

Living Education



**Oak
Meadow**

YOUR TRUSTED PARTNER IN
JOYFUL LEARNING

Freedom: Giving our Kids the World

In this issue:

10 Ways to Free Your Mind, Heart, and Schedule
Menu Choice Assessments
Global Travel and Cultural Immersion



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Welcome to our spring issue of *Living Education*!

One of the greatest things about homeschooling is having the freedom to learn the way that works best for your family. Often this learning doesn't take place inside the home. Homeschoolers can use the world to learn. In fact, one of the hardest parts about homeschooling can be staying home—there's just so much to do!

Families relish their independence but can easily get overwhelmed by the dizzying array of opportunities: travel, mentoring and internships, homeschooling groups, community service, interest groups and activities, and more. While you are having all that fun, how can you make room for the academic skills and content that are integral to your child's education?

This issue looks at how to take your homeschooling out into the world and still get stuff done. You'll find tips about travel, nature explorations, and cultural experiences as well as ideas for finding new avenues of assessment and recognizing how your children's needs change over time. We hope you find some inspiration for finding a new freedom in your home learning.

Happy reading!

DeeDee Hughes
Editor, *Living Education*

Schooling Seasons

by Lindsay Banton

When my girls were first beginning school lessons, our family moved to New England. We left a town in the south that had only two main clusters of homeschoolers at the time and entered a land of homeschooling goldmines. It felt like we met homeschoolers everywhere we went, which helped us make friends fairly quickly. Soon, however, I realized that there were so many activities to choose from that I needed to start being a little more selective. Due to the high number of co-ops, classes, teams, volunteer opportunities, and community groups, we could potentially fill every day of our week and never have a chance to sit at the school table to complete our bookwork.

With a bit of gusto and naiveté, I banded together with a few friends and formed our own little co-op that fit our needs and schedules. This group helped us establish a weekly rhythm, and forced us to leave the house in the coldest winter months when we would normally have just hidden away. We quickly became a well-known group; we collected more families and disseminated information to the homeschooling community at large.

Our academic needs were met at home, and our social needs were met at co-op. Now we needed something to challenge us physically, so we added swim lessons. It seemed, though, that once that gate was opened, opportunities were everywhere! Community choir, piano lessons, art classes, indoor parks offering play time, and coding classes.

Where do you draw the line?

How do we navigate academics, juggle calendars, and distill all sorts of great opportunities down to a manageable list? How do we hold the knowledge of who our kids are and what they need, while sifting through all the offerings?

After a few years of directing our elementary level co-op, I realized that the time away from our school table was not worth the benefits. My dear friend noticed my frenzy and challenged me to say “no” to something homeschool related. I considered saying no to several other things before I realized that it was the co-op that had to go. I reluctantly took her advice and thought long and hard about how much time was given to this group. The co-op was simply not meeting the needs for my family any longer, and many of the members had either moved away or shifted their educational plans. We disbanded the co-op on friendly terms.





Tips for Keeping Things in Balance

For the first time, my kids and I enjoyed spending as much time doing things at home as we wanted. We did the essentials for awhile, then—as we felt ready—we slowly added what we truly wanted to do with our time. Our typical week was filled with a manageable routine of library visits, church groups, planned friend time, and our own interest-led field trips. This was a lovely season.

However, as any parent knows, children are constantly changing and growing, and we need to be flexible enough to make adjustments along the way.

As I gauge the interests, necessary academic subjects, and needs of my kids in the upcoming season of their educational careers, I am wide-eyed and alert to maintaining a healthy balance. Just as the seasons shift around us and our kids change—almost daily—I must stay aware of what we need to add or take away from our schedules. Here are some tips that I've found helpful.

Define success

Warren Buffett is quoted as saying, “the difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything.” What does “success” mean for your homeschooling? Success in our homeschool is not to have kids who are academic superheroes, but to have kids who grow up to be extraordinary learners, kind people, and confident of who they are. I want to give my kids the incredible gift of learning at their own pace without the stress of others peering over their shoulder all the time. I will feel successful if my kids are prepared for lifelong learning. Obtaining this level of success requires me to be very protective of our time.

Know before you go

Knowing my goals for homeschooling before scanning the horizon for potential activities is the key for me. Once I have this plan in place, saying yes or no is much easier. However, each decision to join a club, class, or co-op must still be filtered through a few important questions. Does this event add value to our school time? Are we actually learning something here? Does the time spent add value to someone else (volunteering, serving others, etc.)? Are we being exposed to new topics or stretched in a way that increases our desire to learn more about this topic? Will it project us onto another path of valuable learning? And the final important factor: can we afford it?

Expect change

Keep your eye out for when things need to change. With the cautious eye of experience (and determination not to overwhelm our calendar again), I see the need to slowly add back one or two specific activities since my kids are now in the middle grades. I want them to explore areas of interest and to experience things that aren't currently on their radar. We talked about what they would enjoy learning that we aren't currently studying. Our brainstorming session developed a list that includes gymnastics, basketball, coding classes, 3-D art or architecture, and pattern drafting.

There are so many great courses of action for homeschoolers. Options abound for all sorts of curriculum, extra curricular activities, volunteering, variations in scheduling (gap years, block scheduling, year-round schooling), methodologies, and sequences of learning. Homeschooling truly allows us to tailor the learning to each child while meeting our family's parameters for time, goals, and budget. Yet, it is so easy to get overwhelmed. My job is to select the very best for my kids at this current stage. As they age, it is fun to include them in the decision-making process. I am so thankful my friend challenged me to keep saying “no.” My children's education depends on it, after all. 🌱

Lindsay Banton 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.

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Journaling Nature

by Ruth O'Neil

There are many wonderful things to see outdoors in nature. Exploring nature with our children is one way to break up the monotony of a school day or have a family excursion on the weekend. It gets kids outside and encourages them to learn. Each child will notice different things that they can later share with others in an informal conversation, a report, a presentation, artwork, poetry, or another creative or academic way. Getting out and getting to know nature can reinforce what you're already teaching in science class.

One way we can keep and treasure natural things is by keeping a nature journal. Nature journals are easy to make and you can add to them whenever you want.



