

Ten Things I Wish I'd Known When I Began Homeschooling

you have been homeschooling longer than I, but if any one of my “tips” is of help to you as a novice or a veteran homeschooler, I am pleased.

1) *Weekly Assignment Sheet*

As I mentioned a little earlier, my fifth child was “on the way” as we began to homeschool and she arrived part-way into our first year. Before long I was about ready to call it quits: trying to help a 4th and 2nd grader, a Kindergartener, as well as manage a toddler and a newborn?! Someone was constantly at my elbow asking, “What do I do now?” I felt like the juggler spinning plates on the old Ed Sullivan Show.

One night out of sheer desperation I marked off a piece of paper into a grid showing what subjects we were working on and the page number we would try to do tomorrow. How satisfying it was the next day to check off each assignment as it was done; although, because of many interruptions, we weren’t “done” until 4:30! The following day the kids wanted to be the ones to do the “checking off” as they finished each subject in, I noticed, a more efficient manner. Pretty soon each child had his own customized “Weekly Assignment Sheet” which would answer the question, “What should I do now?” I also now had ready-made records of our work and some lesson plans for future years, and I have unintentionally created children who like to make lists when the situation warrants and then check off each item. I believe these sheets have done more to organize and create free time in our lives than any other item.

2) *The 365-Day Drawer*

Now, fortunately I devised our Weekly Assignment Sheets fairly early in our homeschooling venture. Not so with my next tip which developed only a few years ago, and how I wish I had back materials for it that I’ve thrown out! What am I talking about? It’s nothing

more than a file cabinet drawer full of 365 manila folders—one for each day of the year. After I bribed my kids to help me label each tab (January 1, January 2, etc.), I placed into each folder information I’d accumulated for that day’s saint(s). Ideally this was a brief biography, a prayer, and a picture. Sometimes it was just a scribbled note telling me there was a story about St. Elizabeth of Hungary in such-and-such a book on such-and-such a page. Eventually I started adding more things to the folders that were keyed to dates:

- a) Reminders when to begin novenas
- b) Photos of relatives whose anniversaries of death were that day
- c) Anniversaries of sacraments received
- d) Ideas for upcoming holy day projects, recipes, stories
- e) Birthday cards to act upon in enough time for mailing, and so on.

The mind boggles and the file folders grow fat.

3) *Flexibility*

As I became more organized and disciplined in my approach to educating my children, I also acquired an unfortunate trait—I became rather rigid: we needed to start school at an exact time every day, the children sat in assigned spots, if I had purchased a book or started some program of instruction then, by gum, we were going to use it! I told my friends and relatives not to call between certain hours—I was HOMESCHOOLING! But the pitfalls of an inflexible nature were brought home to me when we entertained another homeschooling family for a picnic supper one July 3rd. My assumption was that after grilling hamburgers and making homemade ice cream our two families would enjoy a leisurely evening until it was dark enough to go to the day-early Independence Day fireworks.

Was I ever surprised when shortly

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I have been homeschooling a long time now and I began without a clue. In the spring of 1994 I was expecting child #5 and had just pieced together how unhappy child #1 was in public school. In addition to being bored silly with far too much ancillary time [drug awareness, computer (game) time, recess, preparation for some upcoming school pageant (Earth Day), coaching for upcoming state assessment tests, etc.], Rob was being singled out by the class bully. After an especially upsetting episode, I asked the teacher to intervene. But she declined saying we couldn’t do that because the boy’s mother was an important figure in the school district administration. My heart ached and I felt powerless.

Two days later I was invited to the home of a friend-of-a-friend to hear about something called “homeschooling.” Needless to say, I liked the sound of this homeschooling then and cast my lot with a bunch of moms who only knew they wanted something better for their children. I’m sure now that this invitation was providential.

Now, after the passing of all those years I can say, “If I only knew then what I know now...” I’m here to pass along my two cents’ worth in that department—ranging from the trivial to the more critical. I know some of

after dinner the mom started to gather up her kiddos and make her thanks. Without thinking I blurted out, “But what about making some chocolate ice cream? And the fireworks?” Her children’s faces fell—they hadn’t known about these possibilities. Their mother explained, “Well, no, we have our school bright and early in the morning.”

“On the 4th of July?!” I asked.

“Well, I forgot it would be the ‘Fourth of July’ when I drew up this year’s schedule,” and she closed the subject.

