

## Ordinary Mom Finds Homeschooling Extraordinary

In a homeschool mom lineup, no one would have picked me. I had never taught anyone anything, including my dog; I lose patience even with myself; I work full-time; I am a partner in a mixed-faith marriage; I only have two children, neither of whom could read the newspaper at age two; I got frustrated assisting with school homework assignments; my daughter and I both ended up in tears when I attempted to teach shoe-tying; I spent most of my time with my children in a car taxiing them to and from after school activities; I didn't even own a denim dress. So how did I, despite the totally wrong "profile", end up homeschooling? Here's my story...

I knew a couple moms who homeschooled their children. I was never quite sure if I thought they were crazy or if I was secretly envious. It seemed to me that homeschooling was only for special moms with special kids who worked well together. You know, the ones who have it all together in the discipline department, super-moms who never loose their cool and whose children seem particularly perfect, well-behaved, and especially precocious and prodigious. I didn't feel I could interact with my children in that capacity. I was certain that they would surely listen to another authority figure more than their mom; that they could learn from just about anybody but me. We were just regular, ordinary folks, not homeschoolers.

We purposely sent our children to low-pressure, learn-at-your-own-pace type pre-schools. Yes, we wanted our children to learn and love learning but we didn't need them reading before kindergarten or doing algebra in first grade. We wanted our kids to be kids. My eldest daughter, who was already six years old at the start of the school year, completed kindergarten unable to read. That was ok, but, even with my "kids-be-kids" attitude, I couldn't help but notice that she desperately wanted to read and, in my "expert" opinion, she seemed "ready." It seemed to bother her that she couldn't read while many other children her age could. So there we were, facing summer vacation, my daughter wanting to learn and feeling something was wrong with her. The stage was set; the obvious thing to do was to try working with her over the summer. But I wasn't a teacher. I hadn't thought about phonics since I was eight years old myself, and my daughter, who we like to describe as "ethereal" because she's dreamy and easily distracted, was to be my first student. I comforted myself with the thought that we didn't have anything to lose...it was just an experiment and both children would go to public school in the fall and the experts could pick up (and fix) where I left off. I decided to tackle reading and some basic math concepts. I contacted the public school where they'd be attending in the fall to find out what topics would be covered and I set out to try the pseudo-homeschool waters.

I did a little research on the internet, talked with a couple people, visited the bookstore a few times, armed myself with "Bob<sup>1</sup>" (early reading) books, Teach your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons<sup>2</sup>, The Writing Road to Reading<sup>3</sup>, some flashcards that my mom sent me from my own flashcard days and, most importantly, a lot of prayer. I was nervous. How could this be? These were *my* kids. I saw them every day, knew them from their first breath, yelled at them to clean their rooms, and tucked them into bed every night.

How could I feel nervous with them? But I did. I had more doubts than I had “Bob” books but I jumped in anyway.

At first it felt awkward but they were infinitely more comfortable and confident than I was and that helped. It seemed natural to them; I guess they credited me with teaching them a thing or two along the way...walking, talking, pumping on the swing...now the possibilities were endless. I got more comfortable too. It wasn't a “formal” time, it was relaxed and close, sometimes cuddly. We curled up on the couch with our “Bob” books and I learned to teach and Samantha learned to read. We had our share of frustrating moments but we had our share of successes and that led us onward. We read every “Bob” book on the market and we rejoiced; then we switched to other books and discovered that she could read those too! Hurrah! And my younger daughter was picking up on it, sort of by osmosis. We pasted phonetic blends and chunks on the kitchen cabinets, we labeled everything in the house with a tag telling what it was; we laughed at silly pronunciations. We decided to learn about money and time too. We had posters with pictures of money, and clocks and charts for counting by 5, 10 and 25. We made the connection between the skills needed for counting money and the skills needed for telling time. Our conversations on car rides were quick drills on what we had learned and points we needed to work on. It seemed everywhere we went was filled with opportunities to “homeschool.” Homeschool became, not a separate component in our lives, but more of a fiber or way of life. I had my finger on the pulse of their learning and that felt right. We felt more connected. The best part was that we got closer as a family. Once we knew how well we could learn together, we learned to work and be together better too. We even taught the dog a thing or two. At the end of the summer, we “graduated” with caps made of black plastic bowls and poster board and tassles made of yarn. We celebrated by visiting *Barnes and Noble*, buying a few books and drinking hot chocolate.