How to Make a Nature Journal

Materials

Plain white paper
Cardstock
Cardboard
Glue
Wrapping paper, scrapbooking paper, or fabric
Hole punch
Ribbon, string, or leather for lacing
Scissors

Instructions

1. Cut two pieces of heavy cardboard to measure 9"x 6."
2. Cover the cardboard by gluing wrapping paper, scrapbooking paper, or fabric on them neatly. Make sure to remove all wrinkles and bubbles (a rolling pin works well for this).
3. Cut several of the plain white pieces of paper in half. It is a good idea to use both regular paper and cardstock to fill your journal. Regular paper is perfect when you want to do rubbings, and cardstock works best when you want to glue or attach something to the page.
4. Punch two holes, 1.5 inches from either end on the 9" side, in both pieces of cardboard and the paper. Make sure the holes all line up.
5. Tie a ribbon or string through the holes to hold the journal together. Leather lacing is perfect for this if you can find it. The leather holds up when tying and retying as you want to add more pages.



What goes in a nature journal? Anything and everything! Have your children observe nature, thinking about what they see, smell, and touch – as long as it isn't poison ivy! When observing plants, it's fun to watch as they change throughout the seasons. In their journal, children can label plants with the scientific names alongside the everyday names.

Allow them to **collect objects from nature** they find interesting. They can make etchings of different leaves or types of bark by placing them behind a journal page and rubbing lightly with a crayon or the side of a pencil point. If an object is too big for etching, have the children draw a picture or take a picture of it, then print and mount it on one of the cardstock pages. Take photos or sketch objects that can't be picked up, such as an interesting tree or rock formation. Don't forget to have children label etchings, photos, and drawings describing what they are, and where and when they were found.

If there is something you aren't sure how to preserve on the pages of the nature journal, you can always put it in a plastic sandwich bag and staple the bag to one of the pages (this is great for dead bugs!).

When going someplace new, encourage the children to **draw a map of the area** to include in their journal. Often you can find maps of hiking and nature trails at your local Chamber of Commerce or Visitor's Center; these maps can be included in the nature journal, along with notes or markings showing areas that have been explored.

When hiking along marked trails, keep an eye out for **historical or nature markers**. These often give all kinds of information relevant to the locality, such as wildlife, types of rocks or trees, and bits of history. These can be photographed to add to the journals, allowing children to keep the information without having to write it all down while they are hiking and exploring.

Examine different habitats. What kinds of animals live in lakes? See how many the children can find and record. What types of animals live in rivers, forests, or swamps? Make a point to find new places to explore: mudflats, caves, tidepools, deserts, meadows . . . you might be surprised how many different habitats are within a short distance of your home.

Take guidebooks with you when you go hiking or exploring. You'll often find a good selection in your library for trees, wildflowers, birds, etc. These provide a lot of information about the things your children are adding to their nature journals.

Nature journals are very personal to each child. Allow their creativity to flow and add what they choose. Do you have a creative writer on your hands? Ask that child to write a poem or a short story about what was seen and heard and felt while experiencing nature. Other children might want to include sketches of close-up details of a feather or tree bark, or charts for data collection (for instance, showing how many of each type of animal was seen).

Add to these nature journals whenever you go someplace new or see new things. Have your children make one for each season of the year or for each destination you go, be it vacationing at the beach, camping in the woods, or hiking in the mountains. Nature journals are fun to make and fun to look back on months or years later. Best of all, keeping a nature journal can help your children develop an appreciation for nature that will last a lifetime. 🌿

Ruth O'Neil is a veteran homeschool mom who has been a freelance writer for more than 20 years, publishing hundreds of articles in dozens of publications as well as a few books. When she's not writing, she spends her spare time quilting, reading, scrapbooking, camping, and hiking with the family. Her newest series of devotionals is based on classic literature.

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Earth Cycles



Magical Moss Garden

Spring brings so many lovely surprises on every nature walk. If you have a rainy season where you live, you'll probably find moss sprouting on every surface. Look closely and you'll be amazed at how many different types of moss there are. It is easy to gently pry moss from its perch on a log, tree trunk, or sidewalk, and use it to create a magical moss garden to enjoy indoors. Here are a few simple directions that you can do with your children. This is just a starting point—let your imagination go!

Instructions

1. Find a shallow waterproof dish, shell, stone, or container to hold your moss garden. You can also use a glass dish or lantern.
2. Go on a nature walk to collect different types of moss. Try to keep the underside of the plant intact when you collect it.
3. Collect other small objects that you'd like in your moss garden: an unusual piece of wood, a shell, a tiny fern plant or other seedling (with its roots), or pretty stones. You might also like to include small ceramic figurines or crystals in your magical garden.
4. Carefully place the bits of moss in your container. You might have to tear or cut some to make them fit. Press them into place firmly.
5. Add any little seedlings or plants you've collected. Tuck their roots firmly between two pieces of moss or make a small hole in the middle of the moss for the roots.
6. Place the remaining objects in your garden. You can add, move, or change objects over the coming days and weeks.
7. Use a spray bottle to mist your moss garden each day to keep it moist (small children love this job!). Your moss garden will be happiest if it is placed somewhere out of direct sunlight.





10 Ways to Free Your Mind, Heart, and Schedule

by Leah Massey

One of the most appealing aspects of homeschooling is freedom. But that freedom is a two-edged sword. On one hand, we have the opportunity to create learning experiences and memories for our children that they'll treasure for life. On the other, if we don't exercise that freedom mindfully, our family might end up frazzled or overwhelmed.

Whether you're a parent who has the tendency to gorge on life by over-scheduling or someone who finds themselves stuck in a rut paralyzed by the array of possibilities, balance can be tough to find. The good news is that if we approach our homeschool years with the idea of curating our family's learning adventures with love and care, the whole family will end up with a precious collection of ideas and memories.

Here are 10 ways to free your mind, heart, and schedule so you can maximize the value of your family's homeschool years.



1. Focus on your family—not just your kids.

One way to improve our enjoyment of freedom throughout our school years is to keep focused on our family unit as we decide what to include in our children's lives. It is important to weigh how each individual activity affects the overall family dynamic. How we do this affects our ability to make wise choices for our family.

Ask yourself: Will the drive time to and from dance classes add too much stress to your evenings? Are those Saturday morning soccer games going to end up being more irritation than fun? Do individual activities even make sense for your family in this particular season of life? Might it be better to choose activities the family can do together?

