

Living Education

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PARENT POWERED!
Group Learning for
Homeschoolers

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Welcome to Living Education

Homeschooling parents can be incredibly resourceful. When a group of homeschooling families joins forces, they can do just about anything. In recent years, there has been an explosion of activity in parent co-ops, independent learning centers where homeschoolers can meet for group activities, and parent-led groups based around common interests. Parents are taking charge of their children's learning in a big way, which is what inspired the theme for this issue: Parent Powered!

This issue looks at ways parents can create meaningful group learning experiences. We hope it inspires you to add a new element of group learning to your homeschooling or to enhance the group learning experiences your family already enjoys.

From Pumpkins to Puberty: The Benefits of Learning Together

by Lindsay Banton



When homeschool parents are given the freedom to lead their learners in the best way they feel appropriate, success stories abound. I am not referring to the prodigies, although those exist in all school scenarios. The type of success I mean is when we all walk away from a moment or an event with our minds engaged and new things to think about.

In my early days of homeschooling, my friends and I spent a day at a friend's farm teaching our kids about pumpkins. Someone read a fun fictional story about a pumpkin. Someone else brought a balance scale and we weighed small pumpkins. Another mom cut one open and let the kids reach their hands into the slimy interior. Someone else had prepared several pumpkin snacks and crafts. We shared a picnic lunch and played in the sprawling grassy field. We arrived home later that day, thoroughly exhausted, having squeezed out every ounce of fun and pumpkin-type activity we had in us.

I was so thankful for my little band of merry home-schoolers. I was glad to have them in my life, just as much for me as for my kids. I knew there was no way I had the motivation to do all the silly pumpkin activities, nor the space or supplies. I had linked arms with my peers that day, and our children all benefited greatly.

Fast forward seven years, a big family move, and many new homeschool friends later, I am embarking on a new kind of parent-led learning. Puberty. Often, essential topics related to adolescence aren't so enjoyable for parents or kids. But, I have found myself in a group of women who happen to enjoy having these cumbersome conversations with kids. We are planning a fun day away for ourselves and our girls, making time and space to have these awkward, important talks together. The mom that is super comfortable having these talks (she does it for a living) will do the heavy lifting this time. Another mom has connections to a nice hotel where we can snag a good deal on a night's stay. Someone else is making big-girl swap bags filled with all kinds of things growing girls will enjoy or need. And, whether we as moms are ready for this season of life or not, we will be there for each other and for our children, and together we'll pull it off, flaws and all.

I am super thankful for these women right now. Again, we are linking arms to support one another in this new and mysterious season of life. Our daughters are given supportive friends to walk through this time together, too. A great deal of encouragement and togetherness can develop during journeys like these, and I'm thankful I can surround my kids with truly good friends, especially at this time in life. They aren't alone, and we moms aren't alone either.

The great thing about parent-led group learning is that my kids get to watch me work together with people who are vastly different than I am. They are given the chance to observe us sharing the floor with one another, deferring to others who are better suited to step forward and share their knowledge, and conferring, brainstorming, and cooperating on ways to

access space or materials that would make learning easier. We share the weight of the fun activities and the tough talks. We are better together.

Likewise, our children are given a wonderful chance to interact with one another, spurring on deeper levels of learning and investigation. My kids find a great deal of motivation from watching other kids of the same age "doing school." When we have these moments of learning together as a group, or when we share our school table with an impromptu playdate, I can see a fun sparkle in their eyes.

My family craves the nearness of wonderful friends, teammates, and coworkers. We don't need to have multitudes nearby, just a quality person or two. Homeschooling lends itself nicely to building a team around us—whether in person or at a distance—to help carry the load when it gets heavy.

When all is said and done, I hope I can consider our homeschooling experience a success. I will deem it successful if my kids can work well with others, give space for the needs and differences of those around them, are kind, can be team players when necessary, and know how to learn. These definitions of success can't be easily taught from reading a textbook or scrolling through a website. They are learned through practice and watching others. I will consider our homeschool a success if my kids finish their time at our dining room table with a respect for others and a desire to learn. I will consider it a success if they walk away with their minds engaged and new things to think about.

Lindsay is a homeschool mom to three kids, married to a fabulous man who roasts coffee at home, and is constantly working to grow her boot collection. She and her husband are veteran campus ministers at a university in New England. You can read more from her at www.lindsaybanton.com.



Listening to Our Children

by Lawrence Williams (from the OM archives)

Often when we're teaching our children, we get caught up in our own plans and agenda, and we forget to listen to what our children are telling us. When this happens, we block the learning process and prevent our children from expressing their own innate intelligence. Listening involves more than just hearing the words our children are saying. It means feeling what is in their hearts, putting aside our own concepts, and honoring their intentions. When my son Christopher was ten years old, something happened that brought this home very clearly.

Chris came to me one morning and said he wanted to build a table. As a homeschooling parent, I thought immediately of all the possibilities for learning inherent in such a project. "Great!" I thought. "Here's a wonderful opportunity to teach him something about design, carpentry, and math all at the same time."

He described clearly what he wanted: a small table that would fit next to his bed, something to hold a lamp and a few things he would dump out of his pockets at night. As he was describing the table he wanted to make, my mind began working. "If we're going to make a table, why not make it a really nice table? Sure! This could be a project we could work on for days, even weeks! And just think of all the things we'd learn in the process!"

I got excited about the project, so I launched into my lecture about the important factors to consider in designing tables. As I talked, the image of the table began to take vivid shape. In my mind, this was a table for the ages. I could see it—fine wood, sanded edges, brass screws, satin finish—gracing his room for years to come and probably being handed down to future generations as an heirloom, a moral lesson in the value of hard work and perseverance, and a reminder of the deep satisfaction Chris and his dad experienced as they built the table together.

But as we started sketching out a rough diagram of the table, I soon began to realize that Chris' vision for this project wasn't the same as mine. He wasn't interested in a finely-crafted piece of furniture; he just wanted a table, and he wanted it fast. In his mind, this was probably going to be finished before lunch, and then he'd be off to other things.

At this point, I should have let go of my own agenda for the project, listened closely to his vision, and determined what I could do to help him achieve it. But I had become enthralled by the form I had envisioned, and I couldn't let go of it. To rationalize my agenda, I told myself that making a table wasn't the real importance of this project: the primary purpose was to teach Chris a lesson in character. "After all," I reasoned to myself, "Chris doesn't pay attention to details. If I don't help him learn how to do this, who will? And this is a perfect opportunity!" So I buried his interests and continued to refine my drawing to greater detail, right down to where the screws would go.

