

Common Arguments about the Strengths and Limitations of Home Schooling

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Today in American culture, few people are unfamiliar with home schooling. Most either know someone who home schools their children or have heard of a family that has selected this increasingly popular alternative to public and private school education. By all accounts, the movement has been growing steadily over the past few years. The U.S. Department of Education estimated that approximately fifteen thousand students were home schooled in 1984, with that number increasing to between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand students in 1988. Currently, it is estimated that between 1.2 and 1.7 million students in grades K–12 are home schooled in the United States (Lines 1998; Ray 1999). This spectacular growth not only testifies to the demand by parents for alternative and less-institutionalized options for their children’s education, but also has established home schooling as a significant and legitimate force in the American educational landscape.

One of the more fascinating aspects of this educational movement is that today’s home schooling families represent a diverse sampling of the American population. Once reserved primarily for fundamentalist Christians with religious motivations for educating their children at home,

home schooling now embraces such a wide range of families that it has surfaced as a mainstream alternative form of education. The recent upsurge in home schooling’s popularity has drawn people from all ethnic groups and social classes, and a rapidly increasing number of minority families home school their children (Knowles 1988; Nazareno 1999; Ray 1999; Wahisi 1995). Ideologically, home schoolers represent a broad cross-section of American society; one can find families holding to conservative and liberal, religious and secular values, beliefs, and political viewpoints (Mayberry 1987; Van Galen 1988). Home schooling’s rapid growth, coupled with the diversity of its practitioners, all but discredits the long-accepted view that public schools serve children from diverse backgrounds equally well. But as with all forms of education, there are both pros and cons to home schooling. In this article, I address why families choose home schooling, and I summarize the most common arguments put forth by advocates and critics of home schooling regarding the perceived strengths and limitations of this unique form of education.

WHY FAMILIES CHOOSE HOME SCHOOLING

Although there are numerous reasons families choose to home school their children, Van Galen (1988) appropriately places home schoolers into two distinct categories: ideologues and pedagogues. The ideologues argue that they home school their children for two reasons: “they object to what they believe is being taught in public and private schools and they seek to strengthen their relationships with their children” (Van Galen 1988, 55). These parents have

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specific beliefs, values, and skills that they want their children to learn and embrace. Because they are convinced that these things are not being adequately taught in public school, they opt for home schooling.

The ideologues' argument is essentially religiously based. Often "these parents view the public schools as grounded in secular humanist philosophy that does not include strong Christian values" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994, 66). They move beyond issues such as school prayer and argue that public schools fail to take religion seriously throughout the curriculum. This becomes problematic for these families because "their religious beliefs and the education of their children were inextricably intertwined" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994, 77). These parents have a deep concern for their children's moral, ethical, and spiritual development, and they feel that public schools do not provide appropriate moral or ethical instruction, much less religious values. Therefore, they home school their children in an attempt to avoid public school's perceived attempt to strangle religion's influence.

Pedagogues, on the other hand, teach their children at home primarily for pedagogical reasons. They are not so concerned with the content of public education, but rather they believe that whatever public schools teach, they teach ineptly. These parents "share a respect for their children's intellect and creativity and a belief that children learn best when pedagogy taps into the child's innate desire to learn" (Van Galen 1988, 55). Pedagogues home school primarily because of what they believe will be the educational benefit to their children. These parents have usually observed children who suffered both emotionally and academically because of the schools' shortcomings, and they recognize "that the schools are often unwilling or unable to serve children with unique learning styles or scholarly needs" (Van Galen 1988, 57). They challenge the power of public schools to sort, select, and label their children based on what they see as a limited measure of their child's ability, and they believe "that breaking from the traditional formal model of teaching will lead to improved understanding and learning in their children" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994, 66).

THE STRENGTHS OF HOME SCHOOLING

First, research indicates that when parental involvement in children's education is high, students are more likely to become academically successful and reach their potential (Simmons 1994). That is the essence of home schooling. Parents are intimately involved not only in their child's education but in the details of their child's life. More impor-

tant, that involvement takes place in a sustained and continuous relationship rather than serving simply a supplemental role.

