**Ingredients for Home-educating Success**

*“Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life!”* CM

*“Education is a relationship.”* BMc

## ***Ingredients for Minimising Stress and Maximising Enjoyment of Home-Education***

Many families are discovering that the training of their own children can be the most rewarding, exciting and satisfying journey of their life. However, there are also families who, despite the best intentions, find themselves in a constant state of stress; being unable to cope with home-education or at least some aspects of it.

Over the last three decades we have conducted research which included surveys and interviews with thousands of home-educating families. The results of our research have confirmed the findings of Dr. Raymond & Dorothy Moore regarding the reasons why some home-schoolers experience 'burn-out' and may even give up in despair.

Stress-burnout is a very real phenomenon. Some parents struggle to deal with the pressure, frustration and anger that rises up in the course of trying to fulfil the false expectations of well-meaning friends, relatives, teachers, government regulations, and even other home-educators, not to mention the expectations of trying to duplicate their own school experiences at home.

Other families report that they really enjoy living and learning with their children and are experiencing a great deal of fulfilment and success in the education and character development of their children. The following are some anti-stress principles which we have found to be key ingredients for successful home-education.

The overarching principle that makes all the difference, has to do with our view of the child.

In an open letter to Maria Montessori, Charlotte Mason challenged her with the following thoughts

*“Anyone who wants to teach children needs to decide whether man [sic] is just physical, or something more. It can't be both ways, and even the most trivial detail of the school day will line up with one or the other of these two fundamental perspectives.”*

Ideas have consequences, and we have found the common naturalistic/materialistic view of the universe (and of a person) has negative consequences in education and in relationships. Charlotte Mason on the other hand, was concerned for a holistic view of the person that included the spiritual life.

To our non-Christian friends, hopefully you will allow us to share the principles that have developed as an outflow of our relationship with the Creator, and from our view of the child (and of parents) not as the impersonal product of mere matter, chance and time; but rather as precious 'persons' individually created with a divine purpose; and that education is a sacred calling, because God truly cares about each child uniquely.

So here are some of the guidelines we have found that enable the successful education of children at home.

**Have a Vision:** Don’t just re-create ‘school at home’, but work out your vision for your family, your goals, and strategies for achieving these goals AND write them down. Hang this on a wall or even the back of the toilet door so when you feel swamped you can refresh your memory. Know WHY you are educating at home. Maybe think in terms of 'home-training', rather than just 'home-schooling'. Home-education and home-training encompasses broader aspects of life. If you have a clear idea what you are trying to achieve and where you are heading, then you are more likely to arrive there.

**Rediscover Your Family:** Some families find that they need to spend some time with a lighter academic load while they insert more relationship-building activities. This could encompass opening up lines of communication; refocussing and re-orienting your family towards your own beliefs, values and overall direction; even just getting to know your children again- playing games with them, going for picnics and bush-walks, spending time discussing their favourite past-times, etc. Building relationship is a vital factor in the successful education of children.

Some might ask “What about the requirements that children be learning?” The good news is that children will be learning all the time – but you need to provide appropriate food for thought, rather than just leave them to be informed by electronic devices and media.

If you are waiting on resources or wanting a lighter start, then go to the library and borrow books on a variety of subjects. Read aloud together and either create a 'lapbook' (you can google what this is) or you can casually chat about the books and record the children's comments in a family journal.

Go on a nature walk in your back yard/park. Identify which birds can be sighted at that time of year. Take watercolour pencils or paints and try to record the birds, bugs, trees, or weeds and flowers seen (observation skills). Use the guides from the library or buy from Australian Geographic. Record discoveries in a family Nature-journal.

Just enjoy the time together. Cooking, household maintenance tasks, and simple craft-projects done together can be opportunities for maths and science as well as lively conversation. Some children who have been bullied and over-stressed at school need a time of lighter workload to relax and settle in to learning routines at home, and to focus on reading and discussing interesting literature together. The ‘personableness’ of the home atmosphere can still be accomplished while establishing a daily/weekly routine.