I noticed that Chris was losing interest, so I moved quickly into my presentation of inches, feet, and fractional numbers, so we could determine exactly how long to make the legs and where to place the screws. After a few minutes I noticed he wasn't even looking at me anymore; he was staring off into space. Still unable to see what was happening, I charged into my lecture about the importance of perseverance, that everything isn't fun in life, and that we have to do some things we don't like to get what we want. After a few minutes of this, he exploded.

"All I want to do is make a table!" he screamed. "I don't want a lecture about all that other stuff!"

"But how do you expect to make a table," I replied in exasperation, "if you don't understand how to do those things?"

"I'll just make it, that's how!" he screamed.

Finally, I realized what I was doing. In my obsession with the form of the table, I wasn't paying attention to what Chris really wanted.

Chris wanted to make a table, and he was ready to go. Instead of moving with him, however, I was pushing against him, because I wanted to do it my way. For him, building a table was a physical act, but I was making it into a mental act. And to make it even worse, now I was turning it into a moral lesson as well.

The choice was simple: I could either hold out for my agenda and lose Chris, or I could agree to do it his way and we could work on it together. But what about the heirloom table that was going to be handed down to my grandchildren? Well, there are lots of different kinds of tables in the world, and this particular table was obviously not going to be an heirloom. In my mind, this was going to be a demonstration of how to make a quick, shoddy table, but I was willing to let him do it because he clearly wasn't going to do it my way.

"Okay," I said reluctantly. "Show me what you want to do."

With that, he went off to the shed and came back with an armful of assorted scraps of wood. Although I had agreed to do it his way, in my heart I was still smugly thinking that he didn't know what he was getting into,



and that after a few minutes he would realize the error of his ways and come to me begging for help. For the next half hour, however, I watched—first with skepticism, then with increasing respect, and finally with awe—as he cut wood, hammered nails, and sanded corners with amazing enthusiasm. Sure, he made some mistakes, but when that happened he either corrected his mistake quickly or incorporated his mistake into a new element of the table's design.

Gradually, his enthusiasm overcame my smugness, and I joined in, being very careful not to impose my concept about this table onto his, but simply feeling my way along, looking for opportunities to assist in the process without interfering, and voicing my sincere appreciation for his work.

When it was finished, it was definitely a table. It wasn't the most refined table ever made, but it had its own unique beauty—a result of the love and enthusiasm that Chris had poured into it. And, more importantly, we were both ecstatic from the process of working on the table together. In less than two hours,

Chris had shown me that there was more than one way to make a table, and when it was all over I had to admit that I actually enjoyed his way much more than mine. Chris took the table to his room and kept it there beside his bed, where it held a lamp and pocketsful of his stuff for many years.

When we were packing up to move out of our house, Chris—20 years old by then—was packing up to move into a new house. He was staying in Virginia, and my wife and I were moving to Vermont. As we were packing, we came to the table he had made, sitting beside his bed. We both stopped for a long moment and looked at it.

"Do you remember this?" he asked.

"I sure do," I replied. "That was the first table you ever made."

"We made it together," he said.

"Yep," I answered. "We did a good job, didn't we?"

"It's not the greatest table in the world," he said, "but it works."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I replied. "I learned a lot when we were making it. I'm glad you still have it."

"Are you kidding? I'd never get rid of this," he said. "I always think of you when I see it. Thanks for all your help."

There wasn't much to say, so I just gave him a hug, then picked up the table and gave it to him. He smiled and carried it to the truck to go to his new house.

I haven't seen our table since that day, but I know it's probably sitting in his house now, holding a lamp, some of his stuff, and becoming more of an heirloom every day.

At the heart of it all

Did you know that Oak Meadow came to life over 40 years ago? Or that Oak Meadow's cofounder, Lawrence Williams, is considered a pioneer in homeschooling and distance learning? In 1975 Williams wrote ***The Heart of Learning***, a heart-centered guide to teaching young children and for creating a nurturing and effective learning environment. This educational classic remains highly recommended for every adult who has a part in shaping the lives of children.

Lawrence Williams cofounded Oak Meadow in 1975 along with his wife Bonnie, in order to homeschool their own children. Since then, Oak Meadow's curriculum and distance learning school have helped families around the world create successful homeschooling experiences.

This article was first published in an early issue of Living Education and reprinted in Autumn 2011.





Best of Both Worlds: How to Add Group Learning to Your Homeschooling Adventure

by Monica Gill

Homeschooling is an adventure. It can feel exciting, exhausting, challenging, and fun. It can also feel insular, isolating, and even lonely. But it doesn't have to. There are many ways parents can create opportunities for group learning, and the benefits are well worth the effort.

Shared motivation

Allowing your children to learn in a group gives them peers who are working toward the same goal. When one begins to feel frustrated, another will be able to step in and help. When children work together, they are more likely to stay motivated. As the entire group strives for a common goal, everyone shares the tasks and problem-solving.

Firsthand assessments

As a parent, when you step into the role of a teacher, you get a firsthand look at your child's learning capabilities. Seeing how your child works in solo and group activities, and with other adults leading them, will help you zoom in on areas they are excelling in, as well as areas that could use improvement or special attention.

Accountability

When children study alone, they are responsible for themselves. This is great for children who are naturally motivated. However, for children who are more laid back in their educational pursuits, this can be difficult. Parent-led group learning encourages students to become accountable, not only to you as their parent/teacher, but also to other group leaders and to their peers in the group.

New learning methods

Another wonderful benefit of group sessions is that your child gets to experience many different methods of learning from peers. When children work on a subject or project alone, they are left to their own devices for brainstorming, problem-solving, creating, and communicating their ideas. It is important for children to learn how to learn and develop critical-thinking abilities, and interacting with others may help them learn faster and more effectively.



How to Get Started with Parent-Led Group Learning

You don't need any experience to organize a group learning activity or class. All you need is the willingness to try and a group of likeminded families. Here are some tips to help you get started.

1. Establish goals for the group.

When a group has a goal in mind, participants are more likely to stay on topic and will work harder to complete their task. Define your objectives and goals before starting the class or workshop so all the participants have a collective focus.

2. Encourage active participation.

In order for children to fully benefit from group learning, each should be invited to participate in a way that works for them. Prepare for different levels of ability, focus, and social skills. Find a meaningful way for each student to have a voice.

