

Running a Learning Centre

by Jo Davis

One thing that I had always realized about home-educating was that as a mother you never get “alone time” or “silent time” to re-charge your batteries or re-boot your computer! Even as I sit down to write this my son comes up to me to talk to me about the book he has just finished reading. Now I don’t know about you but writing doesn’t come easily to me, maybe there’s just too much noise going on in my head to formulate coherent sentences, but I need to sit and think quietly in order to write anything (and re-write and re-work) A hundred words in and I have already stopped three times.

The other concern that I always had was how I would manage once children are older. When they need real expertise on a subject that I wasn’t good at, how was I going to give it to them? By “not good at” what I really mean, if I’m honest, is do I have enough information to pass on an interest and passion? Do I know enough to enable each child to be able to sit and pass exams? Not on your life!

Ten years on, with my oldest child approaching her 14th birthday why am I still home-educating? I have been interrupted writing this article by small conversations with my children (and dogs) seven times already. So far I have been at this all morning (and it’s a SUNNY Saturday). Am I sure that I’m doing the right thing with them. Am I happy? Yep! Yep! Yep!

When my daughter was small I realized that we were going to have a struggle with things like reading, telling the time and basic maths. I had hoped to get through it by focusing on the light at the end of the tunnel. I hoped that we would get there in the end if I just kept my head down and kept on at it.

We lived in Birmingham at the time where there was luckily a thriving home-ed group. We got some great advice and support and learned about the practice of autonomous education, Great, I thought, if only I can get to *that* point it will be easy. Little did I know!

I had long since lost track of getting past the stage of working really hard with them all the time when one day I looked up from cooking the supper and saw one child reading a book unprompted and the other doing her thousandth page of handwriting practice unprompted. “Wow!” I thought, they are teaching themselves! They are interested and have a thirst for knowledge, they are finding out about things that they want to know more and doing it on their own.

This was what I had been striving for: igniting their wish to learn, to know. A powerful passion can sustain you throughout life. I still enjoy learning to this day. What a gift to allow your children to discover that passion for themselves. What an incredible thing to be able to carry with you wherever you go and not lose! But I didn’t get there by teaching all the subjects myself after all. I was just the revision-buddy most of the time!

It started with things like phonics, a devised program used by schools. At that time I was trying to follow what schools were saying children should be doing. Knowing nothing about the subject and not wanting to muck it up and turn my child off, I got someone else to show me and my daughter how the phonics program worked. I bought all the books and the tutor taught us both.

Later on it was swimming classes. We joined an after school class for that. Then there was football club, tennis club and finally horse riding.

This posed a problem as my daughter has learning difficulties and so this was going to need one-to-one classes. By now we had been living back down south for about three years but I had no idea where to look so I went around each riding centre that I found in the Yellow Pages until I found a

couple that I was happy to give a go. I explained how they had to be for my daughter to understand them and got on with it. After many false starts and 12 tutors we found a couple who were great and now she rides really well and absolutely loves it.

But that was just the beginning. I had not realized just how many people were out there teaching children with harsh disapproving approaches who had no business being anywhere near them. The other thing that I hadn't counted on was how hard it is to find tutors in the first place. Where do you look? They're not *all* in the Yellow Pages and frankly most of them have a gall to even advertise!

Still we continued quite happily for another year or so with most subjects taught by me alongside a few tutors for the physical things like swimming, tennis and riding.

By now my son had requested to go into school, been bullied and come out again. I had joined a couple of local home-ed groups but realized that they were almost exclusively social with a few "classes" thrown in.

Ironically I had been concerned about the social aspect of home-educating (most people seemed to ask us how we managed that when we talked about home-educating the kids and I had always been mindful of it), but what I was now concerned about was finding a shared learning experience with group reasoning. We humans are herd animals and learn by experience and imitation much more naturally together than alone. In home education groups I did not feel others shared this concern, so I left and we got on with our stuff at home.