Since then I have lightened up: my kids do their schoolwork where it is comfortable for them, if a book or approach to learning is just not working for a child we try something else, and as life “happens” I try to roll with the punches. After all, homeschooling affords us the luxury of tailor-making our little school exactly as it suits us.

4) *More Praise*

During my tenure as inflexible do-it-my-way-or-else mom, I was (and still am) guilty of not noticing my children’s behavior unless it is interfering with my completing what I perceive to be my enormous amount of work. It is when they are being “bad” that I turn my attention to their behavior because they’re preventing me from getting on with the work I have to do.

My middle child, Phillip, does not possess the academic brilliance of his older brother and sister nor does he shine in social situations like his younger sisters. I tell people that homeschooling has helped create “voracious readers” of my children—that is, four out of five of them—guess who dutifully plods through his assigned reading but no more? He fits many of the stereotypes of “the middle child.”

Yet because of one lovely, God-given moment ten years ago, he knows I think the world of him. One evening I was stuck on a phone call with a very important older lady of our parish. My attempts to bring the conversation to a close were unsuccessful, and I could hear the two youngest (then ages 3 and 1) getting increasingly restless awaiting their bedtime ritual. My husband was away at a meeting, the older children

were lost in their books, and I couldn’t break away! After a while I was finally able to close the conversation and head off to do my mommy business. What did I find? There were the “little girls” tucked in and falling asleep as Phillip, age 6, was singing “Hush, Little Baby.” I drew back, not wanting to disturb the spell, and waited. As he closed their bedroom door a minute later, Phillip eyed me questioningly and apologized, “I could only ‘read’ them *Good Night, Moon* because I have that memorized.” I hugged him tight and said, “You’ll be a wonderful daddy someday.”

“Neat,” he grinned and strode off.

We all like to be praised for good work or just plain good-ness, and it is amazing to me how much more cooperation and general goodwill abounds when I praise my kids genuinely and regularly.

5) *Catholic Homeschooling As a Way of Life*

A few years into homeschooling I got together with some of those moms who attended, with me, that first meeting explaining the idea of homeschooling and its possibilities. As it turned out, everyone at the get-together was Catholic. After catching up, sharing war stories, and comparing what our children were studying, someone asked if anyone taught “Religion” as an actual course in her homeschool. I replied that I did and mentioned the texts I liked. At this one mom piped up, “We’re much too busy to work Catholicism into our school day.” I was floored and mumbled something about also trying to make Our Church’s teachings a natural part of each moment of the day, not a separate subject only. But she didn’t even mean that; she pointed out the many activities in which they were involved, how far her children were progressing in math, etc.

My delight in homeschooling is that I, as mother of these five souls God has entrusted to me, can have such a huge impact and influence on their formation, academically and spiritually, without much infiltration of the often unsavory culture that surrounds us. My kids see me struggle with daily ups and downs; and though I always feel I’m not doing the best job possible,

I point to the rich storehouse of our faith, the models of the saints and the Holy Family, and the help of the sacraments—especially Penance—as blessings we Catholics enjoy. It is not so much that religion is a separate subject in our homeschool as it is THE subject. To borrow the motto from a well-loved homeschool publisher, I am “educating for eternity.”

6) *You Can’t Do It Alone*

I attend several homeschool conferences each year to show and explain the materials that Catholic Heritage Curricula publishes. And while it is always inspiring to see the young moms’ faces light up as they realize, “I CAN do this,” invariably one or two will turn to her husband and sigh, “Now everything will be fine; they’ll be safe.” And my heart goes out to them because that’s just what I thought so many years ago when I brought my children home from public school: away from the bullies, away from the pluralistic agendas, away from the unsavory influences.

As our homeschooling years passed, my husband and I labored very hard to instill our moral values, our deep love of our faith in all its richness to our children. What I wish I had known was that the Prince of Darkness never rests in his quest to spread misery and ruin, and that to win our individual battles we must avail ourselves of all the divine helps offered to us: frequent reception of the sacraments, special devotions—especially the Rosary, and daily petitioning the Guardian Angels of our children to protect them always—body and soul. For although parents cannot suspect everyone, they must remember no one is above suspicion. Do not neglect to teach your children to live in this world but be not of it, and to keep an eye always on the next. The whole Communion of Saints stands ready to help because you simply cannot do it alone.

