I never planned to homeschool. I am the daughter, niece and granddaughter of excellent public school teachers. I cheerfully volunteered in my children’s classrooms and worked on parent committees. I believed in doing my best to change a flawed system from within.

Yet I kept seeing that school wasn’t a good fit for my children. Our 4-year-old already knew how to read, but had to practice sight words in preschool anyway. Our sweet but inattentive second-grader was deemed a good candidate for Ritalin by his teacher.

Our fifth-grader could do college-level work, but due to cuts in the gifted program had to follow grade-level curriculum along with the rest of her class. Our freshman was an honors student but detested school— not only the hours of homework but the trial of dealing with a few teens who were harassing him.

We became homeschoolers overnight when those teens pulled a gun on my oldest in the school hallway, telling him he wouldn’t live to see the end of the day. School officials, who had done nothing to ease the harassment, didn’t even call the police.

The next morning every reason I had to avoid homeschooling stared me in the face. So did my kids. They were eager to learn on their own terms.
Here are a few of the misconceptions homeschooling erased for me.

Misconception #1: Education that counts happens in school.

My kids were growing up in an enriching home. We read aloud every day and enjoyed wide-ranging conversations. We went to parks, museums and plays. But I was raised to believe that formal education is something separate and measurable.

Still, I saw that my kids learned most eagerly when filled with the aliveness we call curiosity. That’s true of all of us: Learning sticks when we’re interested. When we’re not, much of what we learn tends to become inaccessible after the grade is earned.

Hard as it is to believe, studies show that shallow thinking is actually related to higher test scores. (Maybe we acknowledge this reality when we prepare kids for tests by saying, “Don’t over think it.”)

When we’re curious we not only retain what we learn, we’re also inspired to pursue the interconnected directions it leads us. I saw this the summer before we began homeschooling.

My 8-year-old, the one who barely paid attention in school, was playing with balsa airplanes brought to a picnic by a family friend who piloted his own plane. Other kids gave up after the planes broke, but my son worked to fashion the pieces into newly workable aircraft. This gentleman showed him a few modifications, and the unlikely looking planes flew.

After that my son was on a quest. He loaded up on books at each library visit, telling us about Bernoulli’s principle, aviation history and experimental aircraft. He begged for balsa to make models of his own design, which became more sophisticated as he overcame earlier mistakes.
The next time we met up with this friend, my son was offered a ride on his Cessna. That was the highlight of his summer. His interest in planes eventually waned, but not the knowledge he gained. He'd taught himself history, science and math, and more importantly, he'd shown himself just how capable he was.

His pursuit is what researcher Carol Dweck, author of Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, calls a growth mindset. It’s the understanding that achievement comes from purposeful engagement, that talent and smarts are not fixed traits but are developed through persistence.

A growth mindset is linked to resilience and accomplishment throughout life. That’s education that counts!

**Misconception #2: Kids have to follow grade-level standards.**

I once thought homeschoolers had to follow conventional school standards. You know what I mean— in second grade it’s time to learn about ancient Rome, multiplication and adverbs. For my family, an overly schoolish approach never made sense. I can give dozens of reasons, but here’s one that springs to mind.

Kids develop unevenly. They may be way ahead in reading and struggle in math, able to make up imaginative stories but not coordinated enough to easily write or type them. If they don’t advance evenly in school, quite a bit of attention is focused on where they’re lacking (extra help, easier and more repetitive work, labels, poor grades).

But outside of school it’s easy to emphasize their strengths while other areas are mastered gradually without ever being considered “deficiencies.” This has a basis in current research which shows that children are remarkably good at self-regulating. They’re cued to ignore information that’s too simple or too complex, but instead are drawn to learn from situations that offer the right amount of challenge.
For example, it’s well known in the homeschooling community that many kids aren’t ready to read at 5 or 6. Some aren’t ready until they’re several years older. In school that’s a crisis, because every subject is taught using reading. The child who can’t read not only grows disheartened, he also feels stigmatized.

But as a homeschooler he remains immersed in a learning-rich lifestyle whether he reads or not, because homeschooling is infinitely adaptable. Stories abound of homeschooled children who move quickly from nonreading to zipping through Harry Potter books once they’re ready.

A recent study showed that homeschooled children whose parents don’t push them to learn to read, but instead emphasize the joy of reading, end up with kids who are avid readers—no matter if these kids started reading early or late.

In our family, we found our kids eagerly accomplished far more in a whole range of subjects over time. “Grade-level” expectations were, to us, limitations.

**Misconception #3: The parent has to be teacher/coach/principal.**

Being a mother to my children has always been richly rewarding (OK, maybe not in the colicky phase). I didn’t want to take on other roles. Turns out I didn’t have to. We found homeschooling to be an immediate stress reduction. My kids got enough sleep, woke rested, and didn’t have to rush through the day.

Instead they had ample time for conversation, reading, indulging in art projects and experiments, finding the answers to questions, and going on adventures. Our lives were guided by fascination, not bells. Much less control on my part was required.

I find that our cultural emphasis on adult-led activities is somewhat counterproductive. We assume children benefit from the newest educational toys and electronics, coached sports, lots of lessons, and other adult-designed, adult-led endeavors. Well-intentioned parents work hard
to provide their children with these advantages, although there’s limited evidence that all this effort has value.

We do this because we believe that learning stems from instruction. By that logic, the more avenues of adult-directed learning, the more children will benefit. But studies show that a child’s innate drive to creatively solve problems is actually impeded when adults provide direct instruction.

