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Misconceptions about Homeschooling

It was a Tuesday in May, 1993, and I was 10 years old. I sat in the backseat of our station wagon, along with my two younger brothers, as our mom drove us home from a field trip. We had spent the morning with a dozen other children and mothers, touring the Henry Ford Museum and learning about automobiles, airplanes, and life in the early 20th century. As we drove home, my entire attention was turned to *Tom Sawyer*, the latest novel in my stack of books to read. I could hardly wait to see how Tom's adventures would turn out, and whether his trickery would catch up with him in the end. When we arrived home, I would begin to type up a short story that I had written, which I planned to enter into the upcoming Oakland County 4-H Fair. I hoped that my story would win a prize; my writing usually placed well, but as always, I would be competing against my best friend Beth, who was also a talented writer. I would reluctantly spend an hour working through a math chapter as well. I knew that if I worked fast, I would still have plenty of time to spend playing outside with my brothers before dinner. It was a typical day in my life as a homeschooler.

Today, more than 15 years later, I find that most people I meet do not know much about homeschoolers. This is not too surprising. While the U.S. homeschooling population is estimated to include 2 million children, this number is only 4 percent of the total school-age population.¹ When I tell people that I was homeschooled from 1st through 12th grade, they are usually curious. "How did you make any friends?" and "Did your parents have teaching degrees?" are two questions I am often asked.

I have realized that these questions tie into two distinct, but false, ideas about homeschoolers and homeschooling. The first is that homeschooled children are socially isolated; because they are homeschooled, they do not have the chance to socialize with others, and they miss out on an important part of life. The second misconception is that homeschooled children do not receive the education and skills they need, particularly in high school, because they are not taught by trained, specialized teachers. In most cases, however, the truth is quite the opposite. I know this not only from my own experience, but also from the experiences of other homeschoolers that my family and I have come into contact with throughout the years.

¹ Moore, Tristana. "Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses Yearning to Homeschool." *TIME*, March 8, 2010.

My parents began to teach me at home when I was in first grade. Kindergarten was a frustrating experience for me; I was reading at a first-grade level, and was bored and unmotivated at school. My parents wanted me to be able to learn at my own pace. They planned to reenroll me in school a few years later, but homeschooling turned out to be so enjoyable for all of us that they continued to teach me, and later, both of my brothers. When I was in eighth grade, my parents gave me a choice: to switch to public high school, or to continue to be homeschooled. I chose homeschooling. I loved being home schooled, because it gave me the ability to learn in a self-directed way, along the path that best suited my personality and needs. Because I was interested in the arts, I decided to take a few classes at the public high school as well, to supplement my classes at home.

Although I certainly enjoyed meeting new people through my public school classes, the social aspect of homeschooling had never been an issue. From the very first year I was homeschooled, my mother made it a point to be involved with a local home school group, where my brothers and I could meet and play with other children while she socialized with their moms. Home school groups such as the one we belonged to exist all over the U.S., and many host a large variety of activities, which can be learning-based or purely fun. Weekly swim lessons at the local YMCA, field trips, book clubs, French lessons taught by one of the parents, and outings to plays and musicals are examples of common activities. Through these groups, homeschooled kids do more than just develop friendships—they learn how to interact with people of all different ages and backgrounds in educational and social situations.

There are different types of home school groups to choose from. My family's group could be classified as "inclusive," a term created by sociologist Mitchell L. Stevens. In the 1990s, Stevens spent 10 years studying and observing homeschoolers and home school groups. His resulting book, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*, documents the 1990s as an important period in the history of homeschooling. This was a time in which the movement grew rapidly. Stevens found that homeschoolers in the 1990s began to divide themselves into two broad types of groups, which he termed "Christian" and "inclusive." Christian groups were made up of parents who homeschooled primarily for religious reasons, and wanted their children to socialize with other conservative Christians. These parents tended to have strict lesson plans, and they taught their children as though the family was a miniature private school. Inclusive groups, on the other hand, were made up of families from all different faiths, and many of these families taught their children in a more organic and experiential way. Although my parents were devout Christians, my mother preferred groups that were inclusive, not only because of their philosophy of education, but also because the members were more diverse and she did not want to isolate her children.

