

HOMESCHOOLING IN ACTION

Processing and organizing the school day and year

The basic goal of this article is not to show the indisputable advantages of homeschooling comparing with other forms of education, but to present clearly what it is in its essence. I also hope to make clear understanding how it operates in practice, and how to organize a school at home, as well as to show that this is not difficult for every dedicated and responsible parent.

What is in fact a homeschool?

The idea of the only one place where we can receive knowledge and education, the public school, was inculcated into our minds for years. At once in our minds pops up the ringing bell, the first school day, the classroom, the desks – an endless list that certainly includes many painful memories. When we heard about homeschooling several years ago, it was strange and new for us, and even now, in five years this is still new and strange for many.

I was shocked when I realized that the homeschooling was a normal occurrence in USA during the 1980s. This is the time, when I and my generation had entered for the first time the doorstep of the public school. I realize that in Bulgaria the people still do not know that they have the right to educate their children at home, and that definitely this is not a new idea.

Now actually, what is home education, or as we often call it : homeschooling?

Homeschooling is a choice, made by the parents, to educate their children at home, instead to enroll them in a public or private school. The parents direct and manage the children's education, taking the full responsibility for what they are going to study, how they are going to study it, what methods and approaches parents are going to use in order to reach their goals in development of the character and the talents of their kids. The goal of homeschooling is to develop in the kids individual virtues and talents, which is possible only, when man applies individual approaches. It is not possible to achieve that if we try to transfer the traditional classroom into our home, using methods and approaches that are innate for it. The point is to help the children to discover who actually are they, what their strength is, and what they like to do. This is the right approach we have to follow, if we want to have a successful homeschooling. This is the basic role for parents: to tutor their kids with love, in order to lead them into maturity. Homeschooling creates students, who learn independently, who are able to walk alone, and achieve every side of learning.

In fact, there is a statistic in those countries, where the home education is practiced for a long time, and it shows that the homeschoolers achieve higher scores on the standard tests, than their peers in the public schools. The experts say that the homeschoolers have this success because of the advantages they have, such as: stable family environment, supporting and strict parents, flexible choice of curriculum, and individual approach to the student. This is contrary to the education in the classroom, where children are being taught with different learning capacities, different family environment and background. It is obvious that the homeschooling is still new in Bulgaria, but for those, who seek and learn independently it is not a secret that the home education is established in many countries and produces high educational standards in the children.

Why we educate the children at home? Is this right and what benefits we have?

Before start to educate at home our kids, it is important for us to be convinced that the home education is the right and only way we can give them the best. Without that conviction in our hearts we will tend to fall continually in insecurity, and that will divert and discourage us. The **reasons** to make such a decisive step in our life might be many, and the list is really quite long. Here some of them:

Individual training, according to child's abilities.

Achieving better academic successes.

Protecting the children from amorality and depravity that have captured the public schools.

Ability to keep children under your authority, instead of placing them under unknown authority in school, because you love them and you want to be with them everyday, until they grow.

Flexible use of methods and materials.

Transfer of family values.

Instruction with materials and activities, applicable in the real life.

Developing of Christian character in our children under our guidance, and not through socializing with bad-behaved and irresponsible classmates.

To protect our children from aggressive humanist ideas in the public schools.

An opportunity to discipline the children properly.

Uniting of the family.

- Having a supporting environment, etc.

Who has to teach the children? The mother's and father's role.

It is important to realize, that it is not enough to just keep the child at home, if you are going to homeschool him, but to be enthusiastic in searching the best option. The responsibility of educating the child lay upon the family, with mom and dad – and this responsibility requires a whole-hearted devotion from their side. They both setup goals, they want to reach, lending to each other a mutual support. Both of them determine strategy and approach depends on child's needs, acting with love and patience, stimulating him/her to show the best of his/her capabilities.