This experience is repeated thousands of times a year in a child’s life, teaching her to look to authorities for solutions. It is known to shape more linear, less innovative thinking.

Research also shows that a child’s natural motivation tends to diminish in adult-led activities. Unless they’ve been raised on a steady diet of ready-made entertainment, children are naturally drawn to free play and discovery based learning. They make up games, daydream, pretend, and launch their own projects—freely seeking out adults for resources and guidance when necessary. They are naturally drawn to achieve mastery.

My kids have shown me how motivated self-direction can kick into high gear in the teen years. They’ve earned their own money by shoveling stalls, and spent it to buy and restore a vintage car, go on a month-long backpacking trip, and build a bedroom-size recording studio.

And they have stick-to-it-iveness—devoting years to pursuits like a bagpipe band, wildlife rehabilitation, farming, and their own intensive scholarship. Homeschooling has helped us foster a young person’s growing need for independence while providing useful guidance.

**Misconception #4: I can’t afford to provide a decent education.**

Like many new homeschoolers, I thought I’d have to replicate everything from music class to chemistry lab. I knew I’d never have the time, energy or money.
But we quickly discovered that the community around us is filled with people eager to impart skills and knowledge to the next generation, almost always for free.

They’re found at ethnic centers, museums, libraries, colleges, churches and service organizations, plus hobbyist clubs like those for rock hounds, ham radio enthusiasts and astronomy buffs. My children’s lives have been illuminated by spending time with biologists, potters, engineers, geologists, entrepreneurs, archaeologists, organic farmers, model railroaders, meteorologists—the list could take up this page.

People seem honored when asked to share a little of what they know. It’s sad that young people are customarily segregated from adults doing fascinating things right in their own communities, especially in the teen years when they so desperately want role models.

We’ve also gotten together with fellow homeschoolers for countless field trips, enrichment programs, game days, clubs and learning co-op classes.

My kids have re-enacted Shakespearean duels, toured factories, sheared sheep, raced sailboats, learned chemistry from a Ph.D chemist, debated Constitutional challenges, competed in robotics tournaments, built a hovercraft of their own design, calculated the position of the stars, played with world-class musicians, and spent an afternoon with an astronaut after winning a science contest. All free, or practically free.

When certain subjects got really challenging, we easily bartered with an expert or found a community college class to cover it. And we’ve saved thousands by relying on the remarkable resources of our library system.

Sure, I envy those homeschooling families who learn while bike riding in Ecuador or rambling through European castles. But I realize my kids haven’t missed anything despite my penny pinching, especially since studies indicate two-thirds of school kids say they’re bored in class.

Deep scholarship and hands-on learning are simply another homeschooling perk.
Misconception #5: Homeschooling will deprive my kids of friends.

I realized the school day isn’t really set up for socializing, although we’d come to rely on school as a source of same-age friendship.

Sadly, according to Beyond the Classroom by Laurence Steinberg, less than five percent of school kids belong to peer groups that value academic achievement—while pressure from prevailing peers steer young people toward underachievement.

And it turns out studies show homeschooled children have better social skills and fewer behavior problems than their demographically matched schooled peers.

Homeschooling families also tend to be more active in the community. Initially it took me a while to get used to homeschool gatherings where kids hung out with a wide range of ages and abilities. Sure, they’re kids and not beacons of perfection, but I was pleased to see so much overall good cheer.

As for friends, my kids kept many of their school friends. They also made more as we widened our circle of acquaintances. Many of their new friends were around the same age, but some were decades older, bringing perspectives shaped by widely varying experiences. They offered my children a route to maturity they couldn’t have found in school among kids similar to themselves.

Their friends include a Scottish gentleman in his 70s, a group of automotive restoration enthusiasts, a wildlife rehabilitator in her 60s, fellow backpackers, people with differing physical challenges, Christians, Buddhists, atheists, Wiccans—well, you get the idea.

These friendships happened because they had the time to stretch in all sorts of interesting directions.
Misconception #6: Homeschooling is an experiment.

Like any other parent, I’m driven to provide my children with the essential ingredients that lead to lifelong happiness and success. Late at night, unable to sleep, I’ve entertained my share of doubts.

What if homeschooling will limit their chances? I finally realized I was looking at it from too narrow a perspective.

Schooling is the experiment. For 99 percent of all our time on earth, the human race never conceived of this institution.

Our species nurtured children close to extended family, within the rich educational milieu of the community, trusting that young people would grow into responsible adulthood. Worked like a charm for eons.

Taking my kids out of school liberated them from the test-heavy approach of today’s schools, one that actually has nothing to do with adult success.

Instead of spending more than 1,200 hours each year in school, they could devote time to what more directly builds happiness as well as future success. Things like innovation, hands-on learning, and meaningful responsibility.

That doesn’t mean I lost all my doubts. Some days— all right, months—I worried. It’s hard to unlearn a mindset.

But now all four of my kids are in college or launched into careers.

I sat at a recent dinner with my family, appreciating our closeness. My kids take on challenges
with grace, react with droll wit even under pressure, and haven't lost their zest for learning. We laughed as their lively conversation covered Norse mythology, caddisfly pheromones, zeppelin history, and lines from new movies.

I'm not sure how much I can credit to homeschooling, but I know it's given my kids freedom to explore their own possibilities.

And that's more than enough.
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