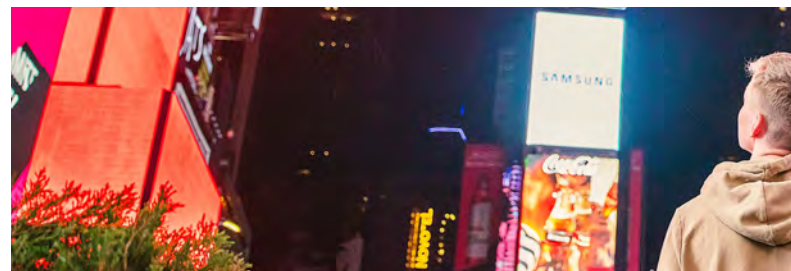
If you're worried that you'll deprive your kids by deciding against activities, please don't be. Your kids need you, not activities. By ensuring that your learning choices respect the interests and energy of all in the family, everyone will feel more joy overall. Plus, when we choose activities that the family can do together, our joint interests and common purpose mean we're creating shared memories that make any lessons learned more powerful in the long run.

2. Eliminate activities.

Being picky about what we add to our children's education helps them—and us—focus fully on the benefits we get from the interests we do pursue. Our freedom as homeschoolers is made more beautiful by creating meaningful limits.

This is the process of curation. To curate means to carefully and deliberately select items from a collection. It is just as much about what is left out as what is included. A sense of restraint heightens the enjoyment of each individual piece. The same can be said for your homeschool pursuits.

Eliminate. Curate. Appreciate.





3. Ditch the daily schedule.

We often create walls in our minds simply by being excessively organized. We frequently aspire to rigidly scheduling each month, week, and day of our school year. But should we? Why not try planning in broader segments? This will free your mind to truly enjoy your learning in a more spontaneous and organic way.

Having a comprehensive list of what you want to cover during your school year is a great way to start. Next, narrow it down to what you want to accomplish by quarter or month. Remove the stress and self-inflicted urgency of daily or weekly deadlines. Instead, enjoy the freedom of letting your family's learning flow naturally from subject to subject. Record what everyone in the family accomplished at the end of each day, along with a quick weekly recap, to create a thorough record. You'll find that your material is getting covered without needless daily worry.

4. Listen to your kids.

Homeschooling allows us to claim the freedom to guide our children's ideas and personalities. Even better, we can let them exercise some authority over their own learning. This will create young adults who know how to make decisions and take responsibility in their lives. But doing this demands that we take the focus off our own ideas and truly listen to what our kids are interested in.

Listening carefully to your kids and being humble enough to change your approach when appropriate frees them to pursue the ideas that are important to them and allows them to feel a sense of autonomy. If you ask your children—frequently—what they're interested in, what's frustrating them, or what would make them happy, you can tailor their learning experiences to who they are in that very moment. Active listening creates a custom education, one of the biggest benefits of homeschooling.

5. Embrace nature.

As homeschool families, we've opted out of the public school model. If you've taken your kids out of the classroom, use that freedom to the fullest and get them into nature. Spending time in nature benefits both adults and children physically, mentally, and emotionally.

There's absolutely no reason your kids can't learn outdoors. It can be as simple as a short walk in your neighborhood noticing the trees on your street. Try doing reading assignments on a blanket at the park or beach. Take advantage of the freedom you have as homeschoolers and embrace nature in your school days. You'll create well-balanced children who turn to nature for comfort in times of stress.

6. Get out in the community.

It's amazing how much of your homeschooling can happen in places other than home. Taking schooling into the community makes effective use of your time. Plus, you give your kids real-life experience in the practical side of life by actively involving them in family business. This increases your children's confidence that they can work independently for the well-being of the whole family.

Here are a few ideas to get your imagination going:

- Let your kids handle family business at the post office, library, or market. Seemingly simple tasks give kids a great sense of accomplishment and a taste of independence.
- Set up appointments for your children to interview local business people, farmers, or municipal employees. They'll practice proper social skills while learning how each individual works for the welfare of the whole community.
- Sign up to do volunteer work together as a family. Highlight your family values and strengthen your children's work ethic while spending quality time together as a family.

These activities hone your kids' social skills in a meaningful way. They also highlight your children's place in the world in an easily identifiable way. Plus, your community will have a chance to see how homeschoolers productively use their freedom.





7. Try something new.

Freeing our learning starts from within. Opening our minds in even small ways can have a huge impact on the joy and growth in our homeschool. Set a goal for each family member to try at least one new thing each week. With each new venture, your family will gain confidence. That confidence will inspire each of you to approach life's challenges with positivity. It's okay to start small. Here are a few ideas you can try:

- **Eat something you've never tried before.** As you taste each item, focus on each new flavor and texture. How do they make you feel?
- **Listen to a new genre of music.** How is this different from what you typically listen to? What do you appreciate about the difference?
- **Sign up for *Letters From Afar*.** Bring a bit of geography and art into your home with this inexpensive snail mail subscription. Use these letters as motivation to explore more about each new location and culture.
- **Learn a new physical skill.** Learn how to throw a baseball, do a cartwheel, or salsa dance. You're never too young or old to use your body in a new and exciting way.

Anything new will do, just give it a whirl. You never know what will spark a flame of interest in yourself or your kids. After a couple of good experiences trying something new, even reluctant children will feel freer to explore the world around them.

8. Revitalize field trips.

Field trips are important activities for homeschoolers, but it's easy to get into a rut. Library. Zoo. Museum. Lather. Rinse. Repeat. But it can be easy to breathe new life into our field trips if we just think outside the box. Look for new opportunities. Or, put a new slant on family favorites.

Have you looked for local historical markers? They can provide a year's worth of learning excursions. Some historical markers are worth a special trip, offering a full day of exploration. Others are close to home and present a perfect 15-minute educational stop in the middle of your day.

Try incorporating a field trip when you run errands. Do you know how all the machines at your dry cleaner work? I bet they'd let you visit and tell the kids all about it if you set up an appointment. Ours did.

For an old favorite, try exploring the zoo with math in mind. Can you figure out how much food the zoo would have to buy to feed all the animals for a year? How much would it weigh? How much would it cost? How much volume would that be? How many houses would that amount of food fill up?

