

Submission
No 2

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

I considered Home-schooling for our children, who are now aged 23 and 20. Our daughter was born 1 year after we settled in Australia as migrants from Germany. I always admired the ease of children in bilingual families to have two or three languages and easily switch from one to another, while I had to memorize every day 2 pages of vocabulary in English and Latin during my school years.

This was for us the opportunity to keep speaking our mother language at home, while our children picked up English wherever we went. It was an amazing experience to see the development of these two languages. I concluded children are like a sponge soaking up every bit of new experience, words as much as behaviour. Another mother at playgroup said to her child "No No No" when that child went to a power point wanting to touch it. Our 14-months-old daughter, who hardly spoke at all and had not much play experience with English speaking children by then, ran to me and said: "Nein Nein Nein?" which is perfect translation. After playgroup at our house with only 2 other 4-year-old girls, our 3-year-old daughter did not participate, but re-played in the afternoon, repeating every single word she had heard in the morning. From that time onwards I borrowed children's books from the library, read every sentence to her in English and translated into German. 1/2 a year later she spoke English in full sentences with correct grammar and fully participated in playing. We just never felt we could leave her at day care or with neighbours until then as she might feel uncomfortable not being able to fully understand everything. Even at Kindergarten age 5 she was in tears once because she could not remember the English word for potato.

We also taught our children to play recorder and piano, bake bread, sew and embroider clothes. They 'helped' or rather played with metal in my husband's gold-smithing work shop. They painted with brushes and water colour, but their favourite materials were coloured pencils, plain paper and animal books even during long car trips.

We took our children nearly every 3 years overseas to meet their extended family in Germany, where I discovered text books with German grammar or Maths exercises, which I found fun and interesting. I spent a lot of time with my children to do those exercises, but they told me later they never liked them.

When I heard about the possibility of home schooling and heard that Albert Einstein was home-schooled as well, I saw a great opportunity in handing on some of our extensive art skills, German language and culture and good habits with very little TV as we despised all the advertising on TV and only let our children watch 30 minutes a day, mostly taped puppet shows from Germany or ABC play school and no computer until year 7 at High School. We felt we had something to give to our children and took their education very serious.

At the age of 5 our daughter, wherever we went, in every shop, bank or at playgrounds she was asked by adults about her age with the comment: "Oh then you are going to school soon?" I told her she can answer, we will home-school, but she felt uncomfortable and said, she rather wanted to go to school, like everybody else. So we visited a local primary school with red brick walls and concrete stairs and stainless steel railings, nearly prison-like metal compartments for coats and bags and smelly toilets. I did not find that very impressive and we enrolled her at a local Steiner school with ochre-coloured rounded mud-brick walls, wooden toys and hand-made dolls, where the teachers did not yell at the children, but explained to us how they perform a morning circle with singing, clapping and stomping, while the children rehearse the timetables or spell out words like 'T H E' and the children draw a brown thick crayon line, then a green and a blue line for letters, which reach high up into the heaven, like the letter h, or are grounded deep down in the ground, like the letter g..... and that every time before they write their words. That looked and sounded like I would have loved to experience school and for us a good compromise instead of home schooling, although the school fees were extremely hard for us to afford.

They taught recorder and violin and placed a great emphasis on art and craft, drama and outdoor activities. Our children always loved the school adventure camps best in National Parks with kayaking, climbing, camp fires, tents..... They never just had to fill in a missing word in a sentence on a pre-printed sheet. They had to learn lots of poems and nursery rhymes by heart. My initial worry about the academic short-comings of not starting to fully read and write until year 3 were un-based. Our daughter was reading thick books like 'The Hobbit' and 'Lord of the rings' in year 5. We happily agreed not to give permission to

participate in the state tests during year 3 because we felt it was an unnecessary strain and unpleasant to be examined. I myself hated exams as a child.

Our son did not like reading as much or just wanted my full attention, so home-readers and practising violin became hours of burden. He was still able to find exactly the right words to describe a picture story about how the milk gets from the cow into the supermarket in 5 short sentences for 6 pictures, not missing anything.

Both children have a very good feel for languages. They had to go on to the local High school in year 7. Our daughter became second best in her HSC year. Our son enjoyed parties more than studying, but still did his HSC, also in German, with so much ease, that the few years, I had influence on my children had paid off. I regret that the peer groups had so much more influence on our children with a lot of bad examples and that the children were at least 8 hours per day out of my control, looking for inspiration and guidance elsewhere.

I always provided good art material, never felt tip pens. I never let my children just colour-in books, they had to draw everything themselves and both became very good artists at school and in private life. We still kept some German traditions alive like painting Easter eggs, making straw star decoration for our Christmas tree, baking Christmas Cookies, a lantern march in November for St. Martin's Day... Only because we worked from at home as manufacturing jewellers, I was able to devote so much time to our children, drive them 2x per week to a gymnastics club (1 hour drive), to violin lessons (1 hour in the other direction, later 3 hours to Canberra), String Orchestra practice and concerts, founded a gymnastics club for 6 months, had my own after-school art classes and organized a Symphony Orchestra for 6 months, all involving our own children, founded a German Social Group, went to Italy, Thailand, China town in Sydney, but also day tours abseiling, roller-blading, cycling and skiing with them which I would all still call my home-school influence. We also went to archery and fencing clubs, started Medieval Re-enactment when they were 12 and 9 (2 events per year, which are Historic Life-education with costume making and a lot of well educated people). Our children had a lot of contact to all age groups and multi-cultural meetings, which is considered a benefit, not only for home-schoolers.