Many parents who home school seek to strengthen the quality of their relationships with their children. Advocates argue that home schooling enables families to build tight bonds amid a society where the family institution is falling apart. The time that parents spend home schooling their children "produces more meaningful communication, emotional intimacy, and a closer family life" (Ballman 1987, 82). In homes where there are several siblings being home schooled, that unique bond extends to the sibling relationships. No other factor in life will have more of an effect on a child's life than the family, and home schooling enables the family to play its important role more actively.

Second, critics of home schooling argue that unless children are exposed to the social life that is found in public schools, they will be misfits incapable of socializing properly. For many critics, that lack of socialization is cited as the major drawback of home schooling. However, home schoolers present a different perspective. They argue against traditional understandings of the socialization process and maintain that there are both positive and negative forms of socialization. Ballman (1987) defines the positive and negative aspects of socialization in the following manner:

Positive socialization helps a child to grow and develop to his full potential in life. When a child's personality develops in a warm atmosphere of love and acceptance, he will usually socialize well with all age groups, including his own. Negative socialization, on the other hand, separates a child from his parents and restricts a child's socializing primarily to his age-mates. This can have detrimental and long-term effects on a child's potential sociability among a wide age dispersment. (71)

Because home school children spend most of their time around their parents in an accepting atmosphere, they, unlike their public school counterparts, are able to engage socially in multiage situations with a high level of confidence. Beyond the classroom walls, how often do people limit their interaction to individuals of their own age? That type of peer socialization inadequately prepares students for normal life situations, where they must interact with people of all ages.

Home schoolers also argue that other institutions, groups, and activities outside the home can provide students with important socialization skills. On average, home schooled students are involved in 5.2 activities outside the home, with 98 percent engaged in two or more (Ray 1997). Their involvement in such activities as scouting, dance classes, group sports, 4H, and volunteer work demonstrates

that home schoolers are not isolated from the outside world. Rather, “home schooled children are more frequently exposed to a wider variety of people and situations than could be expected in a traditional classroom environment where their exposure is limited to 25–35 people of similar age and socioeconomic background” (Nelsen 1998, 35). Also, home school students are more likely “to develop a sense of self-worth and a stable value system—which is the basic ingredient for positive sociability” (Moore 1982).

It is important to understand that a child’s self-concept and the socialization process are closely related. Ray (1989) discusses several studies that indicate that home school students’ social development is comparable to or more advanced than that of public school students. One particular study used the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale to measure the central core of personality with home school children in grades 4–12 (Taylor 1986). Home school students scored significantly higher than public school students, indicating that they had a more positive self-concept. Insofar as self-concept is a basic factor of positive sociability, we can conclude that home schoolers are not socially deprived nor inferior in socialization (Taylor 1986).

Third, education is not exclusively about a child’s intellect; it also includes character. Many home school advocates argue that their view of morality and their deeply held beliefs and values are not being adequately taught in public schools, if at all. Therefore, they opt for home schooling to assure that their children are provided numerous opportunities to learn and embrace the morals and values that they deem appropriate. For example, parents can teach their children the importance of prayer and faith and instruct them in religious precepts with direct reference to the Bible or other Scriptures. Home schooling allows families to integrate their personal beliefs and values, whatever they may be, into all areas of the curriculum.

Fourth, every child’s emotional and educational needs are complex, and any attempt to conform the needs of a child to the school or classroom is impossible and possibly detrimental to the student. This is standard practice in public schools, where students must adhere to a rigid curriculum that doesn’t always address their academic needs or interests. In the public school classroom, the instruction is designed for twenty-five to thirty students, and that forces each student to accommodate the instruction instead of the instruction’s accommodating the students’ needs and learning styles. Successful students make the adjustment while others, although intelligent and full of potential, become discouraged, fail, and are labeled and left behind to struggle in the lower academic tracks.

