

Homeschooling Preschool and Early Elementary Grades

When you start to think about homeschooling your children, it can be scary, exhilarating, overwhelming, or all of the above and more. Maybe you want to homeschool because you know someone who homeschools and you think their relationship with their children is marvellous and something you wish to emulate. Maybe you want to homeschool because you enjoy spending time with your children and would like to continue doing so as much as possible. Maybe you want to homeschool because your child has needs that you don't feel would be well-served by going to school, at least in the early years. Maybe, maybe, maybe – there are dozens more reasons why you might be considering homeschooling.

As the friends you have made with children the same age as yours start enrolling their children in preschool and then kindergarten, you may start to wonder about your choice to homeschool. Should I do this? Will it be to the benefit or detriment of my child? Will my child learn what they need to know? How do I know what to do? Will I be able to teach them what they need to know? Those, and many other questions will be ones you ask yourself and ones that other people will ask you.

Since you will likely get asked questions by relatives, friends and strangers alike, it is a good idea to try to reduce your insecurity by knowing what your choices are and why you made a specific choice. This means that you do need to do some research up front and take an active role, rather than a passive one, but hopefully by doing so, you will have a firmer idea about why you are making the choice to homeschool and be able to create a more satisfying and cohesive homeschooling experience for yourself, your partner and your children. Doing your research will also give you something articulate to say when people question your decision to homeschool – being able to explain why you are doing this and what you are going to do and why you are going to do it that way will help you feel secure when someone brings up the subject. This is not to say that what you decide at the very beginning need be set in stone – but having an idea of your blueprint can help you make decisions, explain things and figure out how to change course when life throws a curveball your way.

First things first – here in Manitoba, you do not need to officially register your child in school or notify the government that you are homeschooling until the September when they will be seven by the end of the school year. So if your child has a birthday from January to August, you would notify the government of your intent to homeschool when they are seven. If your child's birthday falls between September and December, you would notify the government of your intent to homeschool in the September when your child is six and will be turning seven by the end of the year. The notification process is quite simple and is completed via filling out a one page form available here: <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/schools/ind/homeschool/notification.html>

Before you begin to think about curriculum, there are other things to consider. There are different schools of thought as to what is best for children in general and what is best for any given child in particular. It's best for parents to familiarize themselves with arguments for and against early formal introduction of academics so that they can decide what might work best for their particular family. Questions to consider include: How much creative play do you want to include in your day? How much free play? How much time spent exploring nature? How much physical play? How much group play? How much time spent doing academics? What type of academics – hands-on? Workbook-based? How much time spent reading aloud?

Preschool and kindergarten can be a time to cement family relationships and make memories by focusing on reading aloud, cooking and baking together, singing and dancing and creating music, re-enacting favourite stories, exploring art through painting, drawing, sculpting with clay etc. You can do lots of fun science experiments, go to free swim at various public pools, and you will also find that there are lots of activities geared towards preschoolers at local libraries, community centres, churches and other community group meeting spaces. Even without using any formal curriculum during those years, spending active time with your child will give increase their knowledge of the world. Taking them with you to the grocery store, the credit union, the library, the gym and explaining to them what's happening and why is just as useful as finding the perfect math manipulative with which to practice counting.

Once you have a better idea of 'how' you want to homeschool preschool and kindergarten – and why you want to do it that way – then you can start to consider things such as teaching reading, math, writing and so on. Do you need to have a curriculum for these things? No, in fact, if you do all the things listed in the above paragraph you will naturally be covering plenty of writing, math and reading. You and your child can count things in everyday life, in books, on the street, the money at the bank. Your children can share telling stories with you, acting them out with finger puppets or stuffed animals, retelling your favourite stories while looking at the pictures in the associated book. You can share your excitement over finding words that begin with the same letter and sound as your child's name, or marvel at all the words that begin with B or see if you can think of a fruit or vegetable for every letter of the alphabet – and then taste the ones you've never tried before. There are millions of ideas for activities for preschool and kindergarten in books available from the public library, and on the internet. Pick a couple that look like fun, or look like something you would never have thought of to do on your own, or look like something that would appeal to your child's interests be they interested in elephants, stars, flutes or fingers.

