

## Homeschooling

*November, 1992.*

*Standing at the top of the snow-covered hill at the school, our circular sleigh in hand, we have just kissed Rebecca and dropped her off at the schoolroom door. Sara and Erin are both standing by my side, beside the other mothers with their toddlers. Sara wants to slide down the hill with the other young children, and I let her. Erin is too afraid of the hurtling speed, and remains with me, clinging to my coat.*

*"Why isn't Sara in school?" a mother asks, interest in her voice.*

*Dead silence. All the other mothers stop what they are doing, freeze-frame, watching me, waiting for me to speak, while the children laugh and slide in the background.*

*"Because I am homeschooling her," I reply simply. Tight. Taut. Tart.*

*(Because she hates school, I want to say. Very vulgar. Vague. Vague.)*

*Shocked silence. Moms all listening, then, "were you not happy?" asks this mother, not insensitively either.*

*"Sara wasn't happy," I reply honestly. Polite. Proper. Ponderous. Pilfwater.*

*(No, I wasn't happy, I want to say. We cried. Both of us. When Sara began to cry and ran after me when it was time to kiss her goodbye at the classroom door, and this went on for weeks on end, I cried too, I want to say.)*

*"Oh," comments the mother who asked. "Let's go," say the others to their children, "we've got things to do." Everyone disperses except Sara and Erin and I who are left standing at the top of the snow-covered hill. Alone with our circular sleigh, and Sara slides down the hill some more, as Erin pleads with us to go ...*

In 1992 I pulled my daughter out of a competitive classroom where I watched her struggle to tie her laces fast enough to please a demanding and impatient teacher. An educator myself, I ached. I watched my daughter turn

into a clingy, tearful child who could not seem to cross the threshold of the classroom door.

I homeschooled my daughter Sara for a year until a new school planned for our neighbourhood was eventually built. It was a good year, a time of healing and renewal. Sara thrived in the comfort of home learning which was specially tailored to her dreamy, creative spirit. Then Sara willingly re-entered the school system once again, a fresh start. Although she had benefitted enormously from the year at my side, she needed others, too. I felt I needed more solitude and some time for myself. I had returned to university; I was writing. I did not feel I had the time or energy to homeschool any of my three daughters.

Research attests to the academic and social benefits of homeschooling, a social movement growing in scope and popularity. Homeschooling is legal in Canada, with an estimated 50,000 homeschoolers, according to the Canadian Alliance of Homeschoolers (not all register). Each province has different regulations: Saskatchewan requests a philosophy of education and curriculum plan; Alberta evaluates progress with provincial achievement tests; B.C. has the most open policy, in place since 1989, requiring only registration. In 1983, Vancouver newspapers featured an unemployed Christian pipelayer who was being charged with neglect for homeschooling his children in a motel room!

The homeschooling phenomenon is mainly one of choice, not necessity; of deliberation, not impulse. The decision to homeschool seems to stem from several sources. It may be a lifestyle choice that offers an alternative to the more regimented and less creative side of public schooling. Or parents may wish to homeschool in order to protect cherished and traditional family values and religious doctrine which they see undermined in the regular school system. Some parents homeschool children who simply do not fit the mold of public schooling, having physical, mental or emotional challenges. Or some parents, like me, choose to homeschool because, for one reason or another, they are dissatisfied with their local school or their children are unhappy there.

Homeschooling developed out of the educational reforms of the '60s and '70s, giving rise to a philosophy of unschooling (or deschooling): education based on the natural interests of children learning from all aspects of their lives. The late John Holt, a pioneer of the homeschooling movement, believed compulsory schooling hurts children.

"You have reached the 24-hour information line of the Homeschoolers' Association of Greater Vancouver," begins the taped message: lists of events and activities for children and families, announcements regarding network group meetings, a request for help by a single mother homeschooling her sons. Inserted oh-so-gently are reassurances the get-togethers are informal and non-religious in nature.

Events such as the annual Not-Going-Back-to-School Picnic in September draw hundreds of homeschoolers. With a name that thumbs its nose at the yearly commercial back-to-school drive (and the anticipation and relief felt by

many parents), the picnic brings children of many ages and backgrounds together for a social event that promotes a different sense of community than that engendered in the schools.

But there is a faction of families within the homeschoolers' network who have chosen to homeschool in structured and disciplined ways in reaction to what they see as the moral breakdown of a postmodern society. The homeschooling movement is composed of two main factions, the (religious) Idealogues and the (humanist) Pedagogues.

The Moores, a Christian couple in the United States who have been promoting homeschooling since the '70s, espouse child-centred learning but also suggest that children avoid fantasy, fairy tale, and myth. They believe that learning is best accomplished in the home, mainly by the mother. "There is no reason here to get into a feminist flap," they write in *Homeschool Burnout* (1988) but the message seems clear. Much of the overall literature on homeschooling openly admits that it is mainly mothers who homeschool, but adds (politically and correctly) that fathers are important, too.

But even the most traditional and fundamentalist of family values in homeschooling incorporates lots of individual attention related to children's interests and experience and the opportunity to adjust resources, curriculum, and methods as needed. No matter how regimented learning might be in the home, could it compare with schools where children line up to move from room to room, must get permission to go to the bathroom and eat at prescribed times of the day?

Reading through a few issues of *Quest*, the "Canadian Home Educators' Digest," I find a description of one homeschooled day that would make the military cringe! I also find an ad for a book promoting that "... it has been ordained by God that the man rule his family and that the woman order and keep the home." Does this sound familiar, like right out of the Promise-keepers Movement? Award-winning novelist David Guterson, author of *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense* (1993), admits that homeschooling can be a social danger if it narrows children's experience "for political, social, or religious purposes." He claims homeschooling is no more sexist than anything else in a marriage but refers to the women's movement as something that has changed America thoroughly. His description of a mother who can hardly wait to get her children off to school so she can parasail puts me in a feminist flap!

When I'm out parasailing to the school where I teach once a week, I reflect that ironically, some of the benefits touted by homeschoolers are what many educators have been insisting upon for years. However, these measures are difficult and expensive to accomplish.

But what about the social part of schooling? It's not just that kids need other kids and adults for interaction—many homeschoolers seem to be doing a fine job of arranging opportunities for that. What about the pluralistic society we live in? Schools perform a social and community function by bringing diverse groups of children together and educating them in humanistic ways.

Renee Norman

Are homeschoolers selling out on society? on the important reformative aspects of schooling?

There is no doubt that homeschooling is changing our image of education and is a force to be reckoned with in the future. I know firsthand the benefits of homeschooling and the incredible demands it places on women. But if I didn't somehow believe that schools could potentially be safe, happy places where children learn and grow, I wouldn't still be teaching. Perhaps the best use of all our time, energy, and resources calls for new concepts of how we can teach children in both the home and the school.

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- Growing without Schooling Magazine* (ed. Susannah Sheffer), Holt Associates, Cambridge, Mass.
- Home Education News* (ed. Claudia Beaven), Vancouver, B.C.
- Home Learners Network of Greater Vancouver and Home Learners Info. Line (contact: Diane Sandberg).