3. Keep group sizes manageable.

A small group of four to six students is ideal for most parent-led learning groups. Fewer than this and your child may miss out on diverse learning opportunities. Any more participants can become a distraction to your child, rather than a learning aid.

4. Make it a game.

Children become more engaged when learning is made fun. Video games use rewards to encourage participation, be it collecting coins, points, treasure, or leveling up. Elements of gaming can be used in real life to encourage engagement and participation. You might want to award "badges" instead of grades, offer activities or challenges with more than one correct

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solution, or use a treasure map or game board to lead students through learning objectives and allow them to track their goals and progress.

5. Assign roles.

If you are teaching a class, assign each student a position of authority. For example, one student can be the researcher, the other the fact-checker. Switch roles periodically so everyone has a chance to practice different skills. Not only does this make learning feel more fun, it also broadens the methods of learning. You can also use the jigsaw technique, separating students into different teams and giving each a specific task. For example, there may be one researcher on each team. These researchers will then work together to create a subteam to discuss their findings. This supports learning diversity and communication skills.

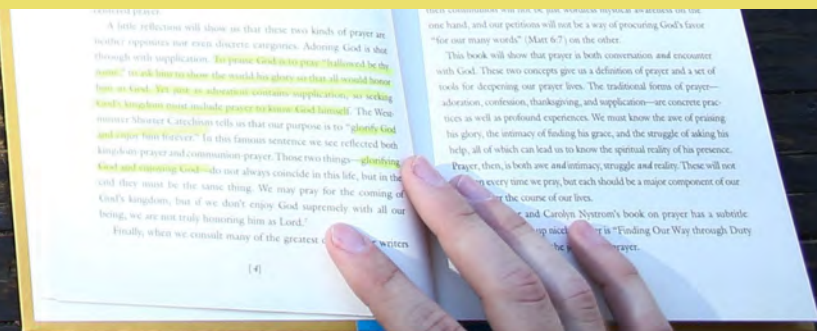
6. Promote communication.

Create assignments that encourage students to establish trust with one another. Help each child communicate effectively not only with their peers, but also with you and other adults who are teaching them.

7. Use outside sources.

Parent-led group learning is beneficial because your children get to learn with their peers, establish problem-solving as well as social skills, and are able to look to you and other parents to help guide their education. When possible, encourage parents in the group to offer classes or workshops in subjects they enjoy or areas of their particular expertise. Everyone has something to teach, and we all benefit when we learn from one another.

Homeschooling parents often are eager to work together with others to create new learning opportunities for their children. You can get the ball rolling by hosting a group learning session for your homeschooling community. Who knows where the adventure will lead?





Living Poetry: Inspiring Us, One Word at A Time

by Antony Yaeger

Over the past eight months I've had the honor of holding monthly "virtual" poetry workshops with interested Oak Meadow high school students. Connected at first only by their computers using Google Hangout, later by their poetic words and discourse, these courageous students, who were scattered all across the country, come together to share their love for the written word, to celebrate and critique each other's poems, and to muse on all things creative.

While the poetry produced has been impressive, it has been the great care in which each student has complimented or gently critiqued a fellow poet and the grace in which each student has embraced feedback, that has consistently astounded me as their teacher. To put it simply, together these students become living works of poetry themselves right before my eyes.

The group is normally made up of four to eight students, and we spend around 20 minutes workshopping each poem. Students are asked to paste a recent poem onto a shared Google doc, which we then all work on in real time as we read over and discuss the work. We use Google Hangout for audio and, for those who want it, video communication, while simultaneously working in the shared doc. Students who prefer written communication to audio or video can participate in the group using the comment or chat features of the Google Drive and Hangout platforms.

The best way to help a poet is to have someone in the group read the poem out loud first, followed by the poet themselves reading it out loud to the group. This helps the poet see how another person reads the line breaks and punctuation, which together assist in creating the sound—or voice—of a poem. When the poet reads their own poem it often sounds quite different than how the chosen reader does, and it provides great insight into any changes the poet might wish to make.

As shown in the workshopped lines below, the poetry produced by these students has been quite exquisite:

*Swept up in the water's dark embrace,
Tangled clouds of sunkissed hair framing a face
Pale and fresh as the morning –*

from *Ophelia* by Jamie Masthay, 11th grade

A poem is a work of art. Complex, inspired, molded over time, emotional, raw. Honesty lives inside a poem like a bloom dwells beneath the closed petals of early spring. The reader goes searching for it, for the heart of the poem, then often waits for it to find them. One single line might stir an emotional response in the reader that echoes throughout the entire poem and lingers long after the words end.

The tools of the poet are called *poetic craft*, and in the Oak Meadow elective poetry course, **Word: The Poet's Voice**, students learn how to use such tools in their own poems. In the poetry workshop, I ask students to consider various aspects of each poem during their celebration and critique of the poem, such as metaphors and cadence, the repetition of sounds, the title, even the final line.

*The feather was the bird's watch
ours was the stars, then the textbook on the shelf
symmetrical mold on the pages of Pyle's
wings from the sea. . .*

from *Feather Time* by Fianna Blythe, 2016 graduate

To work with a poem in a workshop setting, it is important to keep in mind the poet. I say this because for any artist to truly hear and take in critical feedback, one has to be gentle. In our workshops we first take turns praising the poem, talking about what we liked and what worked well, before moving on to exploring what needs strengthening and asking clarifying questions. Next, the poet is free to speak and share any background information that might make the poem more understandable. Most of the time it is this kind of data that a poem needs a little more of. A poem should not explain itself like a report, but at the same time if a reader gets confused or feels lost, then the poem might not achieve the poet's full objective.

*embraced by the murmur of the willow
we rest our weary souls. . .*

from *Empty* by Eve Eismann, 10th grade

As you can see from the selected lines from student poems so far, even two lines can be enough to impart a story, capture an emotion, take the reader on a memorable ride. This, to me, is the essence of poetry. The movement of words in a line on the page, the song-like quality, the repetitive sounds of words, how a line breaks, the image: all of this is the palette the poet dips her pen into as she writes.

The magic of poetry comes alive when, unlike a watercolor painting, for example, the poet can return to the poem and rearrange things, play with an image by deleting a word or adding one, sculpting a poem until it becomes the exact embodiment of what the poet thinks will best exemplify her vision.

