

Letter To a Prospective Homeschooling Parent

I have been getting emails like the one below more frequently lately, so I thought I would share my general response. What would you add?

"Dear, Kerry: I ran across your website while doing research on homeschooling. I am a mother of 3 children ages 6, 4 and 2. We moved to the suburbs when my children were smaller to take advantage of the top-rated public schools in our town. We had a wonderful pre-school experience due to the choice of school focused on play, outdoor exploration and emotional development.

However, as my 6 year old embarks on her education in the public school system, I find myself becoming more and more disappointed. More importantly, I find her becoming bored and disinterested in learning as a 1st grader. All of this said, I am contacting you because I am thinking of homeschooling and I'm scared to death! What are the resources? What curriculum should I use? Where do I begin? So many questions! Help!"

Hello mama!

Welcome to the exciting world of learning without schooling! You have already taken the important first step in redefining your child's education by acknowledging the limitations of mass schooling, recognizing the ways it can dull a child's curiosity and exuberance, and seeking alternatives to school. Now it's time to take a deep breath, exhale, and explore.

1. First things first: Connect with your local homeschooling network. This network could be a message board through a Yahoo or MeetUp group, or a Facebook group, or a state homeschooling advocacy group (like AHM for Massachusetts homeschoolers). Maybe you have already joined the Alliance for Self-Directed Education and have connected with the local SDE groups that may be forming in your area. Tapping into your local homeschooling community, posting your questions and introducing yourself, can be incredibly valuable. You may be surprised at just how many homeschooling families are nearby and the many activities and resources available to you. You may also find families on a similar path as yours. This can alleviate much of the anxiety you are experiencing as you take a peek into this new world of learning. These local networks can help you to navigate your local homeschooling regulations and guide you through the process of pulling your child from school.

2. Second, start reading! Obviously you are already doing this or you wouldn't have found my blog, but there is much more to learn. Homeschooling and education blogs and websites are great resources. Here is my short list of favorite books/articles/films to get you started:

Free To Learn, by Peter Gray

Teach Your Own, by John Holt (Anything by John Holt is worth reading. Here is the Holt/Growing Without Schooling website.)
Life Learning Magazine, by Wendy Priesnitz (editor)
Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling, by John Taylor Gatto
Free-Range Learning, by Laura Grace Weldon
Home Grown, by Ben Hewitt
The Teenage Liberation Handbook, by Grace Llewellyn
The Unschooling Handbook, by Mary Griffith
The Unschooling Unmanual, by Jan Hunt
Deschooling Society, by Ivan Illich
Free To Live, by Pam Laricchia
Class Dismissed documentary
Schooling the World documentary

3. Third: What about curriculum? Personally, I am an advocate for Self-Directed Education (SDE). Sometimes referred to as “unschooling,” SDE shifts our view of education from schooling (something someone does to someone else, often by force) toward learning (something humans naturally do). With Self-Directed Education, young people are in charge of their own learning and doing, following their own interests and passions, with grown-ups available to help connect them to the vast resources of both real and digital communities. Children direct their education, adults facilitate.

I am a realist though. (Or at least I try to be!) So I know that it is often challenging for families to go directly from a schooled mindset to an unschooled one. Whenever parents ask me what curriculum they should choose, I say **if** you are going to use a curriculum, I recommend Oak Meadow. A Vermont-based company that incorporates a lot of Waldorf-inspired educational ideas, Oak Meadow is a gentle, rich curriculum with a stellar reputation.

4. Next, think about your family values, needs, and rhythms. Shifting from schooling to learning may involve some big changes to your family life, your routines, and your schedules. It may lead to reassessing priorities and to carefully juggling multiple work and family responsibilities. It also means you need some help to avoid burning out! Consider your support network of family, friends, and community and get the help you need to make this work for the long-term. If there is a self-directed learning center or homeschooling co-op near you, these resources can also be incredibly helpful in enabling you to find balance and connection.

5. Finally, talk with your kids! Learning without schooling is a collaborative endeavor that is mostly focused on your child’s distinct interests, learning styles, and needs. Talk with your child and find out what she wants to do. If you are coming directly out of a school environment, you may need some time to “deschool”– to fully embrace living and learning

without being tied to the expectations and accoutrements of a schooled lifestyle. Go to the library, the museum, the park, or the beach. Take a walk in the woods. Spend long, slow mornings reading books together on the couch. Bake cookies. Ride bikes. Write a letter to a friend. Watch a movie. Play Scrabble. Go to the grocery store, the bank, the post office. Live life. Soon you will see that living and learning are the same thing.

Best wishes to you as you embark on this exciting life journey! Remember: schooling is a relatively recent societal construct; learning is a natural condition of being human. Happy learning!

Warmly,
Kerry

P.S. For glimpses into our unschooling life, visit me on Instagram.

Originally published at Whole Family Learning.