We have the freedom to approach field trips from so many different angles. And when we try a new perspective, these field trips revitalize our homeschool days.



9. Take a trip.

A trip is a wonderful opportunity to embrace the freedom homeschool offers. You not only have the freedom to travel at times outside the public school norm, but also to make your family trip the focus of your learning in the months leading up to it. In the end, you'll have shared memories of learning and stories of traveling that strengthen your family bond.

Our family took a road trip through the American West this past school year. In the months leading up to the trip, our lessons were full of excitement as we researched the places and wildlife we would see while traveling. The trip itself was so much more meaningful because of the time we spent in advance learning and anticipating.

You can do this too. Start by picking a place to visit. Choose one or two points to focus on. Are you interested in history? The ecosystem of the area? Local industry? In the months leading up to your trip, weave researching these themes into your homeschool days. The final trip will be a celebration of all your family has learned.

10. Welcome others into your life.

To outsiders, homeschoolers appear isolated. In reality, our families are as connected as we choose to be. Welcoming others into our world is as simple as offering a smile and a question. And that simple action brings great rewards.

Open your family up to new learning experiences with extended family, friends, librarians, or even docents at the zoo. All you have to do is set a good example for your kids by being quick to offer a friendly smile and ask questions of those you meet. By welcoming others into our life—even for just a few moments—we're demonstrating to our kids how being free with our attention almost always pays dividends.

Embrace the freedom homeschooling offers by exploring the myriad learning opportunities available. Mindfully curate your family's education by choosing only the materials and activities that best highlight the beauty of homeschooling. Keep your focus on your family as a whole. If you do these things, your children will not only have a wonderful education, but also rich family memories that inspire them to learn freely for their entire lives. 🌱



Leah Massey spends her days wrangling her three free-range kiddos in Michigan. When not reading aloud or exploring her neighbor's butterfly garden, you'll find her up to her elbows in dishes. Leah shares her family's learning adventures and lessons learned from two decades of homeschooling.
ourhabitatathome.com



Healthy Entertainment

In this excerpt from *The Heart of Learning* by Lawrence Williams, we look at ways to escape the ever-present screens and electronic devices and enjoy the simple pleasures of life.

From the **Oak Meadow**
Archives

There are many forms of entertainment that are both enjoyable and beneficial. If your screen-based entertainment patterns are deeply ingrained, some of these activities may seem a little difficult at first, but if you give them a fair trial you will probably find yourself enjoying them more than your old forms of entertainment and feeling much better in the process, both during and afterward.

Here are some ideas for entertainments that are beneficial to children's growth, that support their innate sensitivity, and that also are enjoyable for the parents:

Hiking

This is a wonderful activity for adults and children alike. You don't need to take long, grueling hikes up mountain sides; even short hikes down country dirt roads are very enjoyable, and even most two-year-olds can manage it on their own. The important part of hiking, in addition to the exercise, is the opportunity to get away from traffic and concrete and experience the beauty of the sights and sounds of nature, to sing a few songs together, or just enjoy some pleasant conversation.

Picnics

This is a traditional favorite, but one which is often overlooked. It doesn't need elaborate preparations; even simple food tastes better outside. If you are more adventurous, you can combine a picnic with a hike for a wonderful day's outing. Or, if you prefer a more "civilized" version, you can visit a park in the middle of the city and let the children play on the swings or other playground equipment. Even a picnic in the backyard is more fun than snacks at the kitchen table. Wherever the picnic is, it will provide an enjoyable break from the daily routine and give children an opportunity for plenty of physical activity while their parents relax, read, or chat.

Visiting a nature preserve, wildlife habitat, or the zoo

Nature preserves and wildlife habitats can be found everywhere, especially in suburban areas where the need is great to preserve natural land for wildlife to thrive. Most places have wonderful informational signs, walking paths, and overlooks so even if you don't spot many wild creatures, the outing will be entertaining. Almost every large city has a zoo, so if there isn't one in your town, there probably is one not far away. Usually zoos aren't very expensive, and children never tire of seeing the animals, even if they've seen the same ones many times. Take a picnic lunch and make a day of it.

Swimming and water play

Swimming and playing in the water provide children with a lot of physical exercise and endless entertainment value. Any beach, with its sand and sun, provides fascinating explorations of all kinds. Hours can be spent building sandcastles, exploring tide pools, collecting shells, making rivers and dams, chasing waves and dodging them. A public pool gives you a great excuse to play in the water with your child. You can also set up a small wading pool at home, or even use the tub (just throw in a few things that float and a few containers to fill and pour). A sink can be used for impromptu water play: fill it with water, add a bit of dish soap, and show your child how to use a hand beater or straw to make bubbles— instant entertainment!





Indoor creative activities

The list is only limited by your imagination—and when you are running low on imagination, there are plenty of books in the library to get you jump-started again. Here is a short list of indoor activities for pure entertainment and enjoyment (all of which have built-in educational value, too, of course, but that's just a bonus):

Drawing: crayons, colored pencils, pastels, markers, chalk; color on paper, sidewalks, make books, etc.

Painting: watercolor, finger-painting, acrylics; paint on paper, wood, boxes, etc.

Craft projects: think simple and useful, like picture frames, kites, mobiles, pen holders, etc.

Making music: drums, harmonica, recorder, kazoo, rattles—everyone can join in!

Singing: make up your own songs—silly ones are great fun—or sing along with your favorite CD

Dancing: try different kinds of music, or use props such as scarves, hat and cane, hard soled tap shoes, etc.

Woodworking: even small children can be taught to use a hammer and nails carefully, and a pile of scrap wood has endless possibilities

Cooking: bread shapes, faces on rice cakes, fruit kebabs, ants on a log (lots of fun kids' cookbooks in the library)

Obstacle course: use things in the house to jump over, crawl under, and wriggle through; use a stopwatch to time yourselves

Scavenger hunt: make a list of what to find (draw pictures for pre-readers), and give a “prize” at the end, such as a trip to the park, pizza for dinner, or an extra story at bedtime

Treasure hunt: takes a bit of advance planning to hide a trail of clues, but lots of fun—don't forget to hide the treasure!

