the seasons and the months of the year. We also read a lot of picture books dealing with mathematical concepts. There are a few series books, such as the *MathStart series* by Stuart Murphy and the *Getting Ready for Kindergarten* series by Rosemary Wells, which we read. However, we tended to enjoy nonseries books more; the *MathStart* series includes a list of other books that address the concept, so it's a great resource for finding other books.

Math manipulatives abound in the toys we had in our house. I had once bought some colorful plastic eggs and small colorful plastic baskets. The baskets and the eggs matched in color; though they were not sold as a set, they worked well together. These were toys Suzanne often played with, but I noticed that she decided to sort them on her own. She would put the same colored eggs in the same colored basket. A sister-in-law visited and was intrigued. When Suzanne wasn't looking, she would rearrange the eggs in the baskets, mixing the colors. As soon as Suzanne noticed, she would put the eggs back in the matching baskets. I thought it was great that I didn't have to buy an education game and sit down and teach Suzanne to sort, but she did it on her own.

Playing cards are another great math manipulative, and we made up a few games. I called one game "Race." You start with a standard deck of playing cards using only the numbered cards (you can decide if you want to use 2 through 10 or you can make it shorter by using fewer cards). We split the deck between us and took turns flipping over the top card on our pile and playing it on the floor in front of us to create a grid with columns for 2 to 10, left to right, with a different row for each suit. For example, if you turn over a 4 of clubs, you place it face up on the floor where you think a 4 would go in a row that goes from 2 to 10. If the next player gets a six of hearts, put it in a new row which will become the hearts row and put the six in a different column, slightly to the right of the 4—leaving space for a 5s column. Keep playing by putting cards of the same suit in the same row and cards of the same number in the same column—it's hard to start because you must estimate where you'd put a 7 if the only other cards down are a 2 and a 5; it gets easier as you play—at the end, you're simply filling in the holes in the grid. We called it Race because the suits and the numbers were racing to see who would finish first. When one of us played the last card in a suit, we'd say, "Hearts, race!" Likewise, when all the 10s had been played, we'd say, "Tens, race!"

The grid will eventually look something like this (your suits can be in whatever order you want):

Hearts: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10  
Clubs: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10  
Diamonds: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10  
Spades: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Another card game we made up was called “Going To.” This included not only creating a number line but also practicing the pre-reading skill of sequencing. In this game the suit of the card is irrelevant. Again, we used only numbered cards, which we shuffled and dealt to players. I asked, “Where are we going?” Suzanne often said, “We’re going to the playground.” Since there are four suits (meaning four cards for each number), I asked, “What four things do we need to do to go to the playground?” She would often say, “Put on socks, put on shoes, put on jacket, get in car.” I repeated what she has said, in the same order; then we began to play. She flipped over the top card from her pile, say it’s a 5, she said “Number 5, put on socks.” I flipped a card from my pile, say a 3, and said “Number 3, put on socks.” (As in Race, I’d put the 3 down to the left of the 5, leaving a space for 4, in the same row because suits don’t matter). Play continued this way, putting each number in a row in numerical order. Since the deck is shuffled, you may choose another 3 before a 7 is played. Thus, upon playing the second 3, you’d say, “Number 3, put on shoes” (that was the second step in our sequence). If the next player plays the first 7, they’d say “Number 7, put on socks” (the first item in our sequence). If a third 3 comes up, it’s “Number 3, put on jacket.” If the first 9 is drawn, it’s “Number 9, put on socks.” In other words, you are keeping track of where in the sequence each number is; I thought this was also a good exercise in memory. I placed the same number cards in a column slightly overlapping so that you could see how many cards of that number had been played and determine where in the sequence that particular number was. We liked the game because you can make it different every time you play; the next time might be “going to the grocery store” where you buy four items.

Of course, learning preschool subjects is important, but who can ignore the importance of socialization? I recognize the importance of socialization but disagreed with the assumption that proper socialization occurs only at schools (or that proper socialization even occurs at schools at all). Socialization opportunities were provided through play dates and park days, library story time, dance class, visits to the grandparents, and Sunday school. How did she learn to sit down and be quiet? Library story time and Sunday school. What about waiting in line? Going to the bank and grocery store. Take turns? Having a sibling helped with that, as did playing with other kids. Also, I was always around to remind her of the rules of civility.

## **Structure and Preschoolers**

When we first started homeschooling, we heard some comments about structure in homeschools from my in-laws. I don’t know what their concerns were because we decided to ignore the comments at the time, but I do wonder what they meant.

Structure as in routine? We had a weekly routine—play date on Monday, park day on Tuesday, dance class on Wednesday, visit to grandma on Thursday or Friday and assorted errands. That should have addressed any concerns about socialization, but what about teaching? Of course, the real concern in this question is teaching, not learning. Learning goes on all the time and cannot be stopped. I suppose I decided that finding time to teach was not that important when our lives brought enough opportunities for my daughters to learn.