Home schooling, on the other hand, easily allows teachers to adjust the curriculum and instruction to fit the individual needs of students because home schoolers gen-

erally use a one-on-one tutoring style of teaching. Other factors are the following:

- Home educators do not have to contend with large classes, so the teacher can easily tailor the curriculum and instruction to meet the needs and interests of the student, and she can pace learning according to the student’s level of understanding. In addition, the one-on-one teaching style provides the individual student with undivided attention, allows for quicker diagnosis of problems, offers more opportunities to ask questions, and lets student develop a deeper understanding of subject matter.
- Home school teachers enjoy a benefit that many public school teachers would cherish: flexibility. The home school teacher can make spontaneous decisions as needed without all the red tape and administrative constraints.
- Home school teachers can easily seize teachable moments because everyday experiences provide the foundation for learning. For example, a math lesson on measurement might start with a textbook or a worksheet and end with mixing and baking a cake.
- Traditional time constraints are removed within home schools. Instruction is not pitted against the clock and children are not forced to stop what they are doing, pack away their project, change gears, and think about a new subject. If a child is interested in reading a story, the home school educator can adjust the schedule to allow the student to continue. Also, teachers can easily develop units of study using an integrated approach and making the student’s interests the basis of unit studies. As we know, learning occurs when interest is high.

Finally, in thirteen years of public schooling, students endure many negative learning experiences. Most learn to cope, but the consequences can be serious. However, home schooling provides the supportive environment of a concerned family, where wounds suffered from bad learning experiences can heal and students can recover and slowly regain their confidence. That confidence building is more likely to be found in homes than schools.

Additionally, home schools enhance the confidence of students by minimizing the importance of grades and encouraging students to learn for the sake of gaining knowledge. Unlike the public school classroom, which fosters extrinsically motivated learners, home schooling cultivates learners who are intrinsically motivated and seek after knowledge. Many home schooled students still have the joy of learning, while their counterparts in public school slowly lose this joy as they progress through their education.

THE LIMITATIONS OF HOME SCHOOLING

The main criticism of home schooling centers on the issue of socialization. Critics charge that home schooled children are isolated from the outside world and are socially handicapped. By being sheltered from the real world, children are seldom presented with the opportunities to learn sorely needed social interaction skills. More important, “it is not only socially desirable but also an important part of education for children to interact with their own age group” (Simmons 1994, 48). Unless these children are exposed on a daily basis to the social life found in public schools, they will lack the skills needed to successfully adapt to real-life situations when they are older.

Second, although home schoolers rightly argue that their children can obtain basic socialization skills from a wide variety of experiences independent of school, there are important limitations to this interaction. For example, home schooled children seldom are exposed to the diversity of beliefs and backgrounds that they would encounter in most public school classrooms. Even though they are involved in various activities outside of their homes, such as field trips and other activities with fellow home schoolers, the participants usually are a very select group of students who for the most part share similar values, background, and social class. This type of interaction simply provides the children with a controlled social group unlike those they will face when they enter college or the work force. Even when home schooled students engage in community activities such as sports teams, the few hours spent in practice and playing games do little to expose students to differing viewpoints and lifestyles.

Academically, the lack of peer interaction in the classroom is detrimental to a home school student’s education. To receive a complete education, students need to engage in discussions, share ideas, compete, and work with other students. This interaction helps determine how students confront problems, shapes the manner in which they see the world, and influences students’ goals and aspirations (Simmons 1994). More important, the interaction provides students with a means to compare and contrast themselves against their peers in a variety of areas that move beyond standardized test scores. According to Simmons, “the home school might stand as a lonesome contrast to the active, bustling, energy-filled classroom where students are constantly exchanging ideas and enjoying each other’s company” (1994, 48).

Third, another limitation of home schooling is that the instructor may lack the resources or facilities to deliver a well-rounded curriculum. Although there are countless “sequenced and integrated curriculum materials now available for home schooling, a home simply cannot provide the numerous and diverse enrichment activities such as band, orchestra, choral activities, forensics, and many sports without some cooperation from some established educa-

tional institution” (Simmons 1994, 47). Most home schoolers would agree that such extracurricular activities are a vital part of one’s education and that local home school groups adequately provide those opportunities. However, they may not be of the same quality and depth as those of other educational institutions.