Fort building: using furniture and sheets; great for indoor picnics

Box house: large cardboard boxes can have windows and door cut out, and then be painted or drawn on

Outdoor creative activities

Outdoor creative activities seem even more unlimited than the list above. Sometimes all it takes is a sturdy stick to get the imagination rolling. A stick can be used to dig a hole, build a hut, hit a ball, clear away brush, draw a line, jump over a stream, pry loose a rock, erect a flag, poke in the mud, build a dam...the list is endless. You can look for animal tracks, imitate bird sounds, and collect things. Usually going outside without a specific activity in mind isn't a problem—activities and projects have a way of popping up all by themselves when a child is outdoors. The entertainment value of the outdoors lies in its infinite possibilities.

By engaging in these types of healthy entertainment, you provide an opportunity for the whole family to enjoy an expansive process while deepening the inner bonds among you. When parents provide activities that nourish the feelings and support the sensitivities of their children, the children expand their ability to appreciate the simple delights that life has to offer and experience a pure, natural joy. However difficult this road may seem in the beginning, it is far easier in the long run than the other, for it becomes easier and more enjoyable as you progress. The more frequently you experience the simple beauty of a hike into a canyon, and enjoy a quiet picnic by a clear running stream, the easier it will become to be “entertained” by a simple summer's day. 🌿

Lawrence Williams co-founded 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 Living Education in 1994.



Homeschooling Without Being at Home

by DeeDee Hughes

Some people say the hardest part of homeschooling is staying home. There's just so much to do! So many places to go, things to see, experiences to enjoy! Those new to homeschooling and experienced homeschoolers alike can get carried away with all the exciting possibilities.

Then, a few weeks or months into this freewheeling fun, the worries begin. Are we covering all the bases? Have we met benchmarks and satisfied standards? What am I leaving out?

Here's the good news: You can find a balance between unstructured adventures and academic goals. Try a few of these ideas and see what works for you.

1. Map out your academic goals.

Creating a year-at-a-glance planner will give you a long view of the year. This makes it easier to keep your eye on big picture and see how outside-the-home adventures can support and connect with the academic goals of the year. At the same time, you might identify some non-academic goals, such as open-mindedness, resilience, and time management. You can add these to your planner as well. (See the "Mapping Goals" box for more ideas.) Use regular check-ins to track learning progress.

2. Plan adventures that align with curriculum themes.

Is your child studying U.S. History? Find some local historical markers and learn about what happened in your area long ago. Is your student learning about astronomy? Take a trip to an observatory or camp in the desert during a meteor shower.



3. Look at the layers of learning offered by student interests.

What do your children love to do? Try to connect their interests with the academic goals. Math skills can be used in building and cooking projects, or when a child is trying to figure out how long it will take to save money for something special. Do you have a skateboarder or gymnast at home? Scientific principles of force, motion, leverage, and aerodynamics can be explored while doing what they love.

4. Find flexible ways to satisfy learning goals.

Be creative with how students demonstrate mastery of academic skills and content. Activate learning by having students do mock debates and interviews, reenact a historic event, create a flip book showing the development of a plant, or label the flora on a favorite nature walk. Or have them use what they've learned by teaching it to others in the community. This might be in the form of a story written and illustrated for a group of younger children, a poster or infographic displayed at the library or town hall, or a video travelogue that is posted on social media. Giving students choices about how they learn and demonstrate skills encourages independence. Ask for their input—you might be surprised by what you hear.

Mapping Goals

In addition to academic goals, you might include some of the following in your yearly plan:

- Time management skills
- Organizational skills
- Digital literacy
- Stress management
- Open-mindedness
- Problem-solving skills
- Willingness to take risks
- Skills in managing failure
- Reflection and self-awareness
- Perseverance in the face of obstacles
- Argumentation and rebuttal
- Financial literacy
- Making inferences and extrapolating
- Recognizing interrelatedness of issues

5. Relax and enjoy the freedom of homeschooling.

Your children are your best gauge of how the year is progressing. Are they generally engaged and happy? Are they learning and developing new skills and knowledge? Do they have a healthy balance of challenges and successes? Take a deep breath and let it go, knowing that children have an innate drive to learn, and they *will* learn.

Offering students a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate learning, both inside and outside the home, will help the whole family enjoy your homeschooling adventure.

Have fun not staying home!



Sample Year-at-a-Glance Planner (Oak Meadow Grade 6)

	August	September	October	November
English	Review previous year Compile booklist	Sentences and paragraphs Note-taking and citations Writing process	Capitalization Quotations Poetry	Writing a report Short story writing Story summary
Social Studies	Compile resources	Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt	Ancient Israelites, Persia, and India	Ancient China and Africa
Science	Plan field trips	Scientific method and observation Living things Cell structure	Green plants Soil and nutrients Photosynthesis	Plant reproduction Classification systems
Math	Review previous year	Multiplying large numbers Two-digit divisors Estimating with large divisors	Adding and subtracting fractions Mixed numbers Reducing to lowest terms	Lowest common denominators Multiplying fractions and mixed numbers Cancelling fractions

	December	January	February	March
English	Expository essay Descriptive writing	Perspective in writing Comparative essay	Punctuation Compound and complex sentences Vocabulary review	Opinion essay Persuasive essay Supporting details
Social Studies	Ancient Crete and Minoan culture	Ancient Greece and Roman Empire	Christianity and Islam	Middle Ages
Science	Animal kingdom Vertebrates	Animal life cycles Food chains and food webs	Ecosystems Habitats Populations	Human body Nutrition Digestive system
Math	Dividing fractions Dividing mixed numbers	Adding and subtracting decimals Money math Metric system	Multiplying and dividing decimals Dividends less than 1 Percentages Converting fractions, decimals, percentages	Averages, ratios Probability, chance Squares and square roots

Creating a Year-at-a-Glance Planner

Instructions:

1. Begin by folding a large piece of paper to make 12 quadrants. (Fold it in half and then in half again on the long side, then fold it in thirds on the short side.)
2. Label each section with the months of the year, starting with when your school year begins (or the month before). Although you might only homeschool 9 or 10 months of the year, this gives you a little leeway for vacations and unexpected happenings.
3. Add in any planned vacations or time off from school. If you have to account for a certain number of days of instructional time per year (180), you can write that on the calendar as well (how many instructional days planned for each month).
4. Add subject headers in each month for the four core academic subjects. You are welcome to add additional subjects, too (health, music, P.E., etc.).
5. Using your curriculum table of contents, standards documents, lesson goals, or other tool, fill in the general goals for each month in each subject.
6. If your curriculum is divided into lessons or units, you can also use the yearly planner to keep track of the lessons or units you plan to do each month. This can help you stay on track to complete the work for the year.