If you are interested in having a curriculum on hand, whether you follow it to a letter, consider it a loose guideline and use some aspects and add your own spin to it, or just have it around to read occasionally and make yourself feel good (or worried – having a 'formal' curriculum can sometimes

have that effect too), here are some things to consider.

For reading, are you interested in a phonics approach? In a “Look Say” approach (sometimes rather misleadingly known as whole language)? If phonics, do you want to focus on teaching the letter names first or only the letter sounds without mentioning the names? Do you want to include spelling with phonics, or only start spelling after your child is reading fluently? These questions can help you determine what type of reading program you may wish to use, should you choose to use one. Regardless of your choice, the most important thing to remember is that different children are ready to learn to read at different ages. Some, yes, are ready at age 4. More common is those who seem to find reading clicks around 6 or 7. However, it’s also within the range of ordinary for some kids to find that no reading lesson or curriculum works until they are 8 or even older. At this point, in preschool and kindergarten, follow your child’s lead – if they seem interested, feel free to use your own ideas or choose a reading program. If they don’t want to read on their own – that’s fine – just keep on reading out loud to them, let them listen to audiobooks, let them develop a relationship with books and reading rather than focusing on learning to read.

For math in the preschool and kindergarten years, this is often a time for a very concrete representation of mathematics. Do you want to use manipulatives? Do you want to move from concrete to pictorial? Would you rather use symbols and emphasize rote memorization of basic math facts? Or use actual items to demonstrate mathematical processes such as addition and subtraction? Or a combination of both? Some curricula emphasizes memorization, others will take a very hands-on approach, and others will combine the two or use another approach. Deciding what you would prefer as your primary philosophy will be helpful in making a choice of curriculum, or deciding that you can easily cover preschool and kindergarten math without any formal curriculum but with just the basics of daily life as you narrate, explain and explore things to and with your child.

Writing is another item that people often wonder about in the early years – some schools of thought believe in starting earlier, some in starting later depending on their view of brain development and fine motor skill progression. You may wish to focus on fine motor skills by way of playing with playdough, using scissors, banging nails with a hammer and sometimes picking up a pencil while at the same time encouraging your child to tell you stories or poems or letters that you scribe for them so they can enjoy the magic of their own creation while not having to physically write it down. If choosing a formal handwriting program, give some thought to whether your primary goal is to have legible script, beautiful script or to have writing be speedy. Do you want to start with manuscript or cursive – there are reasons for doing one versus the other and you need to investigate and decide. In terms of actual written production – do you have something that teaches by having children copy out samples of good writing? Do you want to focus on their own style of expression? Would you prefer to combine these things along with other aspects of learning to tell a story?

Finally, would you be more comfortable if you had one packaged all-in-one curriculum that covered not only the basics but also gave you suggestions for history, science, social studies, art and music? Would you prefer to piece things together for each subject and have a curriculum for each one? Would you be fine winging it with help from the library, friends, family, other homeschoolers, the internet and other resources you have in your own home? Would you like to have a combination of some curriculum for some areas and not for others? If at all possible, see if you can find samples (online or better yet, in person) of items you are considering using and asking real live people whether they found them useful, engaging, age-appropriate, easy to implement etc.

Just as with parenting, homeschooling is a changing evolving process and what works for you for a few months might not work when the situation changes and might not work with a younger sibling and might simply not work at all even though you'd hoped it would. There is no manual that tells you exactly what to do; you have to do a lot of background work yourself but there are lots of people who can help – be they real life people in your community, people on the internet or people who have written books on the subject that you can borrow from the library.

If I have one final word of advice for new homeschooling parents of children in preschool and kindergarten it is this – have fun! Don't be afraid to spend only 10, 15, 20 minutes a day doing something that looks like 'formal academics' and spend the rest of the day actively engaging with your child in a variety of activities that will teach them hundreds of skills. Don't be afraid to play with them and take a week off, or two weeks off, or a month off, from any formal work. There are lots of games and activities of daily life and toys that are fun and can be part of active learning – unless your child is dying to sit down with a workbook, you could easily skip workbooks altogether for the early years. Again, have fun as you begin this journey together!