**Emotional Battery Check:** Many parents tend to correct a child’s actions but allow the child to harbour attitudes that are negative, complaining, selfish, uncooperative or disobedient. Even more important than what children do, is the attitude or motive behind their actions. The parent’s consistent example of good character displaying gracious speech and positive attitudes, provides the best model. Just be aware that children also pick up attitudes and character traits from their peers, television, computer games, etc; parent’s will need to work diligently at resetting these along more positive lines.

However, a more hidden/subtle reason behind a person's behaviour has to do with the filling or depleting of their needs. Most often poor behaviour is a sign that the child is getting depleted in one of their essential 'needs'. Every person has a range of needs that are like storage batteries or fuel tanks. Dr William Glasser suggests the basic human needs include 'Love & Belonging', 'Fun', 'Freedom', 'Power to accomplish', 'Purpose', and 'Survival Needs' (food, water, rest, clothing & shelter, etc). There is also a ‘spiritual need’ (a common human need for the transcendent, for connection to Someone bigger than themselves and their tiny world, a need for connection with God).

Glasser explains that our behaviours (things we do, say, think, feel) are our best attempt at filling our needs (even if it is an inappropriate way of meeting one's needs). If your child is acting inappropriately, think about how long it has been since you have spent some quality time with them (the need for love & belonging). If they've been working inside for two hours, maybe they need to run around outside for a while (the needs for fun & freedom). If they have been struggling at school in a competitive environment – a sense of hopelessness may have crept in (a lack of power to accomplish). Are they running on empty regarding food, water, or rest (survival needs)? Adults have these needs also. If you or your spouse are depressed or grumpy, then think about when was the last time you encouraged or hugged them, or how long has it been since you both did something fun together? If you have been busy with people and or the daily duties of life, you may also just need some alone time with God (meditating on His Word and reflecting on your life).

**Establish a Routine that Suits You and Your Family:** As part of this re-orientation process, many families will need to establish a daily routine to achieve some progress towards the family goals and vision. Others discover that they have been too task/achievement-oriented and have a greater need to loosen up and become more flexible, just learning to enjoy their children again. Generally, we've found that the more children in the family, the more organised your daily routine needs to be (to guard against chaos and confusion). This is especially important for children with ASD. However, every family is unique, and some people have a temperament whereby they can function well within a home atmosphere of more creative flexibility and spontaneity. Eventually, you should find an equilibrium between the security of routine, regularity & order, and the flexibility to break out of the schedule to capture a 'learning opportunity'; or to really tune in to, and facilitate your child’s special interests and talents.

If maintaining an orderly home is a major source of frustration, then we heartily recommend Don Aslett's books: *"Is There Life After Housework?*"... and*..."Clutter's Last Stand*". Remember, your children share this haven called 'home' and one day they will need to know how to manage their own homes, so include them in the daily maintenance of the family home.

**No Pressure on Early Learners:** There is a tendency in western societies to view age 6 as the time to begin formal studies. However, every child develops at a different rate. There is some evidence (Dr. Moon & Dr. Moore, 1994), that forcing a child into formal study before their physical senses and minds are ready for it, can cause damage to a child's eyesight, and to their self-esteem, motivation and love of learning. Certainly, encourage them whenever they show signs of readiness for learning, and help them to discover answers to their natural inquisitiveness, but don't be too eager to push them into 'seat-work' (ie workbooks & textbooks) too early. Teach early reading and maths through games rather than with workbooks.

For example, use physical letters of the alphabet to make up simple words (a bit like the Scrabble board game, using fridge magnet letters), draw letters in a sand table, count beads and blocks, do measuring in cooking, measuring to construct geometrical shapes and craft activities; and read interesting stories together. Ask the child to tell back what they know of the story, or to tell back to you how to solve the maths problem. Play observation games – *“run up to the top of the hill, when I call you (after thirty seconds observation) come back and tell me everything you noticed”.* Then walk up together and see what was missed. Parents, when you do begin seat-work (handwriting copy-work, short written retell, a sheet of maths problems) only do 15 minutes and then move to another activity. Aim for quality not quantity- at least in these early stages of establishing habits. Formal lessons should be a maximum of 15 minutes for years 1 to 3, increasing year by year to 30 minutes in early high school and 45 minutes in senior high school.