When you are done, you have a roadmap for the year that can be used to help you document your student's learning. This is meant to be an overview of the year. It doesn't include everything but it gives you a good picture of what will be happening when and shows the scope of your student's studies for the year.

It's easy to check things off as they are done, and then your yearly planner becomes a quick-glance record of your student's work. You can use it to select representative samples of work that demonstrate your child's learning in each subject area over a certain time period. 🌱

DeeDee Hughes is Oak Meadow's director of curriculum development and a firm believer in active learning. Nature explorations are her favorite way to learn, and she's always looking for reasons to get outside.



Menu-Selection:

Identifying and using students' Gifts for Assessment

by John Dorroh

Let's face it. Homeschooling often resembles a three-ring circus! That's generally not a bad thing at all, but with all of that activity, keeping track of student progress can be a challenge.

With the immense variety of opportunities for facilitating learning—often outside the confines of a home—choosing appropriate and interesting ways to evaluate student comprehension can be daunting.

Traditionally, we use written tests for tracking progress. However, most students (and teachers) don't like taking them or giving them. Relax. There is a world of alternate assessment at your fingertips, whether you are using “free form” teaching or roadschooling. You and your homeschoolers should be enjoying the learning experiences rather than feeling pressured to perform well on a written test.

Utilizing students' gifts

Another important factor is that test-taking rarely takes into account the gifts each student possesses. When I asked students what their gifts were, most of them had no idea.

“No one's ever asked me that question,” one student admitted. “What do you mean?”

That led to an exploration of the types of behaviors, skills, and activities students use to achieve success in a particular course. My athletes understood that being able to dribble the basketball was needed to play the game, as well as passing the ball and being able to have a feel for what their team members might do next. My art students knew that they needed to be able to draw and paint, and the culinary arts students needed to be able to handle knives in the kitchen for chopping and slicing.

What did science students need to be able to do? They needed to use a microscope properly, make good observations, analyze scientific literature, perform investigations, and report their findings in diverse ways. But how could I translate such vital skills into choices for alternatives that would let me track their progress?

I brainstormed with a few colleagues and some students. We came up with seven “modes of evaluation” for science. Don't sweat it if you don't teach science. Most of these categories can be used in any discipline. They include:

- lab work
- small group work
- journaling
- art work
- DFPE (drama, fiction, poetry, and essay)
- oral reports
- tests

The most difficult part of switching from a “written-test-only” evaluation system to one with choices was deciding how to handle the paperwork. How could I keep up with each student's choices? In addition, would parents understand, appreciate, and support this change? How would the students react?





Implementing a “choice menu” for evaluation

After much reflection and deliberation, I posted the protocol (what’s expected for each mode) on the wall. I sent a hard copy home to the parents and invited them to attend an open house. In an informal environment with refreshments, I walked the parents through each mode and asked for feedback. There was very little, if any, resistance. Most parents were supportive and asked thoughtful questions such as “What if my child chooses to do all seven modes? Won’t she be overloaded with work?” “What happens when a student has multiple deadlines on the same day?” “What if they don’t like their choices once they get into the work? Can they change?”

Questions like those caused me to rethink parts of my system. Students had to choose at least three of the modes. Whether they wanted to try four, five, six, or all seven modes would be discussed at home. But once the grading period began, they were committed until the next grading period when new choices could be made.

I prepared class profiles for each group and posted them to the back of a door. It was not unrealistic to expect students to forget their choices. (I can rarely tell you what I had for lunch on the previous day.)

To help them understand bureaucracy a bit, I required them to fill out a three-part contract that stated they understood they had made the specific choices, and they would abide by the protocol and honor the deadlines. Copies were distributed and filed.

I staggered the deadlines so multiple projects would not be due on any one day. Also, the number of projects due depended on the nature of the mode. For example, students who chose journaling in their science logbooks made entries almost every day, while those who were writing a skit about cell parts had three mini projects due in a nine-week grading period.

Menu choices in action

So, what did this look like in practice? Here are a few examples:

Social Studies

Reenactments and museum visits are an engaging way to teach the specifics of a particular historical event. For example, let's say that you take a group of students to one of the many fine living history museums in this country where knowledgeable volunteers provide short scenes, enabling students to experience what colonial life may have been like when John Hancock went into Portsmouth to sell a plow, or what happened behind the scenes before Ben Franklin attempted to fly his kite in a lightning storm.

Once your young learners are back home, they can create their own reenactments, researching the literature as needed. They might want to prepare an oral report or make an informational pamphlet. Or how about making a timeline, a diorama, or preparing an authentic meal from a specific period of time? The possibilities are endless.

Language Arts

After reading a novel, have your students zero in on a particular event in the book, and write a letter to the characters involved. Others might choose to write a poem or two about why a central character acted or reacted in a certain way. And when plays are involved, scenes the students find to be particularly intriguing can be reenacted.

Writing in a journal is an excellent way to analyze video clips, develop questions before or after a guest speaker makes a presentation, or gather notes on a field trip. Or perhaps a literary portfolio on a student's favorite writer sounds doable for your situation.

Mathematics

Have students conduct research on famous mathematicians such as Descartes, Pythagoras, and Euclid. Have them give a presentation, perhaps dressed for the part.

Here's another possibility: Rather than simply solving a word problem, have the student write a rationale for each step used to arrive at the final answer. They can discuss these with others.

Tests, anyone?

I'd never suggest that written tests are inherently wrong. I will say, however, that they are probably over utilized. With so many other options available, it makes sense to check them out.

Variety is one of the reasons why the Finnish education system repeatedly produces students with the highest marks in the world. The teachers spend fewer hours in the classroom than almost any place in the world. Yet their students rank among the best. The Finnish educators value experiences over repetitive homework and testing. They also value the freedom to design assessments that work for their students, not for their government and politicians.




"This is what we do every day," said Kari Louhivuori, principal of the Kirkkojari Comprehensive School, "we prepare kids for life."

