

IMAGE FORUM: 26 JULY, 2007 — BARBARA HARRISON

INTRODUCTION

Alexandra asked me to speak at this forum on behalf of the Christian Home Schooling community. I declined.

The only thing all home schooling families have in common is that they do not send their children to school on a full-time basis. There are home schooling families from every race, religion and socio-economic group in Australia and they are home schooling for lots of different reasons. The Christian home schooling community is almost as diverse – there is no typical family or typical approach to education.

So, today I'll only be speaking on behalf of my own family.

However, I should say that in some ways my family is particularly unusual. Firstly, my husband and I were married for 18 years before our son was born – he is now 13. We had planned to have more children much earlier, so during those 18 years we had the interest to observe a generation of children being raised by friends and relatives and spent many hours discussing what we call the nature-nurture question. We concluded that nurture wins hands down. Secondly, since we are now both retired, our only son has the dubious benefit of two full-time teachers at home.

Today, I will try to briefly explain two things: firstly, why we have chosen to home educate, and secondly, how we decide which educational resources to include in our home education programme. The latter also applies to how we decide which public exhibitions and workshops he should attend.

We have identified six major objectives for our home education programme: three objectives relate to moral standards and three to academic standards. For each objective, we conclude with a question. We ask ourselves this question to decide whether or not we should use a particular book, course, workshop or excursion in our son's education.

OUR OBJECTIVES: MORAL STANDARDS

Respect Authority and Consider Other People

We have seen a significant decline in standards during our own lifetimes. To give a simple example, you now rarely see a child giving up his seat for an adult, whereas that was commonplace when we were growing up.

We believe moral standards are absolute, not relative.

But they are not natural – children need to be trained from birth. All traditional societies train their children to fit in. Western society is now actively encouraging them to rebel and we are already paying the price for this neglect.

So, when assessing any educational material, including public exhibitions, for use in our home school, we ask ourselves the question:

Does this material encourage respect for authority and consideration for other people?

Understand that Rights only come with Responsibility

Responsible behaviour means doing what you should do when you should do it. This is the opposite of doing what you feel like when you feel like it – the attitude encouraged by many forms of media today.

We believe that protecting the innocence of childhood allows children to develop a secure foundation for life. They need to start with a consistent base of values. Then their parents need to choose the rate at which they are exposed to the ‘shades of grey’ in the world – when, and only when, they have the maturity to deal with them.

We like the quote “premature responsibility breeds superficiality”. If children are given responsibility for some choices too early in life they may never learn to deal with them maturely. This is one reason for the prevalence of cynicism in our society.

So another question we ask about any resource we might use to educate our child is:

Does our child have the maturity to deal with this information?

Have a Positive Attitude to Service

Service is spelt W-O-R-K. I think this used to be called duty.

We believe that happiness is a by-product of work – it shouldn’t be the focus of life.

But many young people we know seem to be aspiring to retire as early as possible, rather than planning for their life to be of benefit to society. In less affluent societies, you simply don’t get to make this choice!

The next question is:

Does this material honour work and productivity or does it emphasise leisure and recreation?

OUR OBJECTIVES: ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Nurture Life-long Interest in Learning

We believe that the limit to human intelligence is human interest – the more you work, the better you get at any skill, but it is easier to work if you are interested.

We want our son to develop a life-long love of learning. All children are born with an innate desire to learn about the world around them and a good educator nurtures this desire.

But ‘interesting’ doesn’t mean ‘entertaining’. Interest should whet your appetite so you want to learn more.

So, when assessing educational resources, we would also ask:

Is this material informative or just entertaining?

Build a Knowledge Base

You need to retain knowledge for it to be useful in everyday life – it is not good enough to just know where to find it. There has been a significant decline in academic standards in the last few decades. Our son did briefly attend school as a part-time student in infants school, however, we encountered too many teachers with limited literacy and numeracy skills.

We try to emphasise sources and context of information in our home school – what really happened? How do we know this? What information are the conclusions based on? ‘A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing’.

In any educational material, we are looking for facts not opinions – too many opinions are now presented as facts in media and school texts (and sometimes in public exhibitions).

The question relating to this objective would be:

Is this material telling the whole story?

6. Make Informed Decisions

What can we learn from the experiences of others in directing our own lives? Education should give us the opportunity to stand in someone else’s shoes and try to understand why they made the decisions they did.

Education should also allow us to see our current lifestyle in the context of history and appreciate the legacy of previous generations. We need to ask: “Why did some inventions and discoveries take so long to be made?”, rather than scoff at the ignorance of our forebears.

And lastly, we want our son to be able to discern truth from propaganda – to have enough knowledge and understanding to make wise decisions in his own life.

So, our final question is:

What will be the long-term value of this material?

CONCLUSION

Most of our objectives are summarised by a quote from Charlotte Mason. She was a Christian teacher in England about a century ago and is credited with founding the home schooling movement. She said “The question is not: ‘How much does the youth know when he has finished his education, but how much does he care, and about how many orders of things does he care? In fact, how large is the room in which he finds his feet set, and therefore, how full is the life he has before him?’” (Charlotte Mason, ‘School Education’, p170)

We do realise that ‘It takes a whole village to raise a child’. We want our child to be able to interact with society and make a positive contribution in adulthood. Home education is not about wrapping him in cotton wool for life – but we do believe it is our responsibility to ensure that he is not exposed to some aspects of life before he has the maturity to deal with them.