

Slow Schooling

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I'VE BEEN HOMESCHOOLING SINCE 1998. That's 20 years (yup, homeschooling sure does keep those math skills sharp!) of park days, co-op classes, and nature walks, among other things. What started out as a way to keep our dairy-allergic son from dying in the school cafeteria became, eventually, a way of life. By the time kids numbers three and four were of school age, we had an entire community of homeschoolers to socialize with and no real incentive to leave it. In other words, our decision to homeschool had

transformed from a medical choice into an amazing new lifestyle.

But 20 years is a long time, during which I've experienced a lot of changes in how we homeschool. Way back in 1998, a homeschooling acquaintance (and don't ask me how I met her, because this was in the Dark Ages and there were no Facebook groups to find people with) said, "Hey, I'm starting a homeschooling newsletter that lists local activities." And those of us there said, "Cool!" And she said, "But I don't want to bother with printing it out and

stuffing envelopes and paying postage. I'll send it by electronic mail." And we were all like, "Whoa! Do you even think that'll work?"

Yeah, that's how long ago it was—an emailed newsletter was a revolutionary concept. In fact, initially, this woman sent me a hard copy of her newsletter via snail mail, because I didn't even have email until later that year.

See? *Dark Ages.*

Her idea revolutionized our lives. Want to do a field trip? Post it and they will come. Park day? Same. These were simpler times, people, when homeschoolers such as myself were desperate for community and for things to do with our children all the livelong day. In fact, I was the first one to organize a field trip—oh, how exciting it was when all those responses came pouring in!

Gradually, the Internet improved other aspects of homeschooling, as well; gone were our passed-around print copies of *Rainbow Resource* and our dog-eared issues of the *Chinaberry Books* catalog. Each of these materials migrated to an online existence, and we saw that it was good. Yahoo groups became popular, making it easy for people in the same geographical location to find each other. *Scholastic* book orders moved online, too, enabling us to replicate what I remember as the only fun part of grade school: the arrival of piles of shiny-covered paperback books, a mound of treasures to dive into.

And we saw that it *all* was good.

But there's always a snake in the story, isn't there? In this case, I'm not sure what to call that snake: big business, or affluence, or humankind's natural tendency toward convenience. But lately, here is what I am seeing: the heart and soul of homeschooling—that is to say, a combination of somewhat freewheeling ideas about education and an association with people who share those ideas—has been displaced, if you



Photos by Heather Smithson

will, by a more consumerist approach: camps, and business-run co-ops, and lessons, lessons, lessons. The questions I see from new homeschoolers are no longer: “How can I best help my children learn?” and “Where can I meet others?” but “Where can I purchase this resource/class/activity?” It’s a trend that a friend of mine jokingly calls, “Where does my child catch the homeschool bus?”

John Taylor Gatto once drew a distinction between network and community. His thesis, in a nutshell, was that communities engage and nurture the whole person, while networks serve only one aspect of that person. Somewhere along the way, homeschooling, I’m afraid, has become less of a community and more of a network.

It doesn’t really matter to me personally. My youngest (of six) is a teen, so I’m almost done with our homeschool journey. At this point, I’m nothing but a burnt-out, gray-haired old homeschooling mom whose memories of those early days are admittedly colored rose by nostalgia. And I wouldn’t have changed the advent of the Internet and how it benefited homeschooling for anything.

But . . .

There *can* be too much of a good thing. The proliferation of classes and lessons for elementary-aged kids has splintered the community into a thousand pieces, with everyone running here and there. I talk to newer homeschoolers and they sound so lonely, as lonely as I did back in the days of phone trees and no Internet whatsoever. What used to be lively discussions of Charlotte Mason vs. Montessori vs. Rudolf Steiner have devolved into quick chats about whether your 9-year-old is going to take Chemistry: Amazing Molecules! or Lego Robotics at your local co-op.

Hey, I love Lego robotics (chemistry, not so much)—but the point is, *it’s not the classes that matter*. It’s more your

approach to education: does your kid (and do you) feel empowered to create your own learning environment or has homeschooling become just another shopping experience in our already consumer-driven world?

So here’s a suggestion: host a weekly park day (indoors or out). Make it sacrosanct. Let it be the island in the middle of your week, where everyone gathers and relaxes, communes, and is restored. A homeschooling Sabbath, if you will.

Now, if you’re reading this and thinking, “But I don’t have *time* to do that,” that’s your sign: *You’ve got too much going on*. Look, just because there’s an entire box of Oreos in your house, that doesn’t mean you need to eat them all, all at once, right? (Yes, right.) So drop an activity! Go crazy and drop *two* activities, even. You can start a movement, gosh darn it: *Slow Schooling*.

I know, it sounds scary. I like structure as much as the next parent who is surrounded by children each and every day, *all day long*. I have six kids, remember? I *know* how it is. But here’s the question to ask yourself: are you being nourished by those activities or are you simply bingeing on them, in an effort to avoid having any empty time whatsoever? Are you consuming the equivalent of educational junk food? Think about what possibilities you might be shutting out when you leave no time free: possibilities for friendship, creativity, and discovery.

Okay, yes, you’re also opening the door to a bit of whining and bickering among siblings, that’s true. This *is* a fallen world, after all. But there’s still that creativity and friendship part, too.

Slow Schooling. Be brave and try it. Encourage other homeschoolers to try it with you. I’m not suggesting you shun



the Internet (heaven forbid!) or turn your back on organized classes. Every homeschool parent needs a break, and there’s no reason for *all* of us to suffer through biology labs, thank goodness. No, it’s more about balance and making conscious choices. Education, as we homeschoolers are fond of quoting, is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire. Which are you doing?

After 20 years, with my homeschooling journey drawing to a close, there are two cherished memories that linger. The first is the sound of my children sifting through their buckets of Legos, hour after hour after hour. The second is the laughter shared with fellow moms, people I made time for and who made time for me. These are, indeed, the true treasures of homeschooling: time to create and time for friends.

To paraphrase Dr. Seuss, maybe homeschooling’s not something you can buy from a store. Maybe homeschooling, perhaps, means a little bit more.

Rena Corey lives in Northern Virginia and has been homeschooling her six kids since 1998. With four of them grown and flown, you’d think she would be pretty good at this homeschooling thing by now. You would be wrong.