*A breathing universe gone, and I?
My eyes bridged what I knew only in strides,
Hidden beneath decaying summer,
But now cleaved red in clay and heat*

from *What I Saw* by Emma Agudelo, 11th grade



Keeping in mind poetic craft as you read over a student's poem, or one written by your son or daughter, you will begin to see a poem for more than a collection of pretty (or raw or mysterious) lines. While many poems are about love, the purest and most accessible emotion a person might feel and often the easiest to first write, even in love poetry the complexities of expressing emotion can be found. Think of the intention of the writer. A novel has possibly hundreds of pages to create a mood that stays with the reader, as well as the setting the reader steps into. A poem often begins creating an impression in the reader with the first glance of its title. If you think about it, the titles of all types of books are often short pieces of poetry that inspire you to pick them up and flip through the pages. Poetry such as haiku attempts to leave the deepest impression in the reader using only a selected amount of words and lines. With haiku, the discipline of writing poetry has never been more precise and meditative.

*On dawn does stir
the light
off hills does light
fade*

from *Light's Return* by Blythe Wilde,
2016 graduate

When I went back to graduate school at Sarah Lawrence College to study poetry, I was initially surprised at the technical side of writing. I worried that I would understand the craft of poetry so much that I would no longer be moved by it, and the mystery of inspiration would elude me when I wrote. This has not been the case. In fact, now when I write I can feel the music of each line, and the experience feels much like a performance. I enjoy writing and reading in different ways than I once did.

Most of all, I respect the craft of poetry like never before, and, above all else, I admire poets for allowing poetry to be the medium they use to spin their magic on the page. As you will see in these final selections from our workshop, as well as those earlier, each of my wonderful poets has discovered this magic deep within themselves.

But oh, the flower.

*The purple flower.
A violet,
Deep and dark in a
Dead hand.
A bleeding heart.*

by Jamie Merrigan, 10th grade

*All those in the dark
Must grapple with the pain and impertinence
Of abuse
Directed toward their innocence*

from *Subjectification of Women* by Katherine Almquist, 10th grade

I invite you to create a poetry workshop at home if your child has an interest in writing poetry. If you know of others with a love for writing, use programs like Google Hangout or Skype to connect everyone together at the same time, regardless of physical distance. If you have a group of local students, you can meet in person in your living room, library, or park. Send out an email to students of the same age, or put up a flyer at the library. You only need a few people to get started, and more may join through word-of-mouth once the group gets going.

While we all might yearn to have our work published and end up on the shelves of readers around the world, it first takes inner confidence and a trust in our own unique way of expressing ourselves on the page. Having a poem celebrated and critiqued by a supportive group of budding poets tells a young writer that their work is meaningful, that they already have a willing audience, and that their poetic voice deserves to be read and listened to.



Art by Jamie Masthay

*Time withers us all, weathers us all;
Nothing is ever finite. Spring fades
Into summer-fall-winter and back again,
The moon eclipses the sun eclipses the moon.
Planets turn, serene and silent, in their orbits;
They gaze upon us, withholding judgement.*

excerpt from untitled poem by Jamie Masthay, 11th grade

Antony Yaeger was born in Altea, Spain and grew up on Bainbridge Island, WA. He studied poetry and creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College and is a Waldorf-trained teacher. Antony has published several collections of poetry and recently completed his first play, and now, his first novel, *Smoke Tastes Like Fire*. He lives in New York with his wife and twin sons, and has been an Oak Meadow humanities teacher for almost 10 years.

Empathy: The Hidden Advantage

by Michelle Murray



In today's world many societies celebrate individuality above all else. At every turn our children are bombarded with the idea that if they follow the rules of society and work hard enough, they will be entitled to getting everything they “deserve.” With this sense of entitlement comes the danger of becoming self-serving and discompassionate toward others, qualities that may hinder a child's capacity to become an effective team player or a future leader.

While we want our children to have a strong sense of self, we also want them to be caring and kind. Empathy, a trait that allows us to understand and relate to the feelings of another, is a characteristic that can be instilled and developed in our children through teachable habits. According to Michelle Borbe, author of *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*, empathy can lay the foundation for children to live one essential truth:

“We are all humans who share the same fears and concerns, and deserve to be treated with dignity” (13).

However, it is common for people to underestimate empathy as being “soft,” and parents may worry that empathy might prevent a child from being competitive in the academic or professional world. The truth is that empathy plays a surprising role in predicting our children's happiness and success (Borbe, 13). The ability to empathize may affect every facet of our children's future: wealth, happiness, relationships, tenacity, and resilience. Borbe states that it may also promote kindness, positive social behaviors, and the ability to have moral courage. In addition, it may prepare kids for globalization—as well as the job market—and be an effective way to resolve bullying, aggression and racism (14).

Why Teach Empathy?

Empathy should be an integral part of every child's education. While you might assume empathy is an innate quality, it is something that must be taught by parents and educators. Although our children are hardwired to care about others—social ties have always been important for survival—empathy, that ability to identify with the feelings of another, must be taught.

In this world of individualism and entitlement, empathy is the hidden advantage. In *Forbes*, Jason Boyer states “the ability to connect with and relate to others—empathy in its purest form—is the force that moves businesses forward” (“Why Empathy Is the Force That Moves Business Forward,” Mar 30, 2013). Although the assumption that business is cutthroat and competitive is widely accepted, attitudes about empathy are starting to change that. The newest trend suggests that for business leaders to be successful, they need to relate to the people they serve. This might mean seeing, hearing, and experiencing the activity around them and understanding that activity through the eyes of others. This lets us suspend our beliefs and open our minds to new ideas.

Sooner or later all successful people must rely on positive personal relationships that are most likely built on a foundation of empathy.

How to Teach Empathy

Given that empathy is an essential component to our children's education, development, and eventual success, how can we effectively support our children to develop this capacity?

When it comes to developing interpersonal skills, parental influences are by far the most important tool. In addition, children can benefit from seeing empathy and other effective social skills modeled by others outside the family.

Parents can join together with other families to explore and organize activities, workshops, and groups that focus on cultivating empathy. Working with other parents can inspire us to think about how to align our teaching methods to integrate lessons in empathy. Topics to consider include expanding our emotional vocabulary, improving

listening skills, and developing healthy relationships with peers, especially as face-to-face contact is eroding with the continued reliance on social media and the internet.