7) *Siblings As Best Friends*

We’ve all heard the tired old “socialization” argument raised to homeschoolers, questioning our kids’ ability to avoid becoming social

teaching and it stood me in good stead: I was well-liked and well-thought of.

But as a homeschooling mom these long-ingrained traits had to be tempered. No longer could I please everyone. For example, some people had a tough time accepting my decision to homeschool, “What’s so wrong with our educational system that you alone can offer the kids more than all those teachers?” “What about the kids’ socialization?” “This sounds like an awful lot of work; are you up to it?” I learned to say, “My children are worth it,” setting aside both my doubts and my old desire to avoid disappointing people whose opinions mattered to me.

Further I had to learn to say, “No.” In our early years of homeschooling we would try to attend every field trip, every meeting, every opportunity to stave off the “socialization police.” The result was too little school, too many commitments, too worn-out kids and mom. As a dear friend puts it, “It is better for me and ultimately my family to bow out of a commitment which divides my attentions. I have to remind myself that homeschooling is a gift and requires my ultimate effort in order to honor this blessing which the Lord has bestowed.”

9) Copyright Infringement

I have a confession to make—I’m not perfect. But you knew that, and God knows that, and in His Mercy he allows me to make a new start each day and especially after receiving the Sacrament of Penance.

Money is almost always tight at our house—is it at yours?—after all so many homeschoolers must manage with one income in a society that expects two-income households. In an effort to “save money,” I confess I have photocopied many pages and even whole workbooks I’ve purchased because, I thought, “My younger kids will need this same workbook.” It took the news that some publishers of Catholic homeschool materials have or are in danger of going out of business due to loss of sales by customers’ copying to haul me up short. I learned some folks have even copied books and then sold the copies to other families.

I was sad also as I realized I was

really stealing from not only the company but also from the authors and illustrators whose work I was copying. I decided the books contained too much eternal value to quibble over a few dollars. I want my much-loved publishers of Catholic materials there for me in the future. I won’t copy anymore.

10) It’s Hard to Let Go

The past thirteen years of homeschooling have furnished some beautiful highs, some embarrassing lows, and lots AND LOTS of stuff in-between. Sometimes the volume of the work—school, house, parish, extended family—became overwhelming. In particular I remember always trying to give my children clever “themed” birthday parties. One year as my birthday approached, I was feeling exhausted, and I self-indulgently announced, “I’d just like a ‘Leave Me Alone’ birthday!” That remark deserved just what I asked for, but fortunately did not get.

Today I am sitting alone writing this final tip at a park where I used to bring the children to play when they were small. Now, two of them are gone off to college, another’s off on an interview for a part-time job, and I’m waiting for the “little girls,” who help teach music classes. Nowadays my eldest, Rob, routinely flies around America and sometimes overseas, but I still think of him as the bully’s victim whom the teacher would not protect. He manages life’s ups and downs so well that my part has evolved into hearing, upon his return, how he handled this-that-and-the-other situation.

So, on some bad, draining day when you just want to lock the kids in a room, to pass them off to relatives for a week, or to sell them down river, remember what a grandmotherly lady once said to me, “Enjoy them when they’re young; they grow up so fast.” Indeed.

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recluses. There is no need to preach to the choir and refute that silly objection, but I would like to mention a benefit of homeschooling I wished I’d realized as I began—that my children would and have become one another’s best friends.

This was not a goal I set—it just unfolded as the circumstances kept them together pretty much 24/7. No, they certainly don’t get along all the time, but it is to one another they turn for their spur-of-the-moment games, for sharing scary dreams, for a sympathetic ear when Mom lays down the law. I must say I would envy their closeness when they developed a play or puppet show, or played “Old West” or “Pirates.” I was never that close with my siblings who were, when I was in my teens, little people to avoid. My friends and their opinions were what was important.

Thirty years later I have no idea what’s become of most of these old friends, but I have now made it a goal to get closer to my brothers and sister even if they are over a thousand miles away. God willing, my children will always enjoy and benefit from one another’s company—after all God created the seven of us as a family unit for a reason.

8) You Can’t Please Everyone

I was taught as a child to obey those in authority over me and to help out in any way I could. I was a docile, non-rebellious sort and took these lessons to heart. By and large, this was sound