

Getting Started Home Schooling, Part 3

What Curriculum Should You Use?

by Steve & Carol Ryerson

One of the beauties of home education is that you as the parents are free to teach your children however they best learn and however you can best teach. Keep in mind that the goal is to work yourself out of a job. Your job is to train your children to follow God's will in their lives. That includes their having the tools and desire to continue learning on their own. As we look at several different approaches, think about Part Two of this series on learning styles. How does each of your children best learn? How do you as the parent best function?

Workbook Approach

This is probably the best known approach among apostolic homeschoolers and is used by many Christian schools. The most common of these are the Alpha & Omega Lifepacs and the ACE ~ School of Tomorrow ~ PACES. These two curricula consist of 10 or 12 small workbooks per subject per year. The student reads a section of material, answers the questions about it, and continues in that fashion until he completes the workbook. He then takes a test before going on to the next workbook. Goals are set of doing a certain number of pages per day in the workbook for each subject. An advantage in the Christian school setting is that the student can progress at his own pace in each subject, allowing him to work ahead in subjects that come easily for him, and move more slowly in other subjects that he is having trouble grasping.

Advantages:

1. As we just pointed out, the student can easily move faster or slower in each subject. Remember that in the home school setting, this can be accomplished with any curriculum.
2. For new home school parents who lack confidence, this can be seen as a curriculum where everything is laid out in advance. The parents oversee the work and supplement it where necessary; responsibility for planning is reduced.
3. This is easily adaptable to working with several students on different levels at the same time.

Disadvantages:

1. While this may be very good for a visual ~ sequential child, most children learn in a combination of ways. The active child may soon be "climbing up the walls." We have talked to young people who were home schooled for a brief time and hated it, and most often they say they used workbooks. They hated spending everyday confined to a desk by themselves.
2. Having used ACE in the Christian school setting, we found that the workbooks NEED to be supplemented with other materials in order for the children to get some concepts. The responsible parent discovers that little time is saved.
3. Some children soon learn to skip reading the material. They go to the questions and then just look back through the material in search of the answers. Thus, it becomes a game to beat the system rather than something to foster learning and good character.
4. Parents can become so oriented toward meeting the day's goals that they pass up tremendous opportunities for field trips and outside learning. A family who travels a lot in their work once told

us of passing up the opportunity to visit a well-known national landmark that was far distant from their home simply because their children were behind in meeting their goals and they simply could not take the time to stop.

5. Remember, home schooling is essentially home-based discipleship. Much opportunity for parent-child, hands-on interaction is lost with this type of curriculum. For this reason alone, while it may be helpful in some Christian school settings, we do not recommend a workbook-based curriculum for the home school.

Textbook Approach

The main textbook producers with a full curriculum are A Beka, Bob Jones, and Rod & Staff. These are textbooks designed to be used in a Christian School classroom, but can easily be used in the home school. Each of these has its own distinctives. A Beka, especially in the early grades, tends to be more patriotic and traditional~values oriented rather than distinctively Christian. It also tends to be repetitious from one year to the next, just adding a little more information on the subject each year. This is especially true in the English and Social Studies areas. A Beka publishers pride themselves on the advanced level of their books. Some material is introduced a year or two earlier than in other textbooks. Our experience in using A Beka in a Christian School setting is that sometimes students are not ready for abstract concepts when they are introduced. Rod & Staff is published by Mennonites and reflects their conservative values. Their reading books for the first several years are retelling of Bible Stories (basically simplified KJV) on the intended grade level.

Advantages:

1. The material is laid out for the parent, making it easy to follow and feel they are covering all the bases.
2. Parents can take this base and supplement with additional books, field trips, etc.

Disadvantages:

1. Most people will admit that textbooks are some of the most boring books around. Why saddle your children with boring books when there other books and ways to accomplish the same things?
2. If you have supplemented, you may find the next year that you have already covered a lot of the material in that book.
3. The parent may feel the pressure to “finish the book” on schedule and not take time to delve into areas of special interest more deeply.

Correspondence Schools

These are schools such as Christian Liberty Academy in Illinois. They test your children to see where they are in their learning and then choose materials for your children based on those tests and their experience. They draw on textbooks and workbooks from a variety of publishers, including the ones mentioned above. Most of these places have various levels of involvement such as the parents' choice to have the school keep grades and tests and keep a transcript versus the parents doing it themselves.

Advantages:

1. The parent who feels overwhelmed with the entire prospect of choosing books, record keeping, etc. may take comfort in this being done for them. There is comfort in relying on someone else's experience.