**Train Up the Whole Person:** Research conducted by the Moore Foundation, the Carnegie and Smithsonian Institutes, reveals that the formula for growing geniuses, creative thinkers and great leaders involves more than just academic study. Rather than just developing theoretical 'head-knowledge', ideally, we should have an emphasis on educating the whole person (mind, spirit and body). Training the whole person involves developing the child’s heart and their hands, not just their heads. One way we can do this is by ensuring that your home-training program achieves a balance between STUDY (head), WORK (hand) and SERVICE (heart). This approach is known as 'The Moore Formula' (after Dr. Raymond and Dorothy Moore). By integrating 'The Moore Formula' into the study program, the student experiences the subject in a variety of ways while developing a good work ethic and other character traits along the way. To foster all-round development of the student's whole person ('head, heart and hand'), the academic studies should be balanced out with unpaid service at home and in the community, and then opportunities should be sought out for the student to do some physical, creative, paid or entrepreneurial work. Many students discover ways to integrate their service and work into their topic of study by doing unpaid or paid work-experience in that field. Through the integration of study, work and service in this way, your home-training program can be very time efficient. When our oldest children were pre-teens they discovered how to make 'slime' or 'goop'. They thought other children would enjoy playing with it so they bottled it and sold it at our home-education co-op eventually making about $30-$40 dollars (which was quite a lot back in the mid 1990’s). Maybe there are other opportunities for your children; but also consider that ‘work’ can be voluntary.

**Parents as Co-learners:** See learning as a natural part of everyday life. Wherever possible, work together and learn along-side your children, rather than expecting them to complete a task while you achieve something else (e.g, housework). Do the housework together as part of the learning routine. Show by example – when they ask a question, answer *“Well that's a very good question. What do you think? ….* [then] *...That's an interesting theory. Now let's look it up in the World Book Encyclopedia (or Google)”*

Learning together can be fun if you respect your children as 'people', and maintain their respect for you. If we really listen to our children's dialogue, aspirations and queries, then we can intuitively discern their motives and needs, enabling us to encourage, edify and enlighten them in the way they should go. By learning to *'learn and live with'* their children, many home-educating parents find that their children also become their good friends. This approach of teaching and imparting in a natural way through one-on-one, open communication, is like the ‘discipleship’ method used by Jesus with the training of His disciples, and the method that the Bible recommends for teaching children.
"You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up"
(Deut. 6:7, N.K.J.V.).

**Use an Integrated Approach Wherever Possible:** Many curricula that have been designed for the school classroom, are full of 'busy-work' to occupy the children. In the school classroom, this is needed so that the teacher can get around to others in the class, or to keep the children busy so that the teacher can be free to score test-papers, etc. However, this is not needed in home-based education. There are programs which minimise busy work by integrating several subjects into the one topic. These are called 'unit-study' programs. Wherever possible, word-building (spelling), grammar and punctuation can be integrated into written narration activities. Although Charlotte Mason didn't fully follow a thematic unit-study program, she did believe that literature and geography plus cultural enquiry and moral lessons flow naturally out of historical studies. This method is ideal if you're waiting for curriculum orders to arrive. If you're stumped for ideas, ask us.

**Wherever Possible- Teach the Whole Family at Once:** The system of separating age and grade levels has also been designed for the traditional school classroom. For the parent/tutor needing to teach several children simultaneously, they can reduce stress by using multi-level (i.e. multi-age) resources or having all the children studying the same historical period, culture or topic. A multi-level program enables the whole family to research one topic, but each child does learning-activities at their own level of understanding and then presents the information at their own level of expertise. Packaged multi-age curricula include ‘Homeward’, 'Konos Character Curriculum' or 'Konos History of the World', ‘Tapestry of Grace’, and the History resources from 'Simply Charlotte Mason'. Often, when teaching as a family, you can focus on teaching to the older ones, and then the younger members will learn much through the 'trickle-down effect' while listening in on discussions. You'll be surprised what they pick up. When appropriate, have the older ones tutor the younger (which reinforces their own understanding), or just having the older ones read to the younger.