Parents may organize adult book clubs to read and discuss books such as *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered* by Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz; *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* by Jean M. Twenge; or Michelle Borbe's book, *UnSelfie*. Parents can also arrange book clubs for children to read and discuss books that nurture the development of empathy through fictional accounts of individuals facing immense challenges, such as *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio; *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate; or *The Family Under the Bridge* by Natalie Savage Carlson.

Another idea is to organize play groups to play games that develop empathy and emotional awareness. You can find many resources online, like this [empathy game from Moments A Day](#) (includes free printables). Players take turns drawing cards describing various scenarios, such as “his ice cream fell off his cone” and “she is waiting for her Grandma to arrive.” Players are asked to describe how a person in that situation might feel. The Teachers Guild has compiled a [set of activities](#) that work well for older children and groups, such as the empathy map by Claire Partlow. Divide a large piece of paper or chalkboard into four sections labeled: Think, Feel, Say, and Do. Each student writes down an emotion they have felt (Feel), and a thought that is often connected to that emotion (Think), and then note what they might say or do when feeling that way. By posting these think/feel/say/do notes, conversations can evolve about how we and others process feelings, bringing greater emotional awareness and sensitivity to the feelings of others.

It can be beneficial on multiple levels to bring together adolescent children to initiate a service project either locally or for a national organization such as Habitat for Humanity. Many more ideas can be found at the website Roots of Empathy, a group whose goals are to foster the development of empathy and emotional literacy, to promote prosocial behaviors, and to reduce levels of bullying. Look for a variety of ways to connect with others in the shared purpose of teaching empathy to children.

Helping our children develop greater empathy has the potential not only to enrich their lives, but also to enhance our families and our own personal relationships. The ripples from these small efforts can spread out into the community, the wider world, and beyond into the future

Resources:

[“Why Empathy Is the Force That Moves Business Forward”](#) (*Forbes*)

[Roots of Empathy](#)

UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World by Michelle Borbe (Touchstone 2016)

[30 of the Best Books to Teach Children Empathy](#) (Teach Thought)

[Books that Teach Empathy](#) (Common Sense Media)

[Empathy Game: A Tool to Teach Kids to Be Considerate](#) (Moments A Day)

[Empathy in Your Classroom](#) (Teachers Guild)

[13 Top Games That Teach Empathy](#) (Common Sense Education)

Michelle Murray has spent her life fascinated with relationships. She continues to learn important lessons daily and shares what she has learned through her writing, which reflects her deep commitment to self-discovery. Michelle has a BA in Psychology and lives in Alberta, Canada, where she is currently working in the social services industry, assisting people who are homeless and striving to overcome addiction. Michelle is married and is the parent of four children.



Earth Cycles: Growing Wishes



For many people, spring means planting gardens. This year, try planting something new: words! Children will be charmed when you help them plant seeds in the shape of their name or initials. Use fast-growing wheat berries, rye, or grass seed for quick results. For even faster results, buy blooming plants like marigolds, pansies, alyssum, and lobelia for an instant flowery message. In addition to initials and names, try simple words like LOVE, WELCOME, PEACE, and JOY. Shapes are fun, too. Plant a shape like a heart, flower, or star.

If you don't have garden or yard space, you can plant seeds in pots or window boxes in the shape of a single initial. For a more whimsical approach, prepare three pots of soil, and plant seeds in the shape of I in the first pot, a heart in the second, and U in the third. Arrange the pots so the message is clear: I ♥ U.

If you have more room, it can be fun for kids to plant large letters of the alphabet—their own initials or names are especially fun—use a different variety of plant for each letter. Imagine seeing your name in bloom! That's sure to put a smile on anyone's face.

Tips for success:

1. Clean an area large enough to have room for the shape to fill in and room around the shape to make it stand out.
2. If you have enough space, you can plant a border around the words or letters to draw more attention to it.
3. If possible, choose a spot for the planting where it can easily be seen from above. Planted pots or a rectangular window box can be placed where it can be seen from a balcony, window, or porch. You can also arrange plantings on a hillside that can be viewed from a distance; the further the viewing distance, the larger the letters or shapes need to be.
4. Use colorful plants to make the design stand out.
5. Keep the area around the planting weed-free to help highlight the newly emerging letters.
6. Trim plants periodically as they grow to keep them within the lines of the shape or letter. If you are planting grass seeds, children can use scissors to give them a "haircut" when they start to grow so tall the letters are hard to read.

Find more inspiration here:

[Alphabet Garden Theme: Creating an Alphabet Garden with Kids](#) by Nikki Tilley
[Writing with Bedding Plants: Tips on Forming Pictures or Words with Plants](#)



Encouraging Self-Directed Learning, One Spoonful at a Time

by Hillary Harshman

What is the goal of education? As Socrates is quoted, “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” Students who are shown how to learn can teach themselves almost anything. Learning feeds the mind and spirit. Just as babies have to learn how to feed their bodies, students have to learn how to feed their minds.

I first experienced taking on responsibility for my own learning while being homeschooled in the elementary grades. My mom created a unit of study that included reading and writing assignments, but left the choice of topic to me. Snails were my top choice. How excited I was to begin my snail research! I read several books, explored snail terrain in my own backyard, collected specimens, and created habitats while turning in small reports, questionnaires, and an outline over the weeks leading up to my final snail report.

Near the end of the project, I found myself procrastinating on my final essay. Sticking to deadlines was another element of self-directed learning I needed to take responsibility for. It was harder than I expected, but yielded a new level of self-knowledge. Projects like these were baby steps toward taking ownership of my education.

After homeschooling for years, I decided to test out the college waters by taking an introductory computer class at a local community college during the summer before my high school sophomore year. In this group setting, I was coached to develop my research skills and seek out answers for myself, which helped me become more independent in my learning. Solid research skills are essential in the quest for knowledge. If your students already go to the internet or library to find answers to their questions, congratulations! They are taking responsibility for their own learning and discovering how to find what they need. This lifelong skill—and thrill—of discovery carries over into future jobs, relationships, and life changes.

As Sal Khan writes in *The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined*,

The crucial task of education is to teach kids how to learn. To lead them to want to learn. To nurture curiosity, to encourage wonder, and to instill confidence so that later on they'll have the tools for finding answers to the many questions we don't yet know how to ask.

Self-directed learning seems logical to practice alone. While studying alone is beneficial, practicing independent learning skills in a group can be a catalyst for growth. Group leaders (parents or teachers) help students enjoy learning and give them the tools to continue learning

on their own. Group members (peers) encourage each other to reinforce study habits and absorb new information. A study group, or even a study buddy, can provide consistency for a fledgling student.