Let me encourage you: the homeschooling is not for everybody. It is necessary to really take the responsibility and to spend lots of time with your kids. Homeschooling requires a sacrifice of personal time, dreams and ambitions, or to change them, turning them in the right direction.

Homeschool does not begin when the children turn 6, but from the moment you realize that you are expecting a child. You have to devote a lot of time and you have to do your best to lay the foundation that has not been built in most of us by our parents. It would be well if you pay attention to the following recommendations, in order to prepare yourself for that challenge:

- * It is important to read as many books and manuals for homeschooling, as you can:

Ultimate Guide to Homeschooling, Debra Bell;

Mary Pride's Complete Guide to Getting Started in Homeschooling, Mary Pride;

Teaching the Trivium, Harvey and Laurie Bluedorn;

The Well Trained Mind, Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, and many more.

- * Connect and be in touch with practicing homeschooling families;
- * Find homeschool articles and newsletters on the Internet.
- * Acquaint yourself with curricula and recommended resources.
- * Collect catalogues and appropriate titles for the child.
- * Seek and commit to writing all suitable ideas for stimulating the education of the child.
- * Collect Internet sites and links for free resources and practical ideas.
- * Find an appropriate job that affords time for study or make study time your only job.
- * Attend homeschool seminars and conferences. (www.homeschoolingbg.com)

All this will provide for you a really good start and will spare your time for everyday activities and enrichment of your program. Do not leave all this to the last moment! Of course, I do not mean that it is necessary for us to be experts in everything – Chemistry, Physics, Music, etc.; it's about getting familiar with the philosophical framework, principles, methods and practical advices for homeschooling. There are so many written pages about that topic; we just have to read them...

Say we have cleared the things out and now it's time to act. The questions that disturb us are: How actually to begin and from where? Is it necessary to have a plan, and will that limit us?

All begins with setting of clear and practical **goals for our homeschool**. What skills must our children to have that will be beneficial for their life, work, and calling? What must be the final result?

Example:

- * To have clearly fixed moral principles.
- * To be able to learn independently.
- * To be able to take right decisions in their life.
- * To receive skills those have value in the market.
- * To have good academic knowledge.
- * To be persons who are able to express their own opinion, and not to conform to established and wrong standards.

The list may be rather different, but it is important to know what to expect and what to strive for during all the years. These goals keep us vigilant, and they are our foundation to step on, confident that we have not gone the wrong way. They are also our source of encouragement and motivation.

Planning of the school year

It is not necessary for you to have a university degree in education, in order to draw adequate plan of different subjects that you are going to study with your child during the current year. On the contrary, the fact that you control the apportionment of the material and the time for its mastering leads to better academic results, because you alone can judge best the capabilities, character and talents of your child. In fact, there is not a better pedagogue than you.

There exist, and we have read about different methods and ways to organize the homeschool, tuned to and consistent with the character and learner type that we have. We should not reduce all children to a common denominator, and approach them the same way. Even in one family the children are so different and unique. Some kids apprehend an information easier, when they listen and reproduce what they have learned (by means of conversations, reading of reports, retelling), others need to see the things they learn (by means of pictures, drafts, models, educational films), third ones remember best, when they apply the learned things in the practice (by means of educational games, experiments, field trips and different works). Some of them are better organized, others are more creative, and third ones are more analytical. Besides, the different children mature for the different things at different age, and it is important for the parents to understand this, and to be able to change their expectations and plans. Sometimes we have to wait; sometimes we have to hasten, in order not to miss the moment. We should not put in typical framework the individual characters of our children.

What type of learners and learning styles are there is another interesting, practical and useful subject that has been little discussed in our society for reasons that are easy to explain. Now, I am not going to discuss it, but there are some basic principles and practical advices, that have been of use at our home. It's about how to find our way through the pile of resources and textbooks, how to organize our time and how to co-ordinate all daily tasks, to know for sure that the things are going ahead in good pace.