We had a daily routine: breakfast in the morning, lunch in the afternoon, and dinner in the evening. Okay, so maybe our daily schedule was a bit open, but the natural rhythms of the day create a routine. When there were naps involved, that determined what activities could be done

and when. Our bedtime routine included reading to our daughters. I love to read to my kids, but that was hard to do since the three-year-old screamed “no read book” whenever I read to the five-year-old. This phase eventually passed, but the then three-year-old took a few years before she was interested in hearing a bedtime story. We found other things to do—we played card games or board games or just spent time watching them play. Often, they would put on a show, and we could be the audience. Our daily lives taught me a lot about flexibility and responding to the needs and desires of my children.

We played games as part of our learning—my three-year-old learned her numbers from a deck of cards and the alphabet from the numerous other toys strewn about the house. At times, I couldn’t even tell you what my five-year-old was learning because I refused to quiz her and when others tried, she often refused to answer, but I could learn what she knew simply by listening to her.

Does routine mean that I was supposed to sit a five-year-old down at the table and ply her with workbooks? Fifteen minutes in the morning for math? Twenty for handwriting? That didn’t make sense to me. Structure such as this certainly isn’t about learning. I felt my children learned so much more from playing than they would with limited, forced workbook or lesson time.

If the structure is for discipline, then I must ask why? So a five-year-old can learn to be bored but to “take it like an adult.” It has never been persuasive to me that a child must be exposed to something (boredom or bullies) just so they can get used to it. My feeling is that either they won’t encounter such in the future (four-year-olds tend to outgrow their tendencies to bite), or they will adapt to it quickly and don’t need years of practice. Perhaps if they aren’t conditioned to accept it as a fact of life, they will be more likely to change it. Running around and playing at age five does not mean my daughter won’t be able to sit in a college lecture hall or have the discipline to study. Those skills can be picked up later if need be.

## **Unpredictability of Preschool Learning**

I remember when my eldest was four years old and played with a math game that included a set of cards that have a number of objects on one side and a sentence asking how many objects. Flip the card over and you see the answer. My daughter was an early reader and would read the question. Instead of counting the items for the answer (which I knew she could do), she immediately flipped over the card and read the answer. This really bothered me. I could not help thinking that she was being lazy or cheating. I noticed the same thing with a set of Brain Quest books she received (these books are made of cards that are hinged at the bottom so that they fan out. Each card has three simple questions on it. The answers are on the following card). She loved these books and because they are hinged, they are great for the car. I always thought she was doing them, but once noticed that she was only reading the question cards and immediately sliding them over and reading the answer. While it seemed to me to be cheating, I don’t think that was her intent at all. It occurred to me later (after scolding her on the proper use of the books) that she was just practicing reading and maybe saw no reason to try to figure out an answer when it was provided to her. Perhaps it makes no sense to a four-year-old mind that you would work out an answer, which is provided on the next page. I will say that at the age of eight, she understands that you read a question, give your guess, and then learn if you are correct. So maybe it didn’t really matter that at age four she wasn’t doing it right. As to the books, my

irritability at how she was playing with them led her to pack it up and not want to play with them anymore. I learned that I need to leave her alone sometimes. So long as she has other toys or things to play with where the answers are not provided for her, she will work them out. I knew her well enough that I should not have scolded her about not using the cards properly.

It's been a few years since my daughter was preschool aged, and she's doing fine, even without having had formal preschool. I am finding homeschooling even more fun as my daughters get older and their interests and abilities expand. We are very lucky to be able to spend our time together in this way.

### **About the Author**

Marjorie Cole has been homeschooling since she decided to pass on preschool for her eldest. Her daughters are now five and eight and they amaze her with their ability to learn despite her lack of ability to teach. She keeps herself busy volunteering with VaHomeschoolers, singing in her church choir, and knitting like a madwoman.

### ***VaHomeschoolers Voice* Publication Information**

*VaHomeschoolers Voice* is published five times a year by The Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers for our members. Not a member? [Join now](#) and don't miss another issue!

*VaHomeschoolers Voice* prints selected articles, news, and letters related to home education and Virginia homeschoolers. Opinions expressed by individual writers do not necessarily reflect the views of the Board of Directors of The Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers, nor do they represent an official position of VaHomeschoolers. Writers' views are their own, and readers are encouraged to research and explore homeschooling issues to their own satisfaction.

*Permission to reprint content from VaHomeschoolers Voice may be requested by contacting the [Voice Editor](#). Reprinting by-lined articles requires permission of the specific author in addition to permission of the editor.*