In one of my activities of running art classes for 7 years for small groups of up to 6 children with a lot of individual attention I also had a group of home-schoolers attending a 2 hour morning session, where I provided all the materials (professional art materials), prepared the work desks that the children could use the full time to work on their art or craft. I had prepared a lesson plan for the whole year, planning out what activities I would do that I had all the materials organized and ready when needed, was able to keep the parents informed and write a certificate of achievement for my students.

I was glad that I never had to write a report with marks, as every single student put in exceptional effort and although not every child was talented, they all had fun, were proud of their work and deserved praise. They admired the best works and there was never a competition or question about who is better or not, particularly as I had to accommodate different ages in one group.

In this context about tests and marking: my son had sewn a pillow at school year 7 which I considered a very good result for a boy, who had not used a sewing machine before, but only received a C. Surely there would be girls who might have done some sewing beforehand or take their time, or simply work more accurately all the time, but it greatly discouraged our son. He never liked this pillow. One of his regular comments about drawing actually was: Don't want to do that, my sister can do it better anyway. We tried to explain that she was 3 years older and he won an art award even before her at the age of 5.

In one of the tests for school readiness the children were given coloured pencils with the task to draw a house, a tree and a person. The comment to our daughter's drawing was hilarious: She must be depressed because she has used a black pencil quite a lot (actually for the road leading to the house, the smoke coming out of the chimney and a Black Bird flying over the house). My question was, which colour should she have used for the tar, the smoke and a Black Bird? They did not notice that all her animals had a smile on the face.

I myself felt humiliated in year 8 having to perform a difficult song by Mozart in front of the whole class and noticed that my voice was trembling. I never ever wanted to perform again. Only recently at the age of 50 a sound technician remarked on my voice, wanting to tape me singing a song because I have such a nice tremolo.

I placed an emphasis on teaching as many different art and craft skills and techniques, providing different materials with the correct information, e.g. how important acid-free paper is for producing long-lasting art work. From silk painting to pottery, lace making to leather work, sewing, crochet and embroidery, the children tried water-colours, acrylics, pen and ink, pastel, wax crayons, texture paste, face paint, window paint, ceramic paint, lino cutting, Easter egg decoration, Aboriginal dot art, pyrography, mosaic, wire work, copper foil embossing, wax carving, Batik, Macrame, beading, prepared their own willow charcoal sticks, made lanterns, painted sailing ships, flowers, leaves, animals, cars, skeletons, dinosaurs, snakes, shoes.....and whatever I gave them as subjects with appropriate examples and always pictures to study or look at beforehand.

The normal school system quite often cannot focus on quality teaching efforts as the first 20 minutes mostly are chaos control before the children are quiet.

Although our daughter was the best art student she dropped that subject as well as textile during year 11 to gain a university admission index, ending up studying Archaeology and Ancient History. The teachers had tried to influence her, asking her to create a 3 canvas panel major art work for year 12 with mixed media, while she rather just wanted to do realistic portraiture in pencil. She did not like art history, especially modern art e.g. Picasso, but had to study it anyway. That shows me that the curriculum is not focused on children's interest, needs nor importance. It is completely geared towards achieving high marks rather than learning skills. Awards play a far too big role while a lot of effort goes unrecognized. Only at university they were taught how to effectively study and research without wasting time or getting distracted. There is not enough time for proper explanations and encouragement. The teachers have to press through an extensive curriculum with too much computer work, while the children have mostly more experience on computers than the teachers.

An American Study tested children in programming: the result was that children, who grew up with a lot of craft activities and creativity were faster and more able to do the programming task, while the children who grew up with x-boxes and blisters on their thumbs from pressing buttons, kept pressing 'Enter' and expected the program to work by itself.

One example for the twisted logic: At the gymnastics club in the handstand competition those children who held out longest, were awarded and would continue to the next stage. That meant those who were good at handstands got even more practice and those who fell over too quickly had to sit out. As Co-ordinator for Student Exchange Australia I heard a lot of time the comment from my international students that they are astonished how little Australian students know about general history and only learn Shakespeare rather than proper grammar and spelling. A lot of times the exchange students from different countries (France, Denmark.....) top their English classes while here on exchange for only 10 months!

I can fully understand that parents choose to rather teach what they consider important. My own children complained about Aboriginal studies filling the curriculum every year while they don't get to hear about Napoleon or the World Wars. Only if they chose commercial studies as subject they learn how to fill in a cheque or work out strategies to have enough money left at the end of the month to pay rent, electricity, water..... In cooking classes they learnt how to make a traffic light sandwich or pizza instead of real cooking.

Only some teachers left a mark on them and will never be forgotten.

I can fully understand if parents do not register their home schoolers, if they have to stick to a curriculum and keep diaries every day. Writing reports is very exhausting and time consuming. I would rather spend my time on educating, planning and doing activities with my children.

Restrictions that the teaching has to take place at their home are reducing opportunities of taking advantage of the best available resources and cultural activities.

With more than 30 years experience my husband has been frequently asked to teach or demonstrate gold-smithing skills. Why should home-schoolers not take advantage of skilled people in their vicinity or make trips e.g. to the Aquarium in Sydney.....

I strongly support more freedom of choice and delivery of education as it is said: "Travelling teaches as well". It even was considered compulsory for rich people to go on a 'Grand Tour' through the 'Old World' when they turned 20.

The internet is good for a lot of research, but can't make you practice dance steps.