Naturally, you will need directions when you are acting for first time the part of a responsible parent, teaching his or her children. A good reference point is the established minimum requirements for knowledge in each grade. There are such developed programs for the schools in Bulgaria, as well as for all schools in the western countries. I will give for example Virginia Curriculum Standards. It is good to know, that the foregoing programs are for public schools and are conformed to the middle or the lowest level of the students there. Therefore I call them minimal requirements. It is necessary, of course, to make a total revision of their foundation, and they have to serve us just as a reference point that helps us to judge better. Other good and useful sources are the curricula of the different publishers of homeschool stuff, because they are adapted to the needs of the homeschooled children and the great variety helps us to select a suitable curriculum, tuned to the abilities and capacities of the child.

When we chose History curriculum for our son, we decided that it is better for him to start with the Ancient World, adjusted to his age, of course, instead to teach him several years in a row only Bulgarian history, though this is not in accordance with the program of the Bulgarian Department of Education and Science. This is actually one of the advantages of the homeschool –flexibility when choosing curriculum and the right to decide what is better and beneficial for your own child.

I want to encourage all mothers that have decided to homeschool. Do not worry if you can not cover everything you read about in the sources that I have specified. It is not possible to comprehend all the information that exists in the world. Living in the age of information, it is important to teach our children *to love learning* and to be able *to learn independently*, because they could find alone the necessary resources. We have to lay firm foundations. Part of the instruction in some subjects might be under the guidance of someone, who is more qualified than us – a teacher, another homeschooling parent or just experts in the respective area.

An example of five steps for organizing the lesson plan

Step 1: Decide which subjects you will teach and what amount of information and skills will be mastered during the year.

For example:

SUBJECTS:

Bible study
Mathematics
Bulgarian language and literature
English language
History
Geography
Computer skills
Science (natural, physical and chemical phenomena and processes)
Arts
Sports and etc.

Step 2: Now you have to decide what your basic goals are going to be, distributed for each subject.

For example: (for 5th grade or age 10-11 years)

Mathematics:

Fractions, percents, measuring units,
One unknown quantity equations,
Everyday math
Work with calculator, and etc.

We often notice that being driven for a higher academic success, we make plans for more ambitious program that our child is able to cover, but nevertheless we do not lose anything – even if we do not complete all that was planned – for we have made already part of our next program. If we have missed by chance to include anything, that we have deemed later to be of any importance – this is also not a problem, for it could always be covered later.

Step 3: Now it's time to select the resources. These are textbooks, workbooks, books, encyclopedias, tapes, DVDs (educational films, educational games) and everything that you can think about and that will be of use for your program.

Fortunately there are so many resources and textbooks that are in distribution, that today it is rather harder to judge which are the most beneficial. The access to free resources is also an opportunity from which we have to make advantage. Besides it's happens very often that the families share books and textbooks, that had helped them to achieve good results. Of course these are books in English (for a lack of Bulgarian textbooks that can help parents in home education). Moreover, it is encouraging for us to see that there are encyclopedias and workbooks translated into Bulgarian which are beneficial for our homeschool.

I know by experience that it is important to look through several textbooks in a row or to get acquainted with the whole curriculum on a certain subject, in order not to wander about later, or to seek another resource. We are not insured, however, that we will not fail with the right judgment of our child's need at the moment, but we have the power and chance to change the things once we understand that. This is not possible in the public or private schools (in Bulgaria), because they follow standard programs. The parents do not have power and right to interfere there, even if they do not agree with the Evolution theory, for example.

Step 4: Organizing our year, week, and day.

I suppose you guess that the homeschool requires parents to have a virtue, called organization, so that they might be able to cover everything conceived as an idea and plan for the year. Very often this is also a challenge that we, as adults, have to learn. The planning should not make us pedants, of course, that caring of nothing but to follow the plan. Organizing the day, the week and in general, enables us to govern the situations, not to make us governed by the situations.

