

Getting Started Home Schooling, Part 4

Scheduling and Record Keeping

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Planning Your Schedule

In all of the areas of home schooling we have discussed, we must remember that the vast majority of today's home school parents were part of the government school system. A few may have been in Christian schools, but very, very few were home schooled themselves. Thus, the model we parents identify with is that of the government schools.

Think for a few minutes about how the current schedule with a summer vacation came about. In the early years of government schools, America had an agricultural society. Children were needed for work on the farm. To accommodate that, the school year lasted only during the winter months. As industry expanded, child labor laws were created, transportation improved, and developments such as electricity and refrigeration occurred, the school year expanded. Nevertheless, the concept of a long vacation between grades is still with us.

As a home school family, you are free to make a yearly schedule that is unique to your own family's needs. Consider several factors.

Have you found that your children forget a lot over the summer and you need to spend a lot of time reviewing in the fall? Textbooks build a large amount of review into the first few chapters for that reason. If you ask the typical child in grades two through four what he is learning during September and October, he'll tell you that it's all review. When Steve taught in the government school system, it didn't take him long to observe that most new material is learned between Christmas and Easter. Since then we have talked with government school teachers who have said the same thing. Before Christmas they are reviewing, and after Easter the children want to be outside and are not concentrating very much.

The next time you hear a classroom teacher winsomely fantasize about air conditioning in the classroom during May, don't chide him too strongly about how much that would cost the taxpayers. Uncomfortable students are hard to teach.

Think about your family's schedule. Is your husband in a job where he can take his vacation some time other than summer? What camps or other summer activities are you involved in? Do you travel at various times of the year to visit relatives? Are you able to accompany your husband sometimes on business trips? All of these things can affect the schedule you set up.

For several years when Steve was not in the classroom, we waited until after Labor Day to take our family vacation. One year we visited the Statue of Liberty. It was with great glee that we walked right past the signs stating "three hour wait from here," "two hour wait from here," "one hour wait from here," etc. Why? We waited until after the crowds were gone, children were back in school, and the entire Island was relatively empty. Not only did it create a much more enjoyable vacation, but we were able to make the most of our time. The time that just two weeks prior would have been spent waiting in line, was instead spent in other sightseeing.

We found that it worked well for our family to shorten our summer break so that not so much was forgotten and the need to review was minimal. Again, the time that would otherwise have been

spent reviewing was spent learning new things. Of course, periodic review is still necessary, but not because of a calendar that is counterproductive to education.

We worked around summer activities with set dates. Generally we started in early August which allowed for us to take a September vacation when Steve's schedule permitted. We also found it helpful to take about three weeks at Christmas. By Easter, we were ready for another break, so we figured on two weeks off there. It also fit our personal schedule to take a break toward the end of May and then do some work in June.

We know other families who have home schooled year-round with a set schedule of 4 or 5 weeks schooling followed by a one week break. This has worked very well for them.

Don't feel locked into following the government school model. Discuss your own schedule. Are there times when because of other activities, getting the "school work" done is a burden? Maybe you have a large garden and do a lot of canning for several weeks in the fall. Just plan to concentrate on "home ec" during that time and scale back or set aside other work during that time. Many good things will be accomplished as you work together to plan and carry out the canning process or a similar family project. You are implicitly connecting real life to school work; you're not setting aside education. That connection is often irreparably broken by adhering slavishly to tradition.

Flow with the bent of your family instead of fighting it. That will make a big difference in your attitude toward your home schooling.

A common concern we hear is that of getting the books finished. Think back to your own school experience. How often did your teachers make it to the end of the textbook? Ours rarely did. Don't sweat that. If you don't finish it when you would like, just keep going until it is finished. Remember, if you are adjusting your schedule so that less review is necessary, you will be able to go very quickly through early review chapters in the book.

Daily Schedule

The daily schedule is not quite as amenable to flexing as the yearly schedule is, but there is still much room for adjustment to your situation. Sleep at night is better than sleep during the day in the vast majority of cases, so even if Dad has a third shift job, we wouldn't recommend that the whole family be in bed from nine a.m. to five p.m. We would suggest however that you sincerely look for what will work for you. Don't insist that all the work be done during "normal" school hours.

Routines help us to accomplish things because they encourage systematic thinking. They help you to be efficient in using your time, to build on past knowledge, and to develop good habits. So, after you have determined the basics of your daily schedule, you should try to stick to it as much as you can. Of course, a break from the routine periodically is helpful, but get back to the routine after the break, whether the break was planned or not.

Getting started early in the day is good for most people because the majority of people have their most productive hours early in the day. You can experiment with the specifics. For example, should you have an active task right after breakfast, or should you have a sit-down task? Part of the answer depends on how big a breakfast you had and how long the task lasts. Try different schemes, and see which one works for your family, but get started early in the day, every day.

