

Homeschooling Tips

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These tips were written during the early days of the pandemic, when families whose children attended traditional schools were suddenly stuck at home together, attempting to get learning done. I shared these tips to try to help people understand their situation and make the most of their time at home with their school-aged children.

Based on the reactions I get when I tell people I homeschool, people think of homeschooling as very difficult for two main reasons:

1. "My kids would never listen to me!"
2. "I don't have the patience."

These concerns have less to do with the teaching part and more to do with the parenting part. And they have a valid point. In my 12+ years of experience, it is the parenting aspect of homeschooling that is the most difficult.

The top priority right now, after keeping everyone physically safe and mentally well, is to maintain harmony in your home. Focus on learning to live together as a unit, making each others' lives easier instead of more stressful. This is a good time to teach your children how to be intentional about wellness and how to be a member of a community. Always keep in mind the life skills they can be learning right now. Try not to let stress and fear over academic skills and knowledge compound the stress of being home together.

Here are some principles for being home with your kids full time that I have come to believe over the years. These can apply equally to those who are “crisis schooling” (home because of the pandemic) and to those just starting out on an intentional homeschooling journey.

1 - You are not responsible for entertaining your children. When your children complain to you that they’re bored, you don’t have to solve that problem. Empathy goes a long way. I have two responses to claims of boredom. One is, “I could use some help with...” Usually, they back away quickly. The other response is a simple acknowledgement of their feelings, with or without some suggestions for activities.

2 - Your children might have things they want to do. Respect that and negotiate with them so that they spend some time doing what’s important to them and some time doing what you require, whether that’s chores or schoolwork. If possible, and if it helps your daily flow and relationship, don’t impose a schedule on them, but make a schedule for yourself and teach them how to organize their own time. If you have to tutor them, your schedule can include a specific time when you’re available for that. Outside of those “appointments,” try giving them a checklist with only the bare minimum of things you require of them (I recommend keeping it to three things per day if you can), and let them decide when they’ll do what. Learning to organize your time is an important life skill that will serve them well. As are pursuing their own interests and learning independently.

3 - Your stress is directly in proportion to your expectations. If you expect your kids to be well-behaved and considerate all the time, you will be confused, upset, and disappointed when they're not. Same if you expect constant obedience, focused attention, and efficiency. Try to dial down your expectations, and when your children are not behaving or working as you'd like, take it as a teaching moment. Explain (calmly, when possible) how their behavior or habits affect others, or their future, or whatever the stakes are, and ask them to try harder to do better.

4 - If your kids do have schoolwork to do, know that kids may take a LONG time to do their work. Technically, they can complete a full school day in just a couple of hours. But if they're not motivated, they will drag it out. Again, try not to get frustrated. Pull up a chair and work beside them. Studying at home is more like college than school - the environment doesn't enforce specific behaviors. Think about what tricks helped you study when you were in college. Snacks? Timers? Social breaks? My teen does her schoolwork on FaceTime with a friend. At first I thought she couldn't possibly be focusing, but after a few days I realized she is getting her work done with much less complaining. What works for you may not be what works for your child. Help them discover their best practices. Try to encourage.

5 - If your kids do NOT have schoolwork to do, try project-based learning. They pick a topic, they do copious amounts of research, and they produce some output showing what they learned. That could be a newsletter, a video, a poster board, or presentation.

6 - Kids are learning all the time. Keep a journal or photo album to prove it to yourself. Use tags like “negotiation,” “patience,” and “communication.” If you really pay attention and broaden your concept of learning, you will see it everywhere.

7 - Have one friend, or a small group, you can complain to. People who know you and your kids well enough to both commiserate with a bad day, and help you keep things in perspective.

Full-time parenting is hard. Always ask yourself, am I making it harder than it needs to be?