Disadvantages:

1. Nearly all we have talked to who have gone this route, including those who felt it worked well for them, have said there is a lot of pressure to keep moving to get the work done within the allotted time. This might be a good option for those students who are very academically inclined. Others may find some difficulty in that the parent is more limited as to what supplements are allowed (in other words, what alternatives you can use to get to the same goal).
2. The same disadvantages as those listed above for textbooks apply here, except they are magnified because an outside school is putting time pressure on you for finishing the books.

Video School

A Beka Video school and Bob Jones HomeSat bring the classroom into your home. A Beka promotes this as a way to have an “expert” teacher instruct your children. That is a reminder that their true orientation is to the classroom, not the home school. Bob Jones stresses their program is to help the parents, not replace them.

Advantages:

1. This could be a viable option for a high school student who wants a subject that the parents feel they cannot handle themselves, the student cannot do on his own, and there is no one in the local church or home school support group who can help.
2. All the parents need to do is turn on the video and make sure the student is working.

Disadvantages:

1. Do we really want our home schools to degenerate into simply setting our children in front of a monitor and watching a screen? What about home-based discipleship?
2. The young, active, eager child can become frustrated wanting to answer a teacher’s questions. Because he is not in the classroom, he does not get called on.
3. We are aware of situations where children in this setting start referring to the video instructors as their teachers rather than their parents.

Unit Studies

Unit studies integrate many subjects into one basic theme, which is more true-to-life than studying subjects independently. Konos, The Weaver Curriculum, and ATIA (Advanced Training Institute of America ~ Bill Gothard) are the three most well-known of this type of study. Also very good are the Far Above Rubies unit studies for girls and Blessed Is the Man unit studies for boys, both designed to train high school age students for their respective Scriptural roles. For more information on the latter two, check out the following website: <http://www.achristianhome.com/Good Things/HOMESCHOOLING/farandblessed.htm>. Unit studies can be the entire method for the home school, or even moderately creative parents can put together their own unit study for a change of pace from their normal work. Some unit studies center around a Biblical theme. For example, a study of the parable of the sower could include study of soil, methods of agriculture, types of food and their nutritional value, effects of weather and climate on farming, and the development of farm equipment, to name a few things. Books are also available to help parents in developing their own unit studies.

Advantages:

1. This method is excellent for hands-on, parent-child discipleship.
2. There is freedom built into the system to delve into topics of special interest more deeply.
3. This is easy to do with several children, having each of them studying the same topic according to their own level.

4. This type of curriculum can allow more time for volunteer activities such as working at a local museum, involvement in a family ministry, or a local church outreach. Such “outside” activities can be more easily seen as integral parts of the “school” work.

Disadvantages:

1. This takes more preparation time for the parents.
2. Very structured parents may be overwhelmed with the idea of putting together such a study.

Robinson Curriculum

This curriculum is one of the more fascinating ones available. It has grown out of the difficult experience of a home schooling father suddenly becoming a widower and having to cope with the needs of his six children. Both Dr. Arthur Robinson and his wife were trained scientists with doctorates. She died less than twenty-four hours after contracting a serious disease. He and his children with the help of some family friends worked together to keep the family running.

Their curriculum is contained on twenty-two CD’s and covers the entire spectrum of education from grades one through twelve. The CD’s contain everything from readers, biographies, the 1911 edition of encyclopedia Britannica, the 1913 edition of Webster’s dictionary, to math flash cards. There is great emphasis on healthy lifestyle (no sugar and no TV), use of high quality real books, student reading and research, and the importance of children working to solve their own problems.

We do not know how much Biblical values are stressed although they do appear in the promotional materials.

Advantages:

1. Emphasis on real books, research, and independent thinking
2. Saving money over the long run because CD’s don’t have to be purchased again for subsequent children.
3. Solid academics.

Disadvantages:

1. Parent may be led to think that he doesn’t have to do anything.
2. Possible high initial expense: computer, printer (we would recommend laser printer first, then ink jet later), paper, notebooks (still a savings in long run).

Classical Approach

The classical approach emphasizes logical reasoning skills, the foundations of Western culture as found in Greece and Rome, and the study of Latin and Greek. It is not a matter of textbooks versus workbooks; rather, it is a framework for how to think about the learning process. People following the classical approach would lean toward real books rather than workbooks, but that is not the essence of this approach. The heart of this approach is called the Trivium. The three-part combination implied by the name consists of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. This means that regardless of what subject a student is learning, he is taught to take the following approach: First, learn the particulars (essential facts) of the matter, i.e., its grammar. Then work on seeing the interrelationships and connections among these particulars (the dialectic). Finally, work on organizing what you have learned for presentation to someone else in both oral and written form (rhetoric). The following website would be helpful: www.geocities.com/Athens/8259/classic.html. It has several articles with excellent explanations.

