

REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION

From the Harrison Family.

We were married for nearly 18 years before our son was born. We had planned on having a large family much earlier but, as we discovered, life rarely runs to plan. So, while waiting for our own family, we had enough time to observe a whole generation of children (in the care of relatives and friends) growing up. We also had time to follow professional careers which, for each of us, involved designing and conducting training courses for adults. In this context we developed many—and discarded some—theories on human behaviour and learning. This experience also left us with definite views on education, vocational training and the distinction between the two.

We chose to teach our son (now aged 10) at home for a variety of reasons. For many years, we had been appalled by the declining moral standards in our society and the lack of personal discipline that characterised a disconcertingly large number of young people we knew. While these problems may not have had their origin in the school system, it seemed to be doing little to address them. We were also very concerned about declining academic standards, and the lack of appreciation for what we considered ‘genuine education’ amongst those of our friends who were employed as teachers. We had always been critical of time-wasting and value-eroding activities, such as watching TV, playing computer games and acquiring ‘trash toys’. In short, we were very conservative and did not warm to many of the ‘modern’ ideas about education and child behaviour that seemed to be embraced by the current system of schooling.

Having made our decision to home educate, I recall the enormous pressure to prove our worth to the numerous critics and observers that seemed to be watching like hawks as we began. Our teacher friends were appalled that we should even consider depriving our son of the social interactions provided by the school environment, which (they believed) would be so essential for him to become a useful member of society. They also seemed a bit miffed that we thought we could ‘do their job’ without any formal teacher training. Several took the trouble to say (or write) to us that the decision was rather selfish on our part—our son was destined to become a social misfit if we persisted. They didn’t appreciate my husband’s response—all the social misfits we knew *had* gone to school!

My initial reaction to this pressure was to burden my son and myself with a schedule of activities that left neither of us with a great deal of motivation to learn anything. During the first few years, we tried attending a couple of (very) different non-government schools part-time, in an effort ‘to cover all bases’ (especially sporting activities). We were finally left to conclude that, in our case at least, there were simply not enough positive elements of the school experience to offset the negative ones. We also attended as many home schooling activities as possible, so that he would have the opportunity to befriend other children in similar situations, and were enrolled in external classes for Music and French. I remember Kindergarten as a thoroughly hectic year! As our son’s enthusiasm for learning declined I started to ask myself what was wrong.

As we have done many times along our home education journey, my husband and I sat down together to re-examine what it was that we were trying to achieve. Our fundamental goal was to maximise the positive, and minimise the negative, influences in our child’s life—surely the goal of every parent. With an only child, we were very aware that we had become the predominant influence on *every* aspect of our child’s development, and it was perhaps then even more important to look at the big picture. We had already observed that children take after the example set by their parents or, in other words, a child is like a mirror to his parents.

If we didn't like what we were seeing in our child, it wasn't our child we needed to change, but ourselves, then he would surely follow our example.

In other words, the type of person I was had more impact on my son's character than anything I said or did. If I was losing focus, becoming disorganised, irritated by interruptions, or worried about other people's opinions, was this not precisely the behaviour my son was going to adopt? If, however, I appraised *my* resources (of time, energy and finances) conservatively, surely he would learn to do the same. We slowed down, regained some control over our lives and tried to focus on our primary goals.

For many years, I still felt unsettled and somewhat inadequate after meeting other mothers whose comments would imply that their children were performing 'better' academically. My child, I felt, had shown great potential but if he wasn't doing as well as 'possible', was I now failing him? My disquiet prompted me to devour very many books about education techniques and philosophies. Some increased my anxiety; others were like an anointing of peace. My favourite is still Teri Maxwell's 'Home Schooling with a Meek and Quiet Spirit'.

I had to let go of my academic ambitions for my son (which of course would be taken as a reflection of my competence as his teacher) and allow God to guide us to a home routine which included academic pursuits as a natural part of life. This is an ongoing process and has taken many twists and turns along the way. I had expected life to follow a planned and orderly sequence, but have found that the 'wrong turns' sometimes provide the best lessons.

At different stages, I have attempted to embrace a range of current attitudes and approaches to education, often looking for the 'easy way' (which I never found!). While exposed to the 'gadgetry' of modern classrooms, I purchased an extensive array of educational 'resources', hoping to ensure that we were not disadvantaging our son by keeping him at home. We soon discovered that it actually took (a lot) more time and effort to do 'fun' activities or play games than to work through a conventional lesson. We also observed that, unlike many of the so-called 'educational' games, an orderly lesson actually taught something of ongoing value, on which future lessons could build.

I have broadly adopted the educational philosophy of Charlotte Mason, whose writings do not, in my opinion, concur with the 'fluffy' image promulgated by many of her modern devotees. She stressed the importance of parental authority, discipline, order, work and duty in the education of children. I now believe that discipline and order must precede effective instruction, and that systematic instruction *and* regular practice are both essential for real mastery and understanding in any field of human endeavour. We are all endowed with different strengths and weaknesses; the process of education should enable us to diminish our weaknesses and develop our strengths.

While we still aim for high standards academically, I am learning to let go of external time frames for achieving competency in different areas (the standard ideas of 'what a 10 year old should know'). However, I do think every child should learn to 'take pride in his work'. I have found (the hard way) that it actually takes much less effort to form good habits (of neatness, care and attention) in a new student, than to allow bad habits to become established and then have to try to change them. In every area of study (for adults and children alike) progress is most rapid when practice becomes part of a regular (daily) routine—especially when this involves focussed attention and follows an orderly sequence of instruction. In our experience, disciplined practice always leads to competence, which then leads to enjoyment. In those subject areas where my child voluntarily spends time, I can allow him more flexibility—both in terms of the type of activity he undertakes and the amount of time allocated to it.

It is difficult for a child to have a 'good childhood' without caring adults training them to develop good habits, guiding them to make wise decisions, and protecting them from 'bad'

influences. I no longer believe that every family 'should' educate their children at home, but each family bears the responsibility for providing these safeguards to their children. I had also imagined that 'serious' home schooling families never went near any schools, but have since observed that most families tend to use a variety of approaches at different times in a child's development. It is not so much a question of the 'best approach' but the one that is best suited to a particular situation.

How do mothers maintain the balance of chores, school and other responsibilities? The load being carried by each mother is unique to her family's needs, so we each need to achieve that 'balance' which best fits our own situation. It may be human for us to look at another parent's situation and feel a degree of envy (or superiority) but it is not helpful to us or to our children. I spent many years feeling dissatisfied with having just one child; I now accept that the opportunity presented by this situation is precisely as God intended. To rail against 'fate' is one of the most futile of human pursuits...

I see the life of a Christian as one of service. Christian parents bear the responsibility to equip their children with the personal character traits that will help them realise the potential God has entrusted to them. My husband often likes to say 'with opportunity comes responsibility'. Our opportunities, in this indulgent age of rampant consumerism, are enormous, but (as is often overlooked) so, too, are our responsibilities. The virtues of discipline, honesty, compassion, loyalty, courage and perseverance will always be important—not necessarily for worldly success—but to enable us to serve God and our fellow man to our full potential. It has been said that the character of the man is cast in the child, and it is a man's character, more than anything else, that will determine his path through life.

And those critics from the early years? It amuses us somewhat when they comment, in surprised tones, that they can talk to our son "like a normal person". But, maybe we were just lucky...