Some time later other parents started to become concerned about how bored their kids said they were. So I offered to take a "class" in my degree subject one morning a week. That went really well. We kept the group small and the kids loved it. The children progressed and produced really individual work, a true expression of their knowledge, fantastic! The group became too large so we fitted out our garage and worked there. Later I wanted my kids to be able to do pottery and after a couple of false starts we found a studio that was prepared to hire kiln space and their room for half a day. Some days classes got as big as twenty-four. The kids progressed and the social play was before or after with natural chatter whilst they were working. The camaraderie and lovely to see!

Then one day my son said he couldn't do maths except the maths that I did with him. So I set up a small class with a maths tutor to show him that he could do maths. To cover the cost I advertised in our newsletter for six other children. Most of the mothers stayed and the kids loved it too! Then one day my son's best friend asked if he could do our writing practice with us, we follow Steiner principles and he liked the way my son wrote. From there we flew.

For any "class" that I didn't do that my children wanted (karate, African dance, gymnastics, archaeology) I found someone. This was more than a series of workshops, the children were actually learning! When we weren't at home working, we were driving to one of the sessions I had organized and this was six days a week! The kids loved it but all our peaceful exploration time had gone. There was nothing very much that was unhurried or free left in our days except for small pockets of time, but my children were thriving and flourishing in all subjects. I was so happy with how they were progressing that I couldn't cut out anything and reduce their breadth of learning but I wanted them to have more free time and for me just be with them. I realized that I had to centralise their classes in one place and give myself and them time to enjoy growing up as well as expanding their educational horizons.

It took more than a year, but what we now have is a 'hands on learning environment' for home-educators, running our own subjects with individual tutors. All the kids are excelling. Sound like a school? Does each school room have one big table in the middle, with flowers in vases and paint

effects on the walls and dyed muslin at the windows? Do school classrooms have sofas and arm chairs, a kettle and a fridge, plus a soft play area for younger siblings in each room? Do schools have tutors who are at the table with the children, called by their first names and taking part in the discussion and learning? Do schools allow the class to take another direction if conversation dictates it? Does the earliest class not start until 10am (how come schools don't recognise that kids are part of a family, and a family has to be able to get up, breakfasted and ready without the rush and panic of the "school run"?) Are there only four to eight children in school classes (except for gymnastics, athletics and games where teams require more kids in a group)?

Best of all, and so unlike schools, these children are in ability appropriate groups so that they may be with a five year old and a ten year old in one subject and three eight year olds in another. Moreover, these classes are elective. Children come to a couple of taster sessions to see if they like it before we add them to classes. Children can "dip-out" when they need to, they can still hear what's going on if they are in the corner building a fort, colouring or having a cuddle and they always come back when their interest is caught. Children come to particular classes – so some children will come for gymnastics but not for pottery, others for maths games but not for cookery (bread baking this term), while others might only come for music or gardening (we have put in a vegetable plot). We have had the chance to build a willow hut together and watch it grow, make mixed-media mosaics to go on the wall by our vegetable plot and have exclusive use of a gymnasium as well as our own sports and fun day with stalls where everything is paid for with a jar of peas and where we race in relay teams so that all ages get to work together and win together. Everyone gets a gold chocolate coin as they finish each "leg" of a race and we do all the traditional stuff like egg and spoon and sack races, shouting ourselves hoarse. Where else can you do that these days? Everybody is happy and it works!

We keep a book with a page for each subject so that we know we are covering our tutor costs. We have excellent tutors who come in for a maximum of half a day a week and I get a lot of time with my kids. The kids are not just progressing. With the careful mix between our own work and these home-ed classes tailored to each small group, these kids are excelling. They get an amazing education that is individualised to their tastes. The content is controlled by the children's enjoyment (and our organization). The centre gives brilliant social, team and inter-active opportunities, builds healthy relationships and has absolutely no bullying. I am with my children all the time and teach some of the subjects. I can tell you how happy these kids are, how great their classes are, and how very rewarding it is for us as tutors and parents to facilitate their learning in such a broad and varied field of subjects.

Sound like school? Don't think so. To me, it's the best and purest form of home-education with no draw backs.