**Minimise Outside Influences:** You will need to censor or minimise the influences of TV, I-pads, computer games, age-inappropriate literature, and possibly even particular peer interactions.

Research by Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner and his associates at Cornell University, has revealed that ...*"children who spend more elective time with their peers than with their parents until the fifth or sixth grades - about ages eleven or twelve - will become peer dependent"*...for what they think and believe (Moore, 1994, p.49).

Some very interesting research into the development of genius, was conducted by North Carolina University psychologist, Harold McCurdy (in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution). By reviewing the characteristics, education and background of prominent leaders, geniuses and influencers throughout history, the studies revealed common factors which were seen to contribute to their success. The Smithsonian Report on genius offered a three-part recipe for high achievement, consisting of:

1. much time spent with warm responsive parents and other adults,

(2) very little time spent with peers and

(3) a great deal of free exploration under parental guidance."

Study director, Harold McCurdy concluded:

*"The mass education of our public-school system is, in its way, a vast experiment in reducing ... all three factors to a minimum; accordingly, it should tend to suppress the occurrence of genius"* (McCurdy, 1960, cited in Moore 1986: 'Journal of School Health' and Moore, 1990, ‘Home Built Discipline’, p.106).

On the flipside of this topic, we have also occasionally seen the detrimental stifling effects of parents who have been overprotective of their children. They are known as 'helicopter parents' because they are always hovering around ready to rescue the child from the slightest mishap or outside influence. A concern for safety and security has obvious merits, however the result of an overprotective parent may be a very insecure child who can't think for themselves, who is afraid to try new things or show initiative or be innovative, and may tend to burst out of the confines of a legalistic 'walking-on-eggshells' home environment in the teen years.

Therefore, a balance is needed. Allow much freedom within well thought-out, consistent and clearly communicated boundaries.

**Remember- Education is a Relationship:** This is one of the most important principles. Many parents fall into the trap of expecting the school system or the curriculum to solve their problems: *“This resource hasn't worked, and the children don't like that resource. If only I could find the perfect curriculum, or school system.”* However, these parents often miss the fundamental revelation, that it is not about finding the right curriculum or school system. What the children need is **relationship** with you (parent, mentor, and friend). A relaxed, loving, fun and productive time of learning together; enjoying exploring God's Creation (the world), reading quality interesting literature, being swept away in a far-away time and place, the child retelling the story, discussing characters and how life works.

Charlotte Mason warned that the teacher or parent does not have to be the 'showman of the universe', the all-knowing teacher and walking encyclopaedia. She warned that the parent should not get too much in the way of the text/subject, over-explaining or moralising everything. Allow the children to use their own minds to make connections and build their own personal relationships with the character, artist, musician, idea, or thing being studied. If anything, arm yourself with a few choice open-ended questions.

It is very helpful to keep routine, regularity, and order in the home; however, don't stress about *'getting all the stuff done'* or *'memorising all the facts'* or even *'covering all the assigned topics'*. Rather, focus on building a healthy relationship with your child, where learning is enjoyable and the child is developing deep relationships with many things and ideas, people, places, and events. Keep the 'wonder' alive. Certainly, spend a regular time each day to develop reading, writing, and arithmetic skills; but keep these sessions short, while encouraging neat and accurate work, the children fully focussed and doing their very best work for the short time allocated. Train them in good work habits; but even this can be accomplished within a friendly encouraging atmosphere. If children are in an environment of threats and harsh discipline, they won't be able to relax enough to truly learn anything. The atmosphere in your home is absolutely vital. It is as indispensable as the air we breathe – and it is primarily the parent who is responsible for keeping the atmosphere sweet and positive.

Our heartfelt prayer is for you to not only survive the journey of educating your children (or grandchildren) but to THRIVE. What an amazing adventure is the raising of your children.

Happy training for the children's sake.

Blessings
Bruce & Karen McNeice
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