Practicing the skills needed for independent learning can be encouraged any time, any where. In my own life, my parents and sister would listen to me describe a question when I was stumped. If they knew the answer, they would explain how they got there, modeling a logical train of thought or how to connect different facets of knowledge. If they didn't know the answer, they would act as a sounding board, letting me talk out the problem. It was amazing how many times speaking the problem out loud led to the solution! While I was directing my study, having the family equivalent of a study group created an environment that allowed deeper and more continuous growth.

Students benefit from being in charge of their own learning. By learning new ways to research and study, practicing these skills with the support of a group, and then finding ways to apply these skills in new situations, students are growing in both knowledge and life skills.

Students shouldn't have to wait for the teacher to hand them each spoonful of knowledge. With self-directed learning, the teacher shows students how to find—and use—their own spoon.

Hillary Harshman is the author of [College Without the Campus: Earn Your Degree While Saving Time & Money](#). She enjoys adventuring in and around her hometown of Walla Walla, Washington. Contact her via hillary@hillaryharshman.com.

Hit the Road: Making the Most of a Road Trip with the Kids

by Keeba Smith



I take my kids on a lot of road trips, and people are always asking what they need to do so they can plan one. This is a guide that I hope will help you plan and have a phenomenal family vacation.

1. Pre-plan

When taking your kids on a road trip, pick at least two places you would like to go. If you have smaller children, keep in mind you will make more frequent stops so pick something that is less than five hours away. The most common vacations are beach destinations or theme parks.

2. Research

After you have narrowed down your destinations to two locations, research each place to find family-friendly things to do. Look for zoos, aquariums, tour excursions, entertainment shows, museums, or anything that will be fun for the whole family.

3. Budget

Think about what you can afford to spend. That will help determine where you stay, the activities you do, and how long you will stay. A word to the wise: Prepay for as many things as you can. If you are buying theme park tickets or any other tickets, prepay so that it will not take away from your spending money when you are there.

4. Choose your hotel

Try to choose a nice hotel with at least a continental breakfast, which will save you some money. Kids love water so, if possible, pick a hotel with a pool or beach access. Find one in a decent neighborhood and read the reviews from several different sites so you aren't in for any unpleasant surprises. Many families are turning to airbnb to find affordable, homey places to stay.

5. Plan your pit stops

Remember to plan for surviving on the road. With school-age children, plan to stop every two hours. For safety reasons, stop at well-lit, popular travel centers like Pilot or Flying J. Go to their websites and see their locations, or download an app called Truckers Path. It lets you know what truck stops are near your exact location.

6. Pack a suitcase for each person

If possible, pack each child's belongings in their own rolling suitcase. Kids feel proud when they are able to roll their own luggage into a hotel (and it will make your life easier). Be sure to pack swimsuits because you never know when you may stumble upon a beach or a water-park in a neighboring town. Let kids help pack their own suitcases so they know where things are, and keep the jammies and toothbrush on top for easy access at the end of a long travel day.

7. Pack the car

Keeping your children entertained during a long drive will keep you sane. Some parents use entertainment devices such as an iPad or a portable DVD system, while others revel in the traditional car games like "I'm Going on a Trip" or counting license plates from different states. Audio books are another great way to keep everyone peaceful and occupied in the car. Pack customized bags of toys, coloring books, lap games, and books to keep each child happy. Even though you will stop every two hours, pack non-messy snacks and juices.

8. Plan your departure time

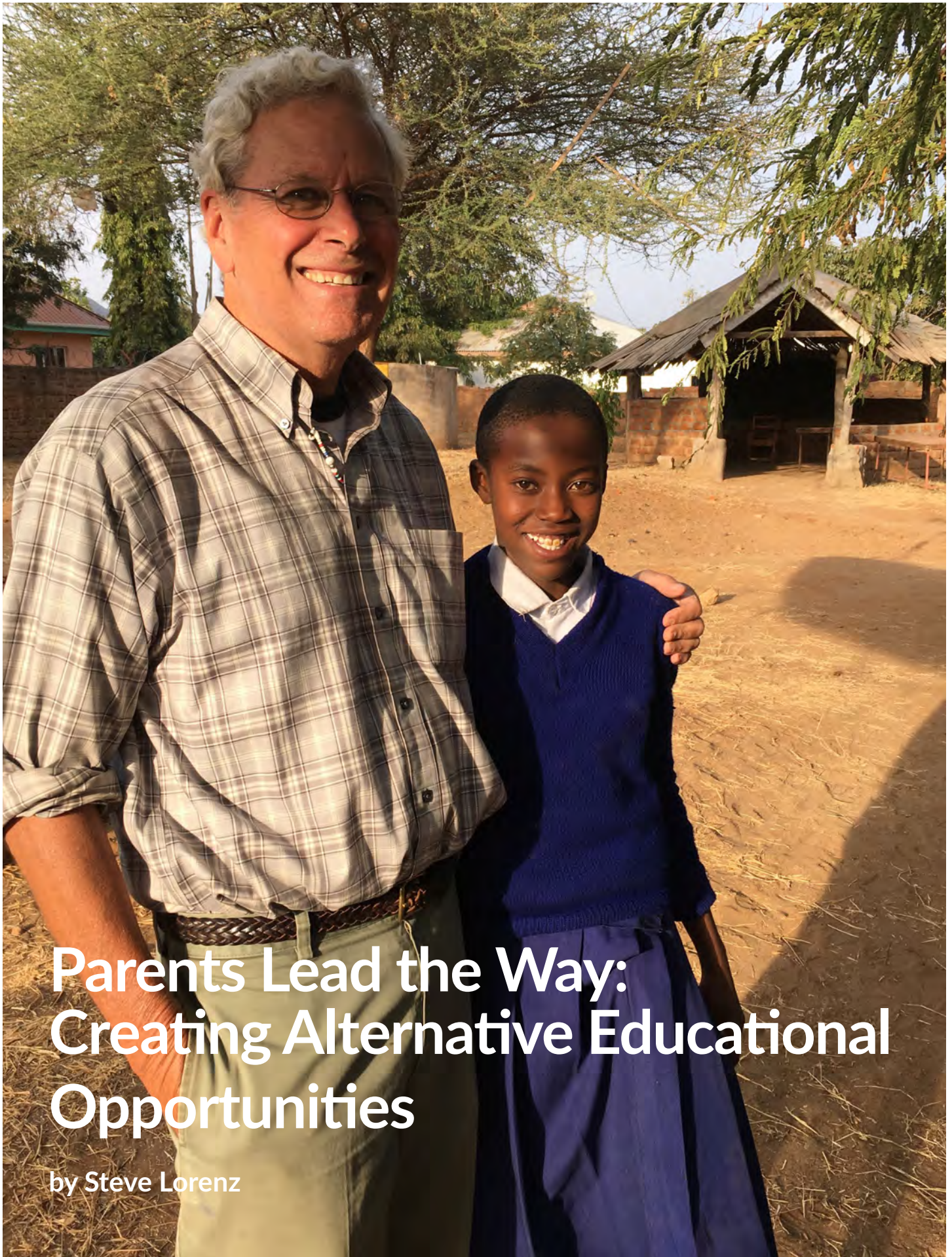
Give some thought to the best time to leave on your trip. Try to leave at a time when your kids will sleep through the majority of the car ride. Leave either early in the morning or late at night. It will delay that inevitable question, "Are we there yet?"

