

Homeschooling Teaching Strategies

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The term "homeschooling teaching strategies" refers to approaches to teaching that can be used with home-educated students. Selecting the right strategy for individual students can positively impact the students' learning and retention, thinking skills, motivation to learn, internalization of selected values, and development of constructive character traits. Although little research has been done specifically on homeschooling teaching strategies, homeschoolers can find research-based guidance from general education research literature and experience-based literature prepared by homeschoolers. This digest looks at several homeschooling teaching strategies.

Definition of Homeschooling

"Home-based education" may be a more accurate term for homeschooling, in that it can be described as (a) a commitment by parents to personally raise and educate their children, (b) family-based and usually parent-led (but sometimes student-led), (c) conducive to individualization, and (d) generally not taking place in conventional classroom and institutional settings (Lines, 1998; Ray, 1999). Homeschooling families often participate in community activities and use resources open to the public to enhance the education of the children.

The number of homeschooling families continues to grow rapidly in the United States. An estimated 1.5 to 1.9 million K-12 students were homeschooled in the United States in the fall of 2000 (Lines, 1998; Ray, 1999, 2000a). The practice of homeschooling is also expanding in other western nations and beginning to take hold in some eastern nations, such as Japan (Large, 2000; Ray, 1999).

Themes From Relevant Education Research

Before selecting specific teaching strategies, homeschooling parents may benefit from considering four key themes from education research. These concepts provide a foundation for effective teaching practices in institutional school settings.

1. *Active Teaching.* Teachers can make a difference in students' learning by being proactive and exhibiting particular teaching behaviors. These teaching behaviors generally include (a) careful

planning, (b) choosing appropriate teaching strategies, (c) actively involving students in the learning process, and (d) regular and effective monitoring and evaluation of student learning (Eggen and Kauchak, 1988; Slavin, 1991).

2. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP).* Teachers must know and understand (a) child development and learning and age-related human characteristics, (b) the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child, and (c) the social and cultural contexts in which a child lives so that learning can be made meaningful, relevant, and respectful of the child (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997).

3. *Teaching Strategies Theory.* Researchers and teachers have found that no single teaching approach works in all situations. That is, the effective teaching strategy (or model) depends on the teacher (e.g., personality traits, teaching strengths, and preferences), the student (e.g., interests, learning strengths and limitations, dominant learning style), and the content to be taught. A teacher should choose a particular strategy (e.g., mastery learning, direct instruction, inquiry training) depending on the combination of each of these three factors (Eggen and Kauchak, 1988; Joyce and Weil, 1986; Slavin, 1991).

4. *Tutoring.* Researchers, teachers, and historians generally concur that one-to-one tutoring is, in many ways, the most effective teaching strategy available for most purposes. Tutoring enhances both the tutor's and the student's academic performance and attitude toward subject matter (Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik, 1982; Fager, 1996).

Homeschooling Teaching Strategies

Many studies have shown that home-educated students perform above the public school average in terms of academics, and research suggests they are doing well in terms of social and emotional development and success in adulthood (McDowell and Ray, 2000). Few research studies, however, have focused specifically on effective teaching strategies in homeschooling. Still, much information on teaching strategies can be found in experience-based literature written by homeschoolers. Listed below, in alphabetical order, are several of the most common teaching strategies or pedagogical approaches that

homeschoolers have reported using successfully (e.g., *The Teaching Home*, 2000). Parents regularly mix elements of multiple approaches.

1. *Classical.* Teach the tools of learning (i.e., grammar – mastery of a language, dialectic – logic, and rhetoric – the expressive and creative use of language) so they may be used in the study of any subject.

2. *Lifestyle of learning.* Teaching and learning are treated as a seamless and organic part of living within a family, geographical community, local faith community, and nation – that is, the "real, everyday world."

3. *Schooling at home.* Parents generally teach as they were taught in schools. There is a high degree of structure. It often involves active teaching with the teacher having a clear-cut and outstanding role. There is no significant integration of subject areas.

4. *Structured/mastery learning.* Content to be learned is clearly presented in (usually) consumable booklets (or via computers) in a sequential, step-by-step manner while immediate feedback to the learner is emphasized. Often the parent is viewed more as a moderator or administrator than as an active teacher.

5. *Unit studies.* These emphasize the concept that all knowledge is interrelated and learned more easily and remembered longer if it is presented and studied in a related way. Subject areas (e.g., math, history) are blended together as the teaching is centered around a common theme or project.

6. *Unschooling.* This approach emphasizes giving children as much freedom to explore and learn about the world as parents can comfortably bear; it does not mean allowing them to misbehave (Holt Associates, 2000).

7. *Worldview.* This approach emphasizes that all education is value- and belief-driven and no form of education or schooling can be otherwise. It purposely and explicitly integrates a particular worldview in curriculum materials, activities, and ways of thinking. An example is "The Principle Approach," which focuses on researching a religious writing to identify basic principles or truths, reasoning from these truths through an academic subject (e.g., history, politics), relating the principles to the student's own character and self-government, and recording in writing the application of the

principles and ideas to life and living (The Teaching Home, 1998, 2000).

These homeschooling approaches involve many of the elements of effective teaching strategies promoted by educational researchers and theoreticians. Their use and emphasis on academics (Blumenfeld, 1986) appear to be working well. Keys to the students' success appear to involve the following interdependent features (Ray, 2000b): (1) "... learning at home becomes an interactive process rather than a series of tasks to be tackled" allowing for rich student-teacher conversation, individualization, taking advantage of teachable moments, and ensuring mastery before moving forward (Thomas, 1998, p. 127; Tizard and Hughes, 1984); (2) tutoring (e.g., concentrated time on task, individualization), (3) social capital and value communities, (4) increased academic engaged time, (5) positive, multi-age social interactions, and (6) high parental involvement (Haury and Milbourne, 1999).

Choosing Homeschooling Teaching Strategies

Many parents gradually grow into a teaching strategy (or strategies). They are open to modifying their strategy as they, their individual children, and their family change over the years. The following guidelines can help parents identify which strategy is likely to work well for them.

Parents should consider:

1. Reflecting upon and articulating a personal philosophy of education. They can do this by (a) reading about the philosophy of education, homeschooling, and their personal worldview, (b) talking with close friends and family members about education, (c) considering their own educational experiences, and (d) writing down their key educational beliefs.

2. Joining a local homeschool support group that supports their philosophy of education and includes experienced homeschoolers.

3. Subscribing to a local homeschool newsletter and at least two homeschool magazines that are supportive of their basic philosophy to learn how other families practice home-based education.

4. Examining their personal preferences, strengths, weaknesses, and

interests with respect to their complementary roles as communicator, parent, teacher, and learner.

5. Thinking about their children individually and as a group with respect to their personal preferences, strengths, weaknesses, and interests in their roles as communicators, children, learners, and students of subject matter.

6. Seeking outside help (e.g., National Challenged Homeschoolers Associated Network, www.nathhan.com) if they have children with an unusual need (e.g., learning disability, giftedness, special interest).

Parents should then move ahead with confidence in their best judgment. As they teach and guide their children, they will have ample opportunity and time to observe and evaluate their children's learning, attitudes, and progress (i.e., academic, social, emotional, and spiritual). Teaching strategies can be modified based on what seems to work best for their individual families.

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