And then, the thought that had comforted me all along, that we'd be sending them back to the public school experts in the fall, now saddened me. The day before we were to ship them off on the bus to a stranger we hadn't met who would spend more time with them during the daylight hours than we would, I broke the silence and said what my husband and I had both known was lingering in the air between us...“I want to homeschool our children.” There's a good reason it had lingered there so long...neither of us really thought of ourselves as “homeschoolers;” we worked with the children over the summer but that was just playing around, there was no responsibility attached to it. My husband spoke of, you guessed it, socialization. And what about cost, and curriculums and testing? “Doing it for real” was a whole different story than our summer experiment. So we sent them off, waving as the bus pulled away. We endured through the school year with inane homework assignments, abstract math (how can those “experts” take the one thing that's concrete and make it so nebulous?), reading level tests (our daughter tested at the fifth grade level), school parties, special prizes for number of books read, and all the “normal” stuff.

Meanwhile, I got laid off from my job of 18 years because we didn't want to move back to NY. I sulked around for a few months living on my severance package and wishing my kids weren't in school. I mindlessly and half-heartedly faxed off resumes looking for

jobs and then, one day, I got a call from a local college asking me if I'd come in to interview for a teaching position. This was fairly remarkable since my only teaching experience had been the previous summer with my own children in my own home. I got the position and I now teach college computer science courses. I love it more than I could have ever imagined. It opened up my schedule, providing me with several afternoon hours to homeschool my girls so, at the conclusion of that last school year, we officially made the decision to homeschool our children.

Our oldest child finished her public school year bored with reading because she was so far ahead and frustrated with math because she was so lost; she truly believed that "I'm not good at math." Our younger daughter had the opposite reaction, believing "I can't read" but "I'm good at numbers." Our first semester goal was to straighten out these misconceptions and get them thinking positively again about learning. I am happy to report that by December of our first homeschool year, my youngest thanked me (with a hug and a proud smile I'll remember forever) for helping her learn to read and my oldest brimmed with excitement at her newly discovered faculty with mathematics. Both children love to read and it's a blessing to be homeschooling again in our family. They have more time for activities now and I'm grateful not to have to make lunches in the morning, rush everyone out the door, chase the bus and count the number of books we've read.

So what about socialization? If none of the other "profile" characteristics trip you up, this objection is the one sure to make even the strongest-willed homeschooler-to-be quiver. We still consider ourselves pretty "ordinary." We don't actually belong to a homeschool group. I still lose my patience and our girls are still recognizable as the ones we had before homeschooling. I haven't become a super-mom and we still practice both Jewish and Christian traditions. Some days I cry and wonder what we've gotten ourselves into but always, when we jump the hurdles and they "get it", we are inspired to move on. I *will* confess to having bought a denim dress. My girls have plenty of friends, many from the activities that they participate in now and some from their previous years at school. There is no shortage of play-dates, sleepovers, or birthday parties to attend. They are comfortable with people of all ages and love to talk to everyone; that's even "better" socialization, in our books, than only knowing how to act around their same-age peers. Best of all, we get the opportunity to instill our values during the daylight hours instead of the values of a random group of other seven year olds. Most of their friends attend public school and most of them, when they come over, want to "do" school with us. We're still ordinary but we're closer and happier and love learning since we found the extraordinary benefits of homeschooling.

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<sup>1</sup> The Writing Road to Reading, Romalda Bishop Spalding

<sup>2</sup> Teach your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons, Siegfried Engelmann

<sup>3</sup> Bob early reading books, Scholastic