9. Enjoy your trip!

A vacation is a time to unwind and enjoy spending time with your family. A road trip is a great way to bond and just be together in a new place, sharing a new adventure. Make sure you experience moments of gratitude: look in the rearview mirror at your children and say, "I am truly blessed."

Now you are ready to plan and enjoy an awesome and fun-filled family vacation. Get out there and make the most of a road trip with the kids.

Keeba Smith holds a Master's degree in Elementary Education and is a certified teacher for the State of Mississippi. She is the author of Trust God! From a Mother's Grief to Affirming Faith: How God Gives Us Twice as Much, which talks about how she grieved the death of her child by relying on her faith. She works as the Lead Classroom Facilitator for STEM Discoveries, LLC, which helps teach STEM to local area kids. Keeba resides in Ellisville, MS, with her husband Myron and their three children. The whole family loves traveling, seeing new sights, and all things science.



Parents Lead the Way: Creating Alternative Educational Opportunities

by Steve Lorenz

In the 1980s my wife and I homeschooled our children for their elementary school years. Living in rural southern Vermont, we thought we were parent pioneers as we guided our children's education. We were fortunate to find another family who wanted to homeschool and "shazam!" we had our own little parent-led homeschool cooperative.

Thirty plus years later, as the school liaison for Oak Meadow, I receive many inquiries from parents about their plans for alternative educational learning models and how they might use Oak Meadow curriculum to support their hopes and dreams. I feel fortunate to be in a position to help parents as they seek to create dynamic learning opportunities through homeschool cooperatives, community education centers, maker spaces, resource centers, independent and self-directed learning centers, microschools, enrichment centers, entrepreneurial incubator spaces, international schools, schools without walls, and more.

In my opinion, there's never been a more exciting time in education, and the best part is that parents are leading the way in this quest to create meaningful learning opportunities that are independent of traditional public schools. Their efforts are spreading positive change into the public and private sector of education all around the United States. Many of these new educational pathways are being developed and led by homeschool parents who operate with the support of regional and statewide homeschool associations.

Current trends in education are evolving rapidly in order to accommodate students who are homeschooling or finding that traditional school choices are not the right fit for them. Many students flourish when they have the freedom to learn independently and craft their own education, participating in educational settings that promote creativity, self-direction, advanced learning, and entrepreneurship.

Here are just a few examples of the great things that are happening in organizations and schools I've had the pleasure of visiting. Because Oak Meadow curriculum is designed specifically to support independent learners, many of these organizations offer Oak Meadow as a curriculum option for their students and families



Voyagers Homeschool Cooperative

Voyagers Homeschool Cooperative in North Chelmsford, MA, was founded 20 years ago by a parent. The initial goal of this parent-led cooperative was to support advanced (gifted) learners who were not being served by local schools. The parent cooperative has grown and now offers opportunities for unstructured social time and small-group learning around themes such as music and theater appreciation, chemistry, Latin, world religions, American Sign Language, and data analytics. Their independent learning center features a drop-off program for teens, where they are supervised and guided in their independent learning by other parents and community members. Voyagers also has a resource center open to the homeschooling public that includes resources and programs in mock trial, national exams, and more.



Workspace Education

Workspace Education opened in Bethel, CT, in 2017, spurred by the dream and creativity of a parent. Parents, many of whom homeschool, join their children at the Workspace facilities as the students take classes from parent volunteers and paid instructors. Their mission revolves around innovation, real-world mastery, and community. Exciting projects in this coworking, entrepreneurial space integrate disciplines within the context of collaboration to bring the foundational literacies to life and to lock in acquired skills in meaningful ways. Workspace offers the freedom to explore and design an educational program that will bring out the best in each child.

students from the area. The school combines Oak Meadow curriculum and Islamic studies with the goal of guiding children to think, create, and develop, rather than to simply memorize and conform. Mezan School views education as a dialogue between student and teacher.

The **MELOC Academy** in Longido, Tanzania, founded by remarkable young Maasai parents, welcomed its first pre-K and kindergarten students in January 2018. The school, which uses Oak Meadow curriculum to support the academic program, will break away from traditional government and



MELOC Academy

private secular school models to offer a very unique alternative educational opportunity for all students regardless of learning or physical challenges. The school serves Maasai families and plans to add a grade every year.

Urban Homeschoolers, a community-based learning center in Los Angeles, CA, was founded by two homeschool parents who were looking for engaging classes that challenged their own children to think for themselves and allowed them to progress at their own pace. Classes are taught by experts in their field and rotate according to student interests. Recent classes include mock trial, medieval manners and games, sewing lab, social action, wood-working, and entrepreneurship and personal finance. Urban Homeschoolers serves a wide-ranging community of families who have decided to take education into their own hands.



Mezan International School

The **Mezan International School** in Kabul, Afghanistan, was founded by an Afghan who is an Oak Meadow parent. The principal, the teachers, and other paid staff are all parents with children at the school, which also enrolls other



Urban Homeschoolers

The exciting work these organizations are doing gives you a sense of the many possibilities for parent-initiated and parent-led learning. What new pathways to alternative education are you creating? What is your ideal vision for your children's education? I encourage you to share your story, hopes, and dreams—I'd love to hear from you. Together, we can continue to expand the opportunities for children everywhere.

