

Home Education Basics

Contributed by Sarah D

As a home educator, I'll start by answering the most FAQs that I get thrown at me:

1. Yes, it is legal
2. No, I am not a teacher
3. Yes, they have friends
4. Yes, there is time to do the housework

Regarding the legalities of home education, it is established in section 7 of the Education Act 1996 (previously Section 3b of the Education Act 1944): "The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable

- a) to his age, ability and aptitude
- b) to any special educational needs he may have either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

We are the parents of two children aged 10 and 13, who have never been to school. I decided when Bethany, the first born was about 3 that the state school system could not offer what I wanted for our children. My decision was easy, but trying to justify it to others was difficult, especially family. I was called cruel, selfish, obstinate, eccentric, among other things; no good would come of it, they'd have no friends, grow up with all sorts of problems.

This far down the line, I can see quite plainly that the right decision was made. Our children are bright, intelligent, articulate, interested in life, have friends of all ages, a huge range of interests and are mature and compassionate for their ages, with a wicked and highly developed sense of humour! If you decide to home educate from birth, or pre-school age, then this should present no problems. You do not have to inform the Local Education Authority of your decision - there is no legal requirement in this. However, if you withdraw your child from school, by the process of de-registration, the LEA automatically becomes involved, and this will mean regular checks by them.

We have an "Inspector" who visits annually, in our case a retired headmaster, who reports back to the LEA with a copy of his report being sent to us as well. When Bethany was 5, I wrote to our LEA to inform them of our decision to home educate as a neighbour had intimated that she would "report us to the authorities"; if this happens, then several agencies can get involved, which can be extremely stressful for all concerned, even where there are no problems. I acted as I did to pre-empt this, and am happy with an annual visit.

When you home educate, you are bound by no rules - you do not have to follow a curriculum or timetable, or to provide lesson plans. You can structure your child's education as you and he wish, and there is no legal requirement to sit SAT tests or any exams. I have never used any curriculum, and have followed the autonomous learning path for our two. This is child-led education, following their interests as they learn. There is no coercion to read or learn anything; they choose what they want to do, and with help and encouragement, they learn. I taught Bethany to read, and Ethan followed on by teaching himself; I do do some maths with them, but only the basics so far that they require for life in the real world.

Home education is not for everyone, and there are as many reasons for home educating as there are home educating families. Some of these reasons are school phobia, bullying, religious reasons, "alternative" lifestyles, or purely, as in my case, taking responsibility for your children's education. It has to suit both the parents and child(ren), though, and it is not uncommon for families to home educate some, while others attend school full-time. One option which mixes the two is flexi-schooling, where the majority of learning is undertaken at home, with part-time attendance at a school for subjects which the parents feel unable to teach e.g. science, art, games, etc. The parents' abilities and aptitudes must obviously be taken into account, but in my opinion, enthusiasm and interest in your child's learning are just as important. We are lucky in that my husband, being an engineer, deals with most of the science/engineering type stuff; I do arts, languages, crafts and all the rest.

I am extremely optimistic about our children's futures. Bethany wants to be a writer, and Ethan an inventor or monster truck driver. Fair enough, they may never do quadratic equations or know all the birth dates of the kings and queens of England; they will however be able to cook, sew on buttons, solve problems, keep themselves healthy, earn a living, be happy and care about others and the world they live in. In our book, we know which is more important in this life.

For further information on home education, the best organisation in the UK is Education Otherwise. They are a well-established organisation, with charitable status and have a wealth of knowledge, experience and information available, run by people who are currently home educating or who have done so in the past. They have a good range of publications, including a regular newsletter, and there are local active groups nationwide and in France.

If you would like to read further on how children learn, I would recommend any books by John Holt.

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