



Homeschooling with Larger Families by Lawrence Williams, EdD

Most Oak Meadow families consist of more than one child, and in many of these families more than one child is being homeschooled at the same time. Some parents have several very young children or infants and are trying to teach one older school-aged child, while other parents are teaching several children of different ages at the same time. Trying to do this with some measure of success and grace can be overwhelming at times, and there are no simple solutions. Although teaching several children at home is an art that will only be perfected after extensive practice (and many mistakes!), there are some basic principles that most home teachers discover sooner or later. Therefore, if you have several children in the home — even if they aren't all of school age — and are short on experience but long on ideals, consider the following suggestions. They may help you avoid some truly colossal blunders and may even save a few gray hairs. Later, when you've earned your wings and can look back on it all with your hard-earned wisdom, you will certainly have a few suggestions of your own to add to this list.

◆ ***Develop Daily Plans***

If your children are experienced home schoolers and have become more independent, or if you are only teaching one child at home, you can afford to be more laid-back about daily plans than if you are new at home schooling and have two school-aged children and a toddler. Formulating a daily plan doesn't mean, however, that you have to be a dictator. In fact, if you try to control the show too strongly, you'll not only alienate your children, but you'll also miss the whole point of home schooling. To create and implement a plan successfully, follow these guidelines.

Always develop your plans in advance, either the night before after your children are asleep, or at some point late in the day when you have a few minutes to yourself and the main learning activities of the day have subsided. This gives you time to consider the successes and mistakes of the day in a more detached mood and look at what worked and didn't work, what avenues are worth pursuing again and which children need particular work in certain areas. With one child, you can plan your day over breakfast, read stories leisurely on the sofa, go on all kinds of wonderful spontaneous adventures and generally engage in a very organic kind of learning process. With two school-aged children and a toddler, however, you have to be prepared each morning when your feet hit the ground.

Make your plan specific, but not intricate. Review your curriculum to see what is next in the schedule. Consider what stories you might want to read or tell and what activities you can develop from that for each child. Think about how long the activities will take and whether they are appropriate for the ages of the children involved. Decide what you will do after they have completed the first activities. Find out if you have all the supplies that you need to do what you want to do. In general, develop enough solid ideas to fill the morning, then run through each of them in your imagination (with each child) to see if they're workable.

Consider the rhythm of the activities and the day. Every plan should have a regular rhythm of contraction (focused time) and expansion (creative or active) so that children don't get tired. If you're planning on doing something mental for a 45 minutes like solving twenty math problems, don't expect your children to follow

that by another mental activity like reading. Instead, do something active or artistic. Go for a walk as part of your science work, draw a picture for social studies, sing songs or or play recorders. Also, morning hours are best for focused activities; afternoon projects tend to disintegrate unless they are very active or artistic. If you have a toddler, don't forget to consider his/her daily rhythm. Planning to do your more focused, mental activities while your toddler or baby is sleeping can make a big difference in the success of the activity.

Provide opportunities for individual and group work. Until your children develop their own individual preferences, plan on focusing together as a group in the morning and individual activities in the afternoon. The natural focus of mornings lends itself to group activities such as integrative teaching around a particular subject (described in the next section), while the more dispersed quality of afternoons is more conducive to individual work or more free-flowing activities like plays or hikes. Working together as a family can be exciting, but children need time by themselves so include time for both in your plan.

Finally, don't get too attached to your plan. It's important to have a plan, but it's just as important to be able to let it go without a second thought if something better comes along. In the beginning, you'll probably rely on your plan most of the time. Later, however, as you and your children begin to become more comfortable and secure with home schooling, you'll be able to improvise more frequently. Children frequently come up with better ideas than the home teacher, and it's important to be able to recognize and go with a superior plan when you see it. When the ideas aren't flowing, though, you always have your plan to fall back on, and there are many days when that's a lifesaver.

◆ ***Integrate Your Teaching***

One approach that's been used for generations had its beginnings in the one-room schoolhouse, where teachers had to regularly deal with teaching a lot of subjects to students of different ages. This method, known as integrative teaching, can be approached in two ways: vertical integration and horizontal integration. Vertical integration involves adapting the same subject to different children's abilities. For example, if you are teaching U.S. History and you have a fifth grader and a first grader, you could tell a story about a particular segment of history to both children (perhaps the Revolutionary War), then have the fifth grader write a paragraph about some aspect of the subject (the ride of Paul Revere) while the first grader writes some words from the story (Paul Revere, tower, horse, lantern) and draws a picture. If there is also a younger child, he/she could be practicing a letter from the story (Maybe "B" for British) and drawing a picture. Chances are, the fifth grader will want to draw a picture also.

The second type of integrative teaching is horizontal integration, in which several subjects are integrated into one lesson. Using the example given previously, you would first tell the story to all the children, as before. Then you would have one child write a short essay (an English lesson) about the Revolutionary War ("In three paragraphs, write the story of Paul Revere's ride, then underline all the verbs"), another child solve a math problem (an arithmetic lesson) related to that story ("If there were 13 companies of British soldiers, and each company consisted of 75 soldiers, how many soldiers were there in all?"), and another could draw a map showing the relative locations of Paul Revere, the British troops and the old North Church (a geography lesson).

Of course, this is just one brief example that would last no more than 45-60 minutes in actual practice, but it serves to illustrate two ways that several children can learn simultaneously. Using this same theme, however, the home teacher could extend the lesson for many days, integrating a variety of levels and subjects. The children could write a short play about Paul Revere's ride, design and make the costumes, and plan a performance for friends and relatives. You could read Longfellow's famous poem about Paul Revere's ride, then talk about poetry and make up some poems of your own, with each child writing a simple or more complex poem according to his/her abilities. Above all, don't be afraid to try new things. If one approach isn't working, let it go and try another. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination and willingness to experiment.