I used menu selection for evaluation for over 15 years. During that time, students repeatedly told me they appreciated the effort it takes to identify and utilize their gifts. Furthermore, many who couldn't identify their gifts at the beginning of the year had figured them out by the second grading period.

Testing, at its best, provides minimum feedback about what was learned about a topic. Engaging students in authentic assessments, however, helps them to understand the topic in much greater depth. On top of that, offering choices gives them a bit of ownership and more responsibility for their own learning.

No one said that homeschooling is easy. It's not. There are so many opportunities from which to choose that making a choice can become its own dilemma. But whatever program you design, you owe it to yourself and to your students to give them a bit of ownership and to provide engaging activities that can be used as springboards for next steps.

If you feel intimidated about using new tools to evaluate student work, start small, gradually adding new components as you become more comfortable. If something is not working, let it go. No one is tying you down to a rigid system of assessment. Experiment. Become a learner while you homeschool. Have fun.

Who knew that assessment could be one of the best learning tools out there? 

John Dorroh taught secondary sciences for almost 30 years. Now he consults with teachers in several states, sharing with them strategies for helping young learners understand science using reading and writing. "Never stop exploring your world," he tells his teachers and students.



Blink

by Iris Robert

Look,
she tells us.
This one is pure of heart.

The leaf she holds in her palm
is made of precious china,
not stems and plant particles,
a gorgeous, glowing gold.

How do you know?
We ask.
Our little child minds begin
to fill with the magical substance wonder,
waiting to see what fairy tale
she might twist and loop before us.

Ah,
she says with a smile.
You see its rounded edges?
We,
the diligent children that hardly know greed,
Nod.

This means that it's pure of heart.
You see,

(this is when our hearts
begin to lift
and we know we'll never forget
the words that will land upon us like
butterflies,
and carefully kiss our naive faces with
the soft wings of syllables)

Long long ago,
she continues,
in a land that
may seem far away,
but is really just the length of
a blink,

two leaves battled to be king.
One said that he would be the finest
with his broad shoulders
and vivid red coat.
The other leaf
had to admit that the first was true,
and he would be a fine king.
But, no, he couldn't.
His edges were sharp like
knife-tips;
they poked your thin skin
until it left a mark behind,
and you will always remember
the evil edge that tried to break you.

The second leaf was rounded.
He was not perfect,
and did not look ordinary.

I would be the finest king,
he proclaimed,
because I will not hurt
my kind people,
and I will never poke
into the soft palm that holds me
as if I'm a treasure.
My rounded edges will bring glee
to people,
and in my green and yellow coat
they will find the simplicity of knowing
that I am a leaf, and
have no intentions of breaking their hearts.

And so it was decided
after a battle of dancing
in the wind's harmonious
breeze,
that the second,
imperfect, rounded,
pure-of-heart leaf
would be king.

She ends the story with a flourish
of the leaf she holds,
and we,
all wide eyes trying to drink in magic
before it disappears,
smile and thank her,
before asking for her
to please
tell the story again.



Iris Robert is a former Oak Meadow Girl Scout, current lover of bubble tea and books, and future author. She can be found reading, writing, playing piano, talking to her fluffy dog, or writing letters to her pen-pals.



Diving In:

Global Travel and Cultural Immersion

by Liz Jackson

As a trip leader, it is an honor to bring young adults to new environments and guide them through the process of cultural immersion. Travel can be a powerful experience and educational in every way as students learn about themselves and the world. The initial excitement and wide-eyed curiosity of the first day transforms quickly into comfort and familiarity, and the new sense of confidence is remarkable to watch unfold. As they settle into the new environment and begin to feel at home, the way a student smiles and moves through the world is a joy to observe.

It's important for young adults to feel supported to explore their sense of independence while being held within a network of caring adults and peers. A trip abroad works best when it has a balance of both structure and freedom. When surrounded by new languages, tastes, smells, and customs, there are surprises and delights and endless opportunities for connection, both within one's self and with everything that is new.

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Many families travel together, yet there comes a time when the teenager or young adult is eager to explore on their own—how will they manage? Are they really ready? What experiences can we give them to make sure they can responsibly handle an independent adventure and really make the most of it?

At Gogi Abroad, we like to think we are training the next generation of travelers—not tourists, but travelers who are able to move comfortably within a culture, make connections, and contribute. We find it best to travel to places with people that have close connections to the communities. This creates a space for students to be more immersed and feel more at ease with a new culture and language.

Traveling and living in another place can be a pivotal experience in a person's life. With some advance planning and preparation, and the help of supportive fellow travelers and guides, giving students the opportunity to travel can enrich not only their lives, but the lives of their family members and newfound friends around the world.

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On the next page (22) are two reflections from recent students, both homeschoolers, who undertook the trips as part of a comprehensive curriculum plan. The trips were 10 to 15 days, yet the impressions and lessons will last a lifetime. 🌱



Based in Putney, Vermont, Gogi Abroad was founded by Liz Jackson, a seasoned trip leader and an avid traveler with over 20 student trips logged in the last five years. Liz recently completed a ten-month trip around the world with her family. Her passion for travel and experiential learning is rooted in her own transformative experiences studying abroad as a teenager. To learn more about Gogi Abroad's unique approach to travel and upcoming trips to Spain, Peru, and Tanzania, plus a Tribal Gap Year, visit

www.gogiabroad.com



Reflections from Peru

Benjamin, Grade 11

Through travel and discovery in another country, I have been put outside my comfort zone and have grown inwardly at a more rapid speed due to my instant immersion into the culture. Although it can be overwhelming at first, it does help you connect with yourself and with the rest of the world.

One specific experience that put me in this place was during my time in Peru, the first trip I took with Gogi Abroad. At sunset above the village of Andahuaylillas in the mountains, my group met with some of the townsfolk to participate in a ceremony blessing the mother earth, called the Pachamama, and connecting with ourselves. As I was blessed by the two men conducting the ceremony, I felt vulnerable in this new situation. Although I felt alone in this moment, lacking connection with my family, I was at peace with myself, with nature, with Pachamama.

This experience blended my homeschooling experience of working through my problems and challenges and experiencing the freedom of exploring a new place by exploring my own self. Furthermore, it changed my view on being in a new foreign country because I was able to make a meaningful connection with my inner self.