Brattleboro School Without Walls, located in Brattleboro, VT, and housed in the Oak Meadow offices, was founded by an Oak Meadow parent who wanted to create a model of community learning that allowed high school students to follow their passions while getting onsite teacher support and opportunities for peer collaboration. Partnering with community businesses such as a local TV station, music center, photography studio, and schools of dance, theater arts, and circus arts, students earn credit from a variety of studies and experiences. This hybrid educational model encourages self-direction while providing academic structure and support.

Steve Lorenz is the interim executive director and school liaison for Oak Meadow Independent Learning. As school liaison, Steve has had the opportunity to travel to conferences and to various educational programs nationally and internationally. He can be reached at slorenz@oakmeadow.com.



Brattleboro School Without Walls

Curriculum Spotlight: Foundations in Social Justice



Oak Meadow created **Foundations in Social Justice** to help parents and teachers bring elements of social justice into their families, communities, and classrooms. Here is one activity you'll find in this practical, essential course.

Activity: Community Forest

Most of you have probably heard of a family tree. In this project, you will create a forest to represent the backgrounds of the members of your community. These can be family members, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, or new people you have met. Consider interviewing members of your neighborhood, friends of friends, senior citizens, or your teachers and coaches about their backgrounds.

Family trees focus largely on names and show those related to a single individual, but the trees in your community forest will include many unrelated people and their geographic origins as well. For instance, if your neighbor was born in Albany, New York, you might write "Patricia: Albany, New York" on one tree. If her grandfather moved here from India, you might add his name and place of origin to her tree: "Kartik, Delhi, India." Sometimes people do not know the names of all their relatives but they know where their ancestors originated; sometimes they know the names of relatives but not places of origin. Your forest can include whatever information you have.

When you have collected information for ten or more trees, find or make a world map and mark all of the places that your community is tied to via the ancestors found in your forest. You might be surprised to see how far your forest spreads!

You can make your community forest as beautiful and elaborate as you like. If there is a public space to display your project, other community members might enjoy seeing it and even adding to it.



Please meet Oak Meadow's Interim Executive Director

We're pleased to announce the appointment of Steve Lorenz as interim executive director of Oak Meadow. Steve has worked at Oak Meadow as school liaison since 2015. In that role, he has cultivated educational relationships with public, independent, and charter schools around the U.S. and abroad. Notably, he has assisted with program development at the Mezan International School in Kabul, Afghanistan, a school that uses Oak Meadow curriculum combined with Islamic studies for students in K-8; and at the MELOC Academy in Longido, Tanzania, a school that offers an alternative educational program for Maasai families with young children. Steve was a homeschool parent and the former head of The Grammar School in Putney, VT. He has been involved with independent and public educational institutions, for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, and community service projects in Vermont for over 30 years. Don't miss his article in this issue of *Living Education*!



Oak Meadow blog, [In the Meadow](#), grows!

With In the Meadow's fresh new design comes several new voices. Joining OM teachers and bloggers Leslie Daniels (K-4), Lesley Arnold (5-8), and Naomi Washer (high school), Oak Meadow welcomes homeschooling parent and craft blogger Veronica Dantzler, who will share original, recycled- and nature-based crafts; and Oak Meadow's own social media specialist, Natalie Wise, who will contribute fun lifestyle tips. We expect to welcome a parenting blogger in the coming months. Subscribe now and don't miss a post!



Veronica Dantzler



Natalie Wise



Spring Garland

By Veronica Dantzer

Oh, the endless possibilities of a simple little cardboard tube! My children have made sculptures, cityscapes, wreaths, and their own toy figurines by simply drawing on them with markers. I've made educational activities out of them as well: color sorting tubes, lacing tubes, scissor practice tubes. The possibilities are endless!

Materials

1. Empty cardboard toilet paper rolls
2. Paint (I use washable tempera paints. They have never stained and the color is vibrant.)
3. Paint brushes
4. Scissors
5. Glue
6. Yarn or ribbon for stringing
7. A stick (if making a wall hanging instead of a garland)

Steps

1. Gather materials



2. Paint tubes your desired color. We went with pastel colors. We talked about how adding white to colors makes them lighter and had a great discussion on color mixing. It takes less than an hour to fully dry. I broke this activity into two parts because of the painting step. I love when we can break our art projects into steps because it is less overwhelming for everyone. My children are younger so painting the tubes for them was fun just by itself.



3. Once dry, flatten (or smash, as my children say) the tubes so they lose their round shape.



4. Once flattened cut with scissors into desired width. We usually get four to five pieces out of one roll.



5. Now that you have a whole bunch of pieces start playing with shapes. Experiment, explore, move things around; it's a great little transient art experience. We made ours into different sized flowers and butterflies. We make flowers with five petals as well as flowers with six petals plus some leaves. We discussed how we could divide them up and how many flowers we could make with the pieces we had. Once you have a shape you like, start gluing. Don't be too shy with glue; a good nickel-sized squeeze will work. Make sure to do this step in a place where you can leave the flowers/butterflies to dry because once you have them together you won't want to move them until they are dry. Once you have your flowers and your butterflies glued together to your liking, let them dry overnight.



6. (optional step) We added circles cut out from cereal boxes for the center of the flowers and made antennas for the butterflies with slivers from the cereal boxes. Before tossing our cereal boxes into the recycling, I usually cut them up and save them in a pile. The cardboard boxes are thin enough to cut easily. We use them for all sorts of art projects, a great alternative to paper.



7. (alternative for small children) If you have little bitties, a good alternative would be to pre-make the flowers and/or butterflies and have them simply paint them. I did this for my youngest and she really enjoyed painting them on her own.



8. Now that your flowers are put together and dry, you can either thread them together with yarn or ribbon, or you can tie them to a stick. I chose to tie them to the yarn because they lay flat better and it was easier for me to distance them equally. After we tied all our pieces to the ribbon, I had the idea that it would be beautiful to tie the pieces and hang them from a stick...maybe next time! I didn't have the heart to disassemble what we had created.

A wonderful addition to this activity would be to pair it with a book, or a poem about spring, or to learn a new spring song. We had fun working together on this project and we hope you do as well. One of my favorite parts about doing these activities is showing my children that you can creatively reuse things and make them beautiful! All you need is a little imagination and a bit of creativity to make something new again.

You can find more creative ideas from Veronica Dantzler by [following her on Instagram](#).

“It is spring again. The earth is like a child that knows poems by heart.”

— Rainer Maria Rilke