Depending on the decision about how the child is going to learn during the year, we estimate how many real school weeks we have. We might choose a different schedule than the specified below. For example one month school – one week rest; or 3 months school – two weeks rest; some parents decide to have school all year long without long vacations. There are many variations, but the most important thing is to know for sure how much time you have.

A sample of yearly program – week schedule

TOTAL AMOUNT OF WEEKS PER YEAR	52	<i>weeks</i>
SUMMER VACATION	8	<i>weeks</i>
WINTER VACATION	1	<i>weeks</i>
SPRING VACATION	1	<i>weeks</i>
HOLIDAYS / SICK LEAVES	2	<i>weeks</i>
TOTAL AMOUNT OF SCHOOL WEEKS	40	<i>weeks</i>

A great advantage of the education at home is the opportunity to relate learning with real life. The family plans concerning possibility for participation in events, walks, getting knowledge of the things in their relation to the real life, as well as meeting other people, are key moments for successful homeschool. We may outline in advance our plans and ideas that will have any importance for further distribution of the tasks down the year.

Week schedule

What the week schedule depends of? How many days of the weeks are going to be schooldays (5 or 6), what are the subjects and the level of their importance for us, as well as what is the amount of information that we have decided to include. This is important in order to decide what subject and how many times in the week will be studied. Another important thing is the time that we will determine for work on each subject. The variations are many again, and the decision depends on the age and

characteristics of the child. A good recommendation is to devote to the exact sciences an hour, and to the humanities more time, because the drawing of reports, making of experiments and research require more time. We personally have not defined strictly the amount of time for a subject during the day. We decide only what will be the subjects for the day, and follow the units and the lessons.

We are all used to the fact that the drafting of the week schedule means to determine what the child is going to study during the week, and that this repeats till the end of the year. There was time when we organized our schedule exactly that way, but recently we realized, that there is more practical way. It is reduced to the following: The week schedule is determined prior the beginning of the new week, its repetition with the last week's schedule not being necessary. That is convenient, because it allows you to be flexible and adequate to the needs of the child. When the theme of some subject is difficult for him, and he has not been able to complete the work that has been planned, then you may increase the days or the duration of the lessons on problematic subject during the new week. The version proposed above requires the parent to spend more time. I want to tell you that sacrifice is worthy your time, because in the aftermath the older children will learn to determine alone their schedule, and that will motivate them to reach the small goals set by them in the learning process.

The school day

I propose you a sample plan of one school day:

MONDAY

SUBJECT	TASK FOR THE DAY	TEST	BASIC SUBJECT-MATTER	NOTE
Mathematics	page 213 - 216	-	Decimal Numbers	90%
Bible study	page 124 - 127	-	The Book of Jonah, chapter 1 and 2 from the Bible	95%
English	English Grammar page 194 - 200	Unit test No 11	The Writing Process	89%
History	Review	-	The Founding of the Bulgarian State	95%

How passes one day in a family that teaches its children at home? There is not a fixed answer of that question, because the answer varies according to how different we are. There are only individual answers. But man can clearly see that we do not conform to the school bell, neither to the availability of a free classroom, neither do we have to comply with the necessity to study in the morning or in the afternoon (during the second term), neither with the so called wood vacations (vacations for the lack of heating in the schools), neither with striking of vacating teachers. **We have at our disposal 365 days in the year, 24 hours in the day – and it rests with us how we are going to distribute them.**

Step 5: Drawing up of the balance

We can not set goals if we do not draw up the balance what we have achieved thus far and whether we go in the direction that has been determined by us. Is it necessary for us to change something in our strategy, and if yes, what it should be? If you tend to get discouraged sometimes, look back and see the road that you have passed, the goals you have reached, your children who grow up in a loving family environment. If it is necessary, make some changes, because being parents that love our children, we have to learn from our mistakes.

Ultimately, the homeschool is school for the whole family. Everybody learn there – mom, dad and the kids. This is a constant part of the successful School at Home.

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