As your children become more experienced at home schooling and more independent in their learning, they will frequently suggest integrative learning ideas that are better than any you may think of. They may suggest going to the natural history museum for a geology lesson, visiting the planetarium for an astronomy lesson, or watching a movie about the civil war for your history lesson. When this happens, praise them for having such good ideas and incorporate their plans into yours.

Another approach used by teachers in one-room schoolhouses is what is now called peer tutoring. This simply means that you let the older kids help the younger kids with their work, or those who are better in a particular subjects help others who aren't as good, regardless of age. Actually, children are often much better at teaching each other than we are, because they are closer to the same level of development and have more of an instinctive understanding of the problems. Peer tutoring also gives children a chance to experience the feeling of satisfaction when they help another child with a problem, and this increases their self-confidence. In addition, it gives them a chance to experience the frustrations of being a teacher, which helps them become more patient as learners. Every child has some ability that is outstanding. Sometimes you have to look hard for it, but it's always there. Peer tutoring provides an opportunity for children to use their talents to help others.

◆ **Maintain Your Presence**

Children are remarkable in many ways; they have abilities and faculties that adults simply don't have. One faculty that they don't have, however, is a center of identity, and that is both the source of their beauty and the source of most of their problems. Because they lack a center of identity, they gain their identity and stability through their environment. Thus, if their environment is unstable, they are unstable. If their environment is chaotic, they are chaotic. If their environment is focused, they are focused. Their environment is more than just their physical surroundings, however. Their environment is composed of everything that is outside of them: the physical environment, the objects that surround them, and especially the other people with whom they interact. The younger the children, the more they tend to be affected by thoughts, feelings and actions of the other people in their environment, particularly their parents. For this reason, it is vitally important that home teachers maintain a strong presence in their interactions with their children, especially if they are trying to teach several children at once.

Presence is an inner strength that you naturally project if you are focused, poised and aware of what is happening in your immediate environment. When you have presence, your children can feel it whenever they are around you, and your presence helps them to maintain their focus and rise above their weaknesses. Presence is not just a psychological concept, it is a tangible feeling that children can experience, and a home teacher's lack of presence in the interactions with her/his children causes them to manifest most of the behaviors that make home schooling with siblings so difficult.

I remember when I used to visit my grandmother's farm when I was a boy. The farm was back in the woods, one mile off the main road, about five miles outside of a very small town in North Carolina. It was a wonderful old two-story wood-framed farmhouse, complete with a barn, a smokehouse, a chicken coop, a woodshed and an outhouse. My great-grandfather built it back in the 1800's, farmed the land and raised seven daughters there. When I was younger I never was in the house by myself, but as I got older my grandmother would sometimes go into town and leave me for a short time. When that happened, I was always amazed at the difference in the feeling of the house when she was there and when she wasn't. When I was there alone, the house felt very empty. I could hear sounds I never heard before, and the house seemed very large, drafty and scary. Then my grandmother would come back, and within a few minutes the whole house was different. It seemed smaller, warmer, and very safe. But more than that, the very atmosphere in the house was different. It was full, rich and alive. Wherever I walked throughout the house, I felt surrounded by something wonderful, like I was wrapped in a down comforter. That "something wonderful" was her presence.

Because children rely upon their environment for their sense of identity, when there is no guiding presence in

their environment, they begin to feel very fearful and unstable, as if the floor was suddenly pulled out from under them. When this happens, they can either become very whiny or clingy, or they can become very angry and rebellious, depending upon their temperament. What they are really seeking, however, is your presence so that they can restore their stability — their sense of identity — and get on with the finer things of life.

It's important to recognize that a lack of presence usually occurs in parents who are physically present, but mentally or emotionally absent. This is often at the root of many of the problems that home teachers of several children experience. Even though the home teacher is present physically, he/she is very much absent mentally and emotionally, usually from the stress of trying to attend to everyone's needs simultaneously. When this happens, the children (particularly the young ones) feel the void and demand more attention, which causes more stress and more mental/emotional absence from the parent, creating a vicious cycle.

This cycle can be avoided by developing a clear, specific plan before each day begins, as described previously. The most potent remedy, however, is to recognize when you are drifting mentally or emotionally and bring your full attention back to the situation at hand. If you find yourself feeling torn in several directions, don't move faster to keep up. Instead, sit down, take several deep breaths, and bring your attention back to the present. If it's really bad, call together everyone who's demanding something from you and explain that you simply can't be everywhere at once, and that they will have to help each other. Arrange to have them peer tutor in those areas where they are capable, and focus your attention upon those that need your particular expertise. If you speak to them with presence and poise, the crisis will pass and sanity will return.

◆ ***Keep Your Perspective***

Finally, remember that this too will pass. Everything does. However much you would like to think so, you simply aren't capable of giving them everything they need. Children are remarkably ingenious creatures and, above all, they are compelled to learn. They may not learn what we want, and they may not learn when we want, but they will learn; it is their nature. They learned how to walk and talk with little more than some love and encouragement from you, and the same force that propelled them to take their first steps is also driving them to learn how to read, write and do math. In spite of everything that you feel you are doing wrong, they will become intelligent, capable human adults, and you will shake your head some day and marvel at the miracle that you have witnessed. So when everything seems to be crumbling around you, and you feel that you have failed utterly, love them. Love them for who they are, who they will be, and who they are helping you become. When you can do this consistently, with one child or many, you will have learned what it means to be a teacher.