Advantages:

1. Use of real books.
2. Mentoring relationship with parent encouraged.
3. The Trivium concept is consistent with the Biblical descriptions of how children develop. Excellent training in thinking and public speaking.

Disadvantages:

1. High requirement for parental research.
2. Potential for dwelling on ancient world and not making adequate connection with modern world.

Miscellaneous Books

There are many publishers which just produce one or two subjects, and their materials are excellent. Among these are Saxon Math, an excellent series; Making Math Meaningful, a hands-on math program; The Learnables, Power Glide, and Rosetta Stone, three foreign language programs; and numerous penmanship programs which teach everything from traditional printing and cursive to various italic variations, including calligraphy. The Pathways Reading books teach the conservative values of the Amish, and many books are available which aid in teaching composition. An excellent supplement, appropriate for age twelve and up including Mom and Dad is Right Words: The Grace of Writing by Blair Adams and Joel Stein.

There are many, many more miscellaneous teaching items available which are too numerous to mention.

Advantages:

1. These books can be used to make up your own tailor-made curriculum.
2. They can be used with other curricular materials. Even if you decide to go with a full curriculum such as Bob Jones or Rod & Staff, you can still substitute in, for example, Saxon math in place of that publisher's math book. You can mix and match any way you like.

Disadvantages:

1. At first it may be difficult to know how to look at books like this and choose. As you gain experience, you will be able to look at a book specifically for things that would strengthen your children's weaknesses.
2. The responsibility is on the parent to make meaningful connections between subjects. The parent becomes like the conductor of an orchestra. It's his responsibility to give direction and appropriate emphasis. You must guard against presenting your children with a confusing mix of odds and ends.

Real Books

As we have already stated, textbooks are some of the most boring books around. Why not cover the same topics using real books? The library can be a tremendous source of material. As always, we issue a caution here that most library books tend to reflect a Humanist or Marxist rather than Christian worldview. Be careful about what books you are allowing your children to read.

There are many sources such as Christian Book Distributors which have books covering history. Others involved in the home school market have made efforts to put together lists of books dealing with a given topic.

Advantages:

1. You can get books which will captivate your children and cause them to want to delve into subjects of interest deeper.
2. You as the parent are totally in charge of getting exactly what you want.
3. Your children's reading levels will soar as they eagerly devour books of interest.
4. Your children will go back to these books and reread them for years to come. How many textbooks do they reread for fun?
5. These can be used as a supplement to a curriculum or as a stand-alone curriculum with some of the miscellaneous books mentioned above.

Disadvantages:

1. It takes much time to screen the many books available to get exactly what you want.
2. These can become expensive, but if you use them in place of a curriculum, then you can easily control the cost.

While these are not the only approaches to academic work, we have tried to summarize the main ones. As we have stated, you do not have to choose one method and follow it totally. We have usually found ourselves stammering for words when someone asked, "Which approach do you follow?" because we did a variety of things ~ whatever worked best at the various stages of our sons' development.

In planning your approach, remember the tremendous opportunities for work and service that are options for home schooled children and young people; don't just think about books.

Build into your schedule the time for them to help with regular household chores. Include such things as remodeling projects (that's called industrial arts). If there is a project going on in your church building, allow your children of appropriate ages to get involved. They can work along side experienced saints as apprentices. These can be such tremendous opportunities that it is worth setting aside the regular academic work for a few days.

Also keep in mind the opportunities available for volunteer work. Do your children or possibly your entire family have a special interest in an area of science or history? Many museums are in desperate need of volunteers. The value in being able to explain scientific concepts, do experiments for visitors, or dress in a period costume while role-playing is something far beyond what a book can offer.

Keep abreast of special programs going on in your city at libraries, museums, or businesses featuring topics currently being studied. Things like that could be much more meaningful than many books. Take advantage, too, of missionaries coming to your church. Spend a day or two studying about their country of labor. At the service, encourage your children to look closely at their display and ask questions about the items or about things they said about the country. Make the most of those opportunities.

Remember our learning styles discussion in Part Two of this series? The above admonitions are particularly important for children who have difficulty concentrating on academics in a written context i.e., from a book. Those children need to have activities interspersed with academics, and they crave connections with the real world. Coordinating something written with something active is very important for them. For example, after you have visited a museum do a short study of something you saw. Or, when a major news event happens, adjust your studies as much as you can without creating confusion. Above all, ask for wisdom.

Pray and Look

As with everything else in life, pray and ask God for guidance with your curriculum. Ask Him to show you how you can best meet the needs of each child.

Spring and summer is the time for home school conferences and curriculum fairs. Allow plenty of time for the vendor hall. Look through books and ask questions of vendors about their products. Take a copy of their catalogs. Don't hesitate to go back to a vendor with more questions. You can also check out their web sites.