The focus of some homeschoolers on experiential learning brings us to the second misconception I frequently encounter: that parents cannot provide a proper education for their children, because learning

must take place in a classroom with a trained teacher. The idea that learning only takes place in classrooms stems from our educational experiences. Most people have been educated through the public school system, in which a school day is broken up into hour-long periods of time, and learning stops when the school day is over. Subjects are often taught in isolation—math is studied separately from music and from English literature. While it can certainly be helpful to focus on “pure” concepts, the downside is that this way of learning can lead to routine memorization that is difficult to integrate into real life. Additionally, because of national and statewide standards, much of the students’ learning is directed toward the goal of obtaining high scores on tests.

Educational standards are necessary, of course, especially with such large numbers of children in the U.S. public school system. Parents such as mine, however, home school because they desire a more individualized education for their children. These parents subscribe to the theory of “unschooling,” which basically states that children are naturally curious and learn best at their own pace, without too many constraints. In day-to-day life, this meant that learning could take place anywhere: in the kitchen, in a museum, or outdoors. While my brothers and I had general goals to meet—for example, finish a chapter in math by the end of the week—we given a great deal of freedom as to when and where to study. We did not have desks, and my mom never sat down to deliver a lesson to us, but she was always available when we had questions. Our days included a large amount of unstructured time, when we were free to explore our curiosity—TV was off limits, but books and educational games were always available. Unschoolers also believe that learning can be more effective and enjoyable if concepts are not isolated by subject, but are formed around projects or activities. For example, I was in my home school group’s rocket club, which created an opportunity for me to learn about physics. Around the same time, my mom had me watch documentaries about space travel, and took my brothers and me to the local science museum, where we learned about the solar system.

The idea that only state-certified teachers can help children learn is a common concern for many homeschooling parents as well. Disciplines such as math and science, for example, can be daunting to parents who lack expertise in these areas. Fortunately, the resources available to homeschooling parents are vast. Each year, my parents, along with thousands of other homeschoolers, attended curriculum fairs, where they could view and purchase any number of textbooks and educational software. Some parents liked to purchase an entire curriculum, with books for each subject that should be covered in one year for a particular grade level. Parents like mine, who bought textbooks only for certain subjects, could mix and match depending on which style they liked best. To help us learn about biology, for example, my mother provided textbooks and, much to my disgust, a kit which arrived in the mail and contained a worm, a frog, and a fish for my brothers and I to dissect.

Additionally, in order to make sure we were learning what was expected for our grade level, my parents administered the Illinois State Test to us every other year. These were typical standardized tests, targeted to our particular grade level, divided by subject matter, and accompanied by Scantron answer sheets with the little ovals to fill in. My parents did not share the results with us, but were always pleased to find that we scored well above expectations for our grade level. Another bonus of the tests was that they helped prepare us for the SATs, which we took some years later when we applied to college.

The college application process is the final mystery I will uncover. In order to apply to college, one needs grades and a high school transcript, and many people wonder how a homeschooler obtains these. Fortunately, there are plenty of resources for homeschoolers in this area as well. In my case, my parents enrolled me in a school called Clonlara, based out of Ann Arbor, Michigan, which operates a fully-accredited "Home Based Education Program." Through the program, I was given guidelines about what subjects needed to be completed each year for my high school transcript; algebra, U.S. history, English, and so on. The way I learned, however, was still completely up to my parents and me. I was assigned to a facilitator, who helped us keep track of the subjects I completed. Taking advantage of outside resources, such as curriculum fairs, occasional standardized tests, and programs like Clonlara, helps homeschooling parents make sure that their children's education is both individualized and first-rate.

Homeschooling is certainly not for everyone. For kids who don't deal well with self-directed learning, or who want to play on the high school football team, homeschooling is not the best answer. It involves an extreme amount of patience and dedication, and requires at least one of the parents to make homeschooling their full-time job. For my family, though, homeschooling was definitely the right choice. I am grateful to my parents, especially my mother, for homeschooling me. I believe that my years at home taught me to value learning for its own sake, to see connections in the world around me, and to view education as a lifelong activity.