Regarding your academics, we would like to see some Bible study and prayer early to give your most productive time to the Lord and symbolize the idea of giving the first things to Him. Next in importance regarding scheduling would be math. It needs to be done at a time when your children's minds will be sharp and able to concentrate on detail.

When Steve taught in the classroom, he had many situations where he would observe children's receptiveness to learning. On more than one occasion, he would see children who had just come in from the playground sit down and tear into work strongly for fifteen or twenty minutes because their blood was flowing rapidly through their brains, and they were very alert. Soon the opposite would happen...they'd be ready for a nap. That alert time is the time to do something that the child finds more difficult. For some children, you would want to wait a few minutes to let them slow down a little because they are so alert after exercise that they are alert to everything and find it hard to concentrate and prioritize. In that case, you have a discussion of some kind for a few minutes just before they get back to work.

It is usually good to intersperse the hard with the easy and the active with the passive during the course of a day. Work the breaks in accordingly. Again, consider the difference between the morning and afternoon. Usually the morning will require fewer breaks than the afternoon, and not every "break" has to be a do-nothing time. A time of folding laundry or doing dishes together can be a break from book work, yet still be quite productive. Often your best conversations with your children will take place during one of these "breaks".

Another thing to remember is that it is not necessary to do each subject every day. Maybe you are working on a big history project or a science experiment or demonstration. You might want to consider spending a longer period of time on those, thus eliminating some other subjects for that day. On another day, you could skip the big project and concentrate on the other subjects.

Record Keeping

Like most things there are many variations in record keeping.

You need to have a basic outline of your plan for the year in advance. This helps you to have an overview in mind of where you are headed in each subject. This would show the basic topics to be covered and help you then to include and exclude more detailed activities according to whether they fit into the plan or not.

That outline then needs to be organized in such a way that you can see what should be accomplished in any given week to stay on schedule.

Don't panic...the basic plan can change...but you still need a plan. If you see that you are behind, you can look at your overview and determine what you will do to get back on schedule.

For daily planning, you can use a commercially available teacher's plan book that is essentially a grid of rectangles showing days of the week in columns and subjects in rows or vice versa. Each block would show page numbers, topics of discussion, or descriptive phrases of what was done that day. You can come up with your own system of planning ahead, then showing what was actually done. It could be as simple as putting the plan in one color of ink and what actually happened in another color.

Keeping a journal is another way of keeping track of what's going on. Each daily entry would include the work accomplished that day with any pertinent comments about it.

As our sons got older, we began making a weekly list for each of them with the work listed that they needed to accomplish that week. They kept a daily log of what they did and how much time they spent. At the end of each day they reported back to us. In their high school years, they had considerable latitude in deciding what they wanted to do at any given time, but they had a system of accountability. Of course, some work was done, together, but they still gave us the log at the end of each day. We could then use that to keep a permanent record of what was being covered.

You might want to keep a record of additional things on separate lists, such as books that each child has read, or dates and locations of "field trips." If your state's reporting system requires it, or

if you just find it helpful, you might need to keep a separate record of time spent by subject area. Don't try to keep so many different lists and records, though, that you get bogged down.

Good records of what you accomplishing are essential. If you would ever be questioned by government officials about what you are doing, those records could be invaluable. Even if you live in a state where almost no reporting is required, keep in mind that we live in a society where those laws can be changed very quickly.

We highly recommend that all homeschoolers join Home School Legal Defense Association (www.hslda.org). Not only does this provide you with legal help if the need should arise, but you are also helping other homeschoolers who are having legal problems.

Permanent Records

A permanent record is essential for admission into institutions of higher learning such as colleges or trade schools. You can make your own form or purchase one from several different curriculum publishers.

The permanent record includes when courses were taken, names of courses, credit earned, grades earned, contact information regarding your home school, college board scores, achievement test scores, and awards and accomplishments. We also made up a simple personal reference form to use in applying for scholarships. That made it easy to collect recommendations in advance of the scholarship application process rather than during the process.

Although we are not advocates of using letter grades in the home school setting, you do need to keep a systematic record of what has been accomplished in a way that officials in various institutions can understand. Along with this record, you might want to have a portfolio of sample work in an area of specialization that could be of interest to the school to which you are applying. This could include essays, poetry, art work, photographs, audio tapes, or video tapes.

Your home schooling is one of the most important endeavors in which you could possibly be involved because of its far-reaching effects. You want to work hard to make it the best it can be. You want to allow the Lord to open your mind as to where He is taking your children and what they need to be prepared to go there. This is an exciting process, and we pray that you will be enthusiastically and prayerfully engaged.