Regarding resources, funding, and facilities, it is important to understand that home schools are no different than public schools. Just as our current public school budget is inequitable, so are personal incomes. The majority of families (82 percent) who have the ability to choose home schooling earn yearly incomes in the range of \$25,000 to \$75,000 and above (Ray 1999). Does family income affect educational outcomes? Home school advocates argue that income has no effect on standardized test performance (Ray 1999, 1991). However, simply using standardized test scores as the sole basis for determining the relationship of income to education overlooks other important aspects of schooling. Income indeed affects the overall educational experience for the 18 percent of home school families whose finances fall below the \$25,000 level. Limited resources affect their ability to provide adequate educational opportunities and equipment, such as computers; field trips and other experiences that cost money such as entrance fees to museums; science materials such as microscopes and other laboratory facilities; access to tutors to teach courses such as Spanish or to other needed specialized professional assistance; and simple everyday school materials. All of these can prove to be a financial burden for poorer home school families. Even though home school support groups provide some assistance, this is limited. As in the public school system, where wealthier schools have the resources to provide more opportunities to their students, wealthier families can often provide a better overall home school education.

Fourth, critics of home schooling argue that parents may have too much freedom under current legislation. Only ten states require that parents have a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma to home school. “Perhaps the biggest and most legitimate concern about home schooling is making certain that children are being taught by a ‘qualified adult’ . . . the term qualified is not referring to teacher licensure but rather the ability to ‘present instruction to children in a coherent and skillful manner’” (Simmons 1994, 47). Certainly most parents who home school are well meaning and highly motivated, but they may lack the ability and professional preparation that they need to provide effective instruction. Not everyone can teach.

Regarding instruction, several other issues are relevant and worth addressing. One concern is that few individuals have the self-discipline to push aside interruptions during the typical day. The baby crying, the phone ringing, or the siblings fighting can all cause an academic program to suffer. Certainly it can be argued “that learning never stops

and that the interruptions themselves can provide learning opportunities, but the fact remains that certain clearly defined learning tasks demand intense concentration and unbroken periods of study” (Simmons 1994, 47–48).

Another concern is the scope and depth of knowledge required in some content areas as home school children move into the secondary level. Are parents able to teach students higher levels of math, complex biological terms, or an in-depth analysis of American history? Although resources such as tapes and books can aid instruction (again, finances may play a role), most students need a teacher who has expertise in the subject to provide the appropriate level of instruction or to deal with the complexities of particular academic areas. It is difficult to accurately assess, diagnose, and determine the curriculum and instruction that would most appropriately meet the needs of a particular child—even when it is the teacher’s own child.

Finally, many of the skills that are important for successful students, employees, and professionals are not fully developed at home. For example, the home school curriculum does not always emphasize organizational skills, time management, intense study habits, or the ability to work with others. For instance, the same flexibility that enables home schools to provide extra time for students to fully develop and write a report can prove problematic if students neglect to develop skills needed to manage time and meet deadlines.

CONCLUSION

Currently, home schooling’s popularity is rapidly increasing, and the movement is beginning to play a significant role in the education of America’s children. This alternative form of education has gained legitimacy because of its proven effectiveness and success in both academic and social areas. However, there are no simple yes-or-no answers to the many complex questions that home schooling generates. Advocates and critics view education and related issues from very different perspectives, and each perspective sheds new light and insight on these issues.

Nevertheless, most of us can agree that all forms of education contain various strengths and weaknesses. The bottom line is that the education of children in the United States should primarily be the responsibility of the parents. Parents have the right to determine what form of schooling best meets the needs of their children. More important, the expectation that public education should adequately serve the needs of children from broad and diverse backgrounds should be dismissed. Public schools do not, cannot, and probably should not be expected to meet the needs of every child in the community. Instead, parents, schools, and the community need to work together to educate all children, no matter what form of education parents choose. Instead of constantly comparing and contrasting public and home schools, we need to learn

from one another and then use this information to improve the learning experiences of all children.

Key words: home schooling, strengths, limitations, families, education

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