Reflections from Tanzania

Katherine, Grade 11

During the first few hours of the hike up Mount Longido, I was feeling positive because I was exhilarated by the breathtaking views from the mountain, meeting young children who came out of their houses to greet us, and this new adventure. As time went on, fatigue began to set in and it was harder to stay positive and confident in my ability to reach the top of the mountain.

At this point, I became much more self-aware than I had been at the beginning of the hike. I began to look inside myself for inspiration, restating my goal over and over again and recognizing the opportunity I was given in order to keep myself going. Besides looking inside myself, I also gained inspiration to continue forward from my peers. Each of us was struggling, but through our struggle, we grew closer. When someone needed a break, we all took a break. When someone needed help, we all helped. We built off each other's confidence and strength.

Once we made the ascent to the top of the mountain, I reached a new level of confidence and self-awareness. Besides the overwhelming view of the African landscape from the top of the mountain, I was overwhelmed by my accomplishment. I had never worked that hard or done something so difficult with people I had only known for a short period of time. I was in awe of how much willpower I had inside of me and how much more I had yet to explore. After the hike, the trip took a new turn for the best. Our group became a family and I gained new self-awareness and confidence. My life was changed by that experience. That is the freedom you experience in a new culture. The wisdom you gain is irreplaceable.






Curriculum Spotlight

Women's Literature: Worlds of Fantasy and Science Fiction

In one of the lessons on *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin, students are asked to consider how gender influences our lives and perceptions. In the story, the main character visits a planet where the population is gender-neutral, except for a brief period each month where each person can choose which gender they'd like to express. They may choose to be male one month, and female the next. Students are asked to think about what it would be like to live in a place like this. Assignments like these help students frame their thoughts.

Choose one of the following assignments:

- a) In chapter 7, "A Question of Sex," the first Investigator is appalled to not have gender identity as an anchor for relating to others and Genly has a similar experience. By the end of the story, Genly has come to appreciate the equalizing force of androgyny. After Genly sees his crewmates, he is shocked by their faces, voices, and demeanor that is so gender-specific: "But they all looked strange to me, men and women. . . Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species. . ." (296) When he sees a Karhider again, he is relieved to see a "human face," neither man nor woman. If you had a choice of living in a gender-neutral world, or a world in which gender was a choice that was presented anew each month, would you? Why or why not?
- b) In chapter 16, Estraven has questions about the nature of a woman: "Do they differ much from your sex in mind behavior? Are they like a different species?" (234) Genly has trouble answering. How would you answer the question "What is a woman?" or "What is a man?"
- c) Do you agree or disagree with Genly's statements about gender in chapter 16, when he says, "I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food. . . It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones." (234) Give your own opinion, based on your experiences in life so far. 



Craft



Fish Kite

When the wind kicks up, make a kite and find a good place to run with it. Enjoy the spring breezes!

Materials

- Tissue paper
- Glue
- Pipe cleaner or insulated wire
- String

Instructions

1. Cut two identical fish shapes out of tissue paper (use a double thickness for each fish shape, to prevent tearing).
2. For the fish scales, glue small brightly colored triangles on the sides in interesting patterns.
3. Glue the two fish shapes together along the outside edges to make a hollow tube, keeping the edges around the mouth and tail of the fish open.
4. Glue brightly colored tissue paper streamers to the tail. Don't glue the tail pieces together—make sure the tail stays open so the wind can flow through the kite.
5. Form a pipe cleaner or wire into a circle. Glue this circle around the inside edges of the mouth to form an open fish mouth.
6. Finish by attaching a string to the mouth so the kite can be flown. When the wind catches it, it should puff the fish up a bit as the air passes through the middle.





The Grand Gap Year

by E.R. Zarevich

They called it “The Grand Tour” in the old days, as far back as the seventeenth century. The Grand Tourist, as I like to say, was typically a wealthy young man or—occasionally—a wealthy (and carefully chaperoned) young woman of good education, sent off to do the rounds of the hot spots of Europe with Mom and Dad’s money, with the purpose of returning home with an enlightened mind and impressive, fascinating stories to tell at dinner parties and to their future children. In his *New York Times* Frugal Traveler article, “What is the Grand Tour?” Matt Gross calls it “cultural finishing school,” which really hits the mark because The Grand Tour was considered, at the time, a key factor in shaping and elaborating a young heir’s or heiress’s social and academic success. It was also their only chance to see the world before they settled down into the unavoidable adult responsibilities of running an estate or business and raising a family. It was their one chance to thrive, have a bit of fun, and feel like a whole person before they became a job title, a spouse, a parent, or all three.

Nowadays we have a different name for this ex. We call it “the gap year” and it has a slightly less glamorous stigma attached to it than The Grand Tour. I’ve heard Gap Yearers, as I like to call them, described as lazy, spoiled, and directionless, the last being especially intriguing because Gap Yearers by no means map out their trips blindly. They carefully plan their backpacking adventures around locations where they can *experience* things, such as boating in Greece, dancing in Berlin, swimming in Spain, museum-hopping in London, sketching statues in Italy, or looking out across the Seine in Paris.

My own Grand Tour came late, at age 26, in the form of an organized expedition around Eastern Europe on a bus full of strangers. This was my first time travelling on my own. Unlike female Grand Tourists of the past, I was allowed and able to forgo the chaperone. I was terrified, but I was thrilled, and even while flying to Frankfurt, Germany on a plane by myself I was struck dumb by the stunning realization that I was *out in the world by myself*.

And to be honest, I’ve never learned so much in my life. Besides learning the lengths some people went to in order to escape from behind the Berlin Wall, I also got a practical and indispensable crash course in how to manage on a limited amount of travel money, scout out an inexpensive lunch, follow directions, get information, take close care of my valuable belongings, and *talk to people*—people who would be in my life for only a short time but would leave a lasting impact. Those are things school cannot and will not teach you, because it’s not job training. It’s life training. And getting that life training meant the world to me.

So let your kids take the Gap Year, or the Grand Tour, whatever you want to call it. Let them have that one essential year of travel and world schooling. Retirement can wait. Life cannot. 🌱



E.R. Zarevich is an English/ESL teacher who writes in her spare time. She resides in Burlington, Ontario, Canada. She has also been featured in *Understorey Magazine* and on the writing